

Through it all, our nation's flag has been there



THE AMERICAN FLAG is enjoying a fresh new popularity since the tragic attacks of Sept. 11. Annin & Co., the nation's largest and oldest flag maker, reports that sales are still hovering

at 25 percent above normal as Americans continue to fly the Stars and Stripes from their front porches, businesses and cars.

Grandiose public displays of the red, white and blue are also in fashion. The World Series in New York, the Super Bowl in New Orleans and the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City are all examples of the national obsession with patriotic pageantry. What was once regarded as an old-fashioned reverence for — or a jingoistic display of — the flag is now considered critical to the healing process of a nation that has for too long emphasized its cultural differences rather than its unity as a people.

Flag Day reminds us we began our history as a people dedicated to the rights of mankind, regardless of religious or ethnic origin. Although the United States has wavered from that commitment on occasion, the better angels of our collective nature compel us to return to it, more today than ever before.

Two hundred and twenty-five years ago today (June 14, 1777), Congress adopted a resolution that the "flag of the United States be thirteen stripes alternate red and white and the union by thirteen stars in the blue field, representing a new constellation" There was no mention of any debate on this new flag, its creator or even the significance of the design.

Legend holds that Francis Hopkinson, a New Jersey congressman and signer of the Declaration of Independence, designed the first flag and that Betsy Ross,

COMMENTARY

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a Philadelphia seamstress, made the first one in June 1776 at the request of George Washington, then-Commander of the Continental Army.

The United States was a fledgling nation then, trying to assert its independence from a more powerful British empire. Washington wanted to replace the first American flag, known as the Great Union Flag (seven red and six white stripes with the British Union Jack in the upper left corner) so the redcoat army would not misinterpret the design as a sign of American submission to the crown like they had done at the siege of Boston on January 1, 1776.

Hopkinson answered the need by designing a new banner which retained the seven red and six white stripes, but replaced the Union Jack with thirteen white stars on a blue ground. Ross suggested the circular arrangement of the stars.

No one knows with absolute certainty the symbolism of the design. While the 13 stripes and 13 stars represented the 13 original states, some say the circular arrangement of the stars indicated the equality of the states, while others claim that the circle represented the hope that the Union would be without end.

With the addition of new states, the stars would become staggered in rows, and Old Glory would inspire poets such as Francis Scott Key who wrote the "Star Spangled Banner" as he watched the bombardment of Fort Mchenry on the night of Sept. 13, 1814, as well as frontiersmen such as Lewis and Clark who paved the way for America's manifest destiny of continental expansion.

But the Stars and Stripes were not always so popular.

During the early 20th century, Old Glory was viewed as a symbol of jingoism by smaller, underdeveloped nations in the Caribbean and South America where the United States impeded nationalist movements in order to establish lucrative markets under the guise of a benevolent international policeman.

By 1949, when President Harry S. Truman signed an Act of Congress making June 14 of each year "National Flag Day," the United States had laid the foundations of a Cold War aimed at resisting communism abroad. Containment would dominate U.S. policy in Europe and Southeast Asia for the next 40 years.

"Red, White and Blue" became the colors of a good neighbor for some, and represented the "Ugly American" for others. Even at home the flag evoked mixed emotions.

While the World War II generation revered Old Glory, it was sometimes burned in effigy by their children who opposed the Vietnam conflict and the discriminatory treatment of African Americans.

Today the threat of international terrorism has once again united as a people. How our government responds to that threat in the coming years will determine how Old Glory is viewed in the future, both at home and abroad.

Our flag, like the flag of any nation, is only as good as the people it represents. Hopefully, the Stars and Stripes will continue to remind us all that freedom not only demands eternal vigilance and accountability, but also the sometimes painful process of self-evaluation.

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