

# Whose Flag Is It, Anyway?



**Ben Reed Zaricor**

The American flag packs emotional wallop—a potent symbol viewed passionately across our political spectrum. Much of this passion appears to be rooted in highly personalized, possessive and often misguided perceptions of “ownership.”

Many people feel so strongly about “Old Glory” that they are quick to draw lines in the sand and establish their own arbitrary dictates of what constitutes “respect” and what borders on “desecration”—a term itself suggesting something with religious, symbolic power, though the American flag was the first secular national flag. When someone, or some group, violates such artificial barriers, verbal and physical blows may follow as people rush to define and defend “their” flag.

Now we are in yet another phase of America’s never-ending, often heated, public debate about the flag and how it “should” be displayed and treated.

That’s why actions, for example, calling for an amendment to the Constitution to prohibit “desecration” of the American flag, go to the heart of our country’s sense of liberty. I simply do not understand those who want to pass laws limiting our freedom of expression, which has been guaranteed by the Constitution for over two centuries. I do not hold, as others may believe, that our flag needs protection from its people.

Many Americans may not know that, from the Colonial period to 9/11, individual Americans have created and customized the flag independent of any governmental oversight. There is, for example, a long tradition of people incorporating the flag into their clothing. Some people also have added personal elements to their flags, such as writing their names along its borders. The Sons of Liberty added a snake and “Don’t Tread On Me”; centuries later, others placed the “peace symbol” in the star field to deliver a specific message in

the 1960s, and again in the aftermath of 9/11, the War on Terror and the War in Iraq.

The American flag, and what it symbolizes to people around the world, mirrors our nation’s history—from the struggle for independence to today’s role as the global superpower. And because no single group “owns” the flag, or ever has, its design and the materials it is fashioned from illustrate the creativity, whimsy and idiosyncratic realities that are embedded in our singular culture.

Because of the powerful emotions bound up in flags, and the fascinating stories tied to them, I decided to become a collector in 1969 when many of my friends would never have dreamed of collecting such things. At that time I saw a young man in a restaurant beaten for wearing a stars and stripes vest. That experience awoke in me a passion to learn the history of our flag, which I discovered was hidden in the old flags.

The creation of a national flag center would provide a permanent, year-round venue where people could view flag exhibits and learn our country’s history through these old and torn pieces of cloth. It would provide a forum for discussion of the ideas that influence our character as a nation and a place to participate in spirited educational debates and programs. Today there is no place like The Flag Center where you can see the original flags that tell so much of our country’s “sea to shining sea” destiny.

Our flag tells a story of diverse ideas, cultures, personalities, races and political persuasions. It is a story both of differences and of unity. The stars on the blue canton of the flag represent individual states and their union; it is perhaps the most vivid expression of our national motto, *E Pluribus Unum*—“Out of Many, One!”

It is our flag, not the flag from our government. It is something we use in our everyday lives to express ourselves and our political freedoms. When you look at these pieces of American history, you realize they were designed, made and used by people very much like ourselves. This flag belongs to us all.

*Ben Zaricor, co-sponsor of the 2003 exhibition in San Francisco, The American Flag: Two Centuries of Concord & Conflict, began collecting flags in 1970 while a student at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. With his wife Louise and family, he has assembled more than 2,500 flags, quilts, and other flag related items in the Zaricor Flag Collection. A version of this essay was published in the San Francisco Chronicle on July 4, 2003. (Inset) Currier & Ives, 1850s (ZFC0638)*