

Owlcation

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The Meaning and History of the American Flag and Why We Honor It

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Angela loves history and feels it is essential to our future to know the past—or else be destined to repeat it.

First Flag of the United States

USA Flag History

We all know that the 50 stars on the flag represent the 50 states and that the stripes represent the original 13 colonies. We also know that Betsy Ross made the first flag. But did you know that George Washington commissioned her to make it after a few other men or that Washington first drew on a piece of parchment what they wanted? Betsy Ross wasn't thrilled to take on this responsibility, and her initial response was, "I don't know, but I can try." Here are more facts that you probably did not know about the stars, the stripes, the colors, the folds, and the meaning behind it all.

Did You Know?

"Old Glory", the original Star Spangled Banner, is one of the main artifacts on display at the National Museum of American History in Washington D.C.

Stars on the United States Flag

Throughout history, the number of stars on the flag has changed. As each state joined the United States of America, another star was added. On July 4, 1960, Hawaii was the final star that completed the flag that we know today.

The shape of the star chosen to represent each state was a different decision. Before the end of the 18th century, six, seven, and eight-pointed stars were more commonplace than the five-pointed star. Some speculate that the five-pointed star was chosen to separate the United States from Europe further. Another theory is that Betsy Ross came up with the five-pointed star because it was easier to do with one snip of the scissors than a six-pointed star. No one knows for sure, but the five-pointed star was an unprecedented decision that allows our flag to be that much more special to Americans.

How Many Stars Were on the Flag?

Year	Number of Stars	States Added
1777-1795	13	Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Virginia
1795-1818	15	Kentucky and Vermont
1818-1819	20	Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, Ohio, and Tennessee
1819-1820	21	Illinois
1820-1822	23	Alabama and Maine

Year	Number of Stars	States Added
1822-1836	24	Missouri
1836-1837	25	Arkansas
1837-1845	26	Michigan
1845-1846	27	Florida
1846-1847	28	Texas
1847-1848	29	Iowa
1848-1851	30	Wisconsin
1851-1858	31	California
1858-1859	32	Minnesota
1859-1861	33	Oregon
1861-1863	34	Kansas
1863-1865	35	West Virginia
1865-1867	36	Nevada
1867-1877	37	Nebraska
1877-1890	38	Colorado
1890-1891	43	Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Washington
1891-1896	44	Wyoming
1896-1908	45	Utah
1908-1912	46	Oklahoma
1912-1959	48	Arizona, and New Mexico
1959-1960	49	Alaska
1960-NOW	50	Hawaii

Stripes on the American Flag

The 13 stripes on each flag are always seven red and six white. Before 1916, there was no consistency about whether the flag had six or seven red stripes. No one knows for sure if there is a reason they chose seven red stripes, although some may wonder if it had anything to do with keeping the edges of the flag clean since white shows dirt more efficiently than red: not a very patriotic reason, but a very logical answer.

As for the stripes themselves, they stand for the first 13 colonies. They include:

- Virginia (1607)
- New Jersey (1618)
- Massachusetts (1620)
- New Hampshire (1622)
- Pennsylvania (1623)
- New York (1624)
- Maryland (1634)
- Connecticut (1635)
- Rhode Island (1636)
- Delaware (1638)
- North Carolina (1653)
- South Carolina (1670)
- Georgia (1733)

Colors of the Flag

The colors on the flag were deliberately chosen to represent a theme that our founding fathers felt was essential to the building of our nation.

- **Red** stands for courage, hardiness, and bloodshed. Courage because our country separated from what we once knew, we started over, we fought for our freedom. Hardiness because our founding fathers believed our country would outlast the land that we came from. And finally, bloodshed to honor all those who lost their lives for our freedom and our country.
- **White** stands for purity and vigilance, purity because our country is independent and not corrupted by any other country. Vigilance because our country needs to be alert and careful in the choices we make.
- **Blue** stands for justice and perseverance, justice because it is the basis of our country, and perseverance because although our nation is young, we will stand firm against all opposition.

Did You Know?

According to the U.S. Department of State, the names of the flag's official colors are "old glory red," "white," and "old glory blue." Their HTML codes and Pantone equivalents can be found on the Department of State's style guide.

Why We Honor the American Flag

One of the main reasons we honor the flag is to pay respect to our country and the liberties that we enjoy here, which means paying respects to those who paid the ultimate sacrifice.

One of the most symbolic ways we pay respects is during the funerals for our police and military. It became ritual to cover the casket of a deceased public official or Armed Forces member in the 1700s during the Napoleonic Wars. Today, the tradition is used to remind funeral-goers of the dead's commitment and sacrifice.

According to Today, there are three ways that the American flag is displayed during a decedent's burial:

- **Closed casket:** the flag should be arranged on the casket with the union blue field at the head and over the left shoulder of the deceased.
- **Half couch (open):** the flag should be placed in three layers so that the union is the top fold by the open part of the casket to the deceased's left.
- **Full couch (open):** the flag should be folded in the traditional triangular shape and placed in the middle portion of the head panel of the casket cap right above the left shoulder of the deceased.

A flag folded into the traditional triangle can be displayed next to the cremated remains during a service.

Customs for Folding the American Flag

Whenever folding the United States of America's flag, there is a symbol behind each fold and tuck. It is not random but very purposeful, which is one reason why they will fold an American flag at a veteran's funeral.

They always fold the flag to display only the blue and white stars. One reason they do this is so that none of the red shows, because it stands for the bloodshed. We want to remember the person's perseverance and vigilance, not the loss of the person.

It is folded in the shape of a triangle so that it symbolizes the hat worn by Revolutionary soldiers. It is because of these men that we have our freedom and our rights.

What Does Each Fold in the American Flag Mean?

- **Fold One:** Symbol of life
- **Fold Two:** Symbol of belief in eternal life
- **Fold Three:** Honor and remembrance of veterans
- **Fold Four:** Symbol of our weaker nature
- **Fold Five:** Tribute to the United States of America
- **Fold Six:** Symbol of our hearts and devotion
- **Fold Seven:** Tribute to the Armed Forces
- **Fold Eight:** For those who went into the "Valley of the Shadow of Death."
- **Fold Nine:** Tribute to womanhood and its giving and nurturing nature
- **Fold Ten:** Tribute to our fathers who gave their sons to protect our land
- **Fold Eleven:** Dedication to Jews and represents the bottom of the Seal of King David and King Solomon
- **Fold Twelve:** Represents the Christian and glorifies God.

The American Flag and Tradition

The U.S. National Anthem

The American flag is deeply-rooted in the traditions of our country. It hit a milestone during the War of 1812 between the United States and the United Kingdom. Poet Francis Scott Key found himself in Baltimore during the conflict, just as Britain's Royal Navy unleashed an assault on Fort McHenry at the Chesapeake Bay. Key watched the attack from a ship a few miles from the action. When the British left a day later, Key was surprised to observe the flag still waving over the fort. He was inspired to write the "Star-Spangled Banner" as a tribute to what he witnessed. In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson declared the song to be played at all national events before it was made the national anthem March 3, 1931.

The Pledge of Allegiance

Francis Bellamy developed a patriotic program for schools around the country in commemoration of the 400th anniversary of Columbus' journey to the New World. The pledge was intended to ensure that younger people knew to respect that flag and to prevent any more civil conflicts in the future. In its original form the pledge read:

"I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

Did You Know?

President Eisenhower added the phrase "one nation, indivisible under God," in 1954 as a response to the fear that atheism was being spread by the Soviet Union.

Proper Flag Etiquette

The section of law detailing guidelines involving the U.S. flag is called the Flag Codes. Some of the statutes include:

1. Never let the flag touch the ground.
2. Not displaying the flag during unpleasant weather conditions.
3. Hoisting the flag energetically and lowering it ceremoniously.
4. To never dip the flag in such a way as to "bow" unless as a signal of duress.
5. The flag should never be embroidered, printed, or otherwise for any advertising purposes.
6. Never use the flag as a costume or athletic uniform except for the patch used by military personnel or public servants and officials.
7. Any flag that is worn, dirty, or torn should not be publicly displayed, but privately destroyed.

Flag Day: Celebrating Our Flag's Heritage

The First Flag day was in 1877 on the 100th anniversary of the Flag Resolution in 1777. Today we celebrate Flag Day with parades, ceremonies, and picnics sponsored by our veterans, schools, and other patriotic programs. The holiday is meant to preserve the honor and pride associated with our first flag, "Old Glory," and the values she stood to uphold.

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Questions & Answers

Question: Why should I honor the flag?

Answer: A flag represents either a club, state, or country that you are part of. By respecting it or honoring it, you are saying that you stand behind that club, state, or country and the people who are part of that club, state, or country. You may disagree with some aspect of that club, state, or country, but you are willing to set that aside to show support for the group as a whole.

My guess is your actual question is why Americans should honor the United States flag, as that is the hot topic of the year. I will continue to honor this country as long as it continues to work towards freedom, unity, and love. I believe that, although our country struggles in all three areas, I feel that as a whole our country continues to strive for those three things. I support that idea.

I feel that we need to continue to fight against things that hinder freedom of any group or person, things that cause disunity, or when a group is being treated unfairly, unkindly, etc. Our country, just as the individuals in it, will never be perfect, but I believe we need to continue to strive for success all while showing support for the people the flag represents.

Question: Do you feel it's right that our professional football players kneel during our national anthem and disrespect our country by doing so and everybody that fought and died for it?

Answer: In our country, we are given the right to do as we please within certain parameters. We have free speech, which means they can be vocal if they are unhappy with something and want to make a statement. This is a silent protest and yet captures people's attention. I believe initially it was to speak out against brutality towards black Americans by police. But unfortunately, the mission is getting lost and less focused, which loses its impact. Too many people had different reasons. I was like "Oh I agree with that, but not that." And therefore, could not join it, since I was not one hundred supportive of all the ideas that were represented by it. Then again, I also noticed some contradicted one another as well.

I am not going to make a judgment call on whether I think it is right to do so. If I felt our country was going down a dark path that harmed people like that of the Holocaust, I would not stand and respect our country at that time. Do I personally agree with the reasons I have heard that some of them are kneeling? If I truly felt that police officers were targeting black Americans across all of the United States than yes, I would agree. I do believe there are police officers who are more racially charged against blacks, but I don't believe that is the norm. I believe that the majority of police officers are unbiased and protect our country as they should. So I do not feel that not standing for the national anthem is the proper way to protest against this particular act. I would rather see protests outside of police stations where there are bigotry and racism. It's not the country as a whole that is the problem. It is small pockets of people who hold onto such erroneous beliefs. Instead of disunity, I would rather see our country trying to speak out by promoting unity. I think purposely choosing to stand next to your teammate of a different race and joining hands in the air during the national anthem would speak louder than kneeling.

Question: How can I use the American flag as a topic for an essay?

Answer: First you need to decide what kind of essay you are trying to write. Are you trying to write an argumentative one or an explanatory one? What about this article did you find interesting? What caught your eye? What did you disagree with? What did you agree with? What surprised you? There are so many directions you could go when writing an essay about the American flag. It is up to you to decide what message you want to give to your reader. I personally stay away from debates, because I am pacifist by nature, but not by politics. So my writing tends to be expository. It doesn't catch people's attention unless their goal is just education.

Question: How come there are different flags?

Answer: To understand why there are different flags, you need to understand the purpose of flags. In early years, a flag was raised to claim a particular land or ship. It was to notify others that that land/ship belonged to the group or country that flag represents. Flags are also used to show support and promote unity within a group. Since there are many different groups, countries, states, there is a need to symbolize each group through a flag, hence the multitude of flags.

Question: What do the stripes mean?

Answer: There is one stripe for each of the original colonies, for a total of 13.

Question: What does the American flag stand for?

Answer: A flag is the representation of a nation. Each person may look at the flag and feel it stands for something different, and it is shaped by how you think about your country, or the country's flag that you are looking at. I feel the American flag stands for freedom, equal rights, hope, opportunity, among just a few. What do you think the flag stands for?

Question: Why did they chose stars to represent the states ?

Answer: The honest answer is that no one truly knows for sure, but we do know that the resolution of the Continental Congress in 1777 states "the union [shall] be thirteen stars white in a blue field, representing a new constellation." This statement lies in the midst of resolutions regarding the Navy. The association of sailing and stars may have played a part. Also because the primary reason for a flag is to identify ships, it makes sense that there would be that navigational symbolism.

Question: Why do football players kneel?

Answer: Many chose to kneel because they felt that police officers were showing prejudices against black Americans. Not only were they concerned about the racism, but they also were concerned about the extreme violence that happened to certain black Americans. They felt the treatment was unjust and needed to be addressed.

Question: If I were to not put my hand across my heart for the national anthem towards the flag, because I do not believe the flag stands by certain aspects for which it should, would it be considered disrespectful?

Answer: Many believe that you stand and sing during the national anthem, and you place your hand on your heart for the pledge. Therefore, it is not necessary to place your hand on your heart when you are singing the national anthem. You should take off your hat as a sign of respect.

Regardless of what your views are on how to behave during the national anthem, essentially what you are saying is that you do not respect the flag. You do not believe that it stands for what it claims to stand for; therefore, you do not believe it deserves the respect that others place towards it. So yes, it would be disrespectful, but you also are making a statement about your feelings towards it. Therefore, I do not necessarily believe that one should show respect towards things they do not respect.

That being said, I believe that America should go back to the things that the flag is supposed to represent. Since I want America to represent all those great traits, I will continue to show respect to the flag. Not because I think America is doing a good job of portraying those characteristics, but because I believe we as a nation need to continue to strive for that!

Question: Why is the American flag red, white, and blue rather than green or black?

Answer: It may be because they were using the same colors as the British flag. Although maybe they chose the colors, because of what they wanted the colors to mean. The white was supposed to signify purity and innocence, whereas red was to signify hardness and valor, while blue was meant to mean vigilance, perseverance, and justice.

Question: Do you think that schools should teach history at an early age?

Answer: Definitely, but more important than teaching history, is teaching accurate history. In order to best do that, it is important to teach it from several vantage points and many sources. I believe reading it from various texts rather than a textbook is most effective.

Question: How long should the flag be displayed?

Answer: Generally, it is respectful to only display the flag from sunrise to sunset, unless the flag is being illuminated throughout the night, in which case it can be displayed 24 hours. If the flag is not an all-weather flag, then it should not be displayed while it rains or snows.

Question: Why do the professional football players kneel during our national anthem?

Answer: Many have chosen to do so because they feel that police officers have unfairly targeted black Americans and done unjust violence against them.

Question: Was purple a choice when the American flag was in the process of being made?

Answer: Though I cannot say this with certainty, I don't believe so. They chose to use red, white, and blue, like so many other countries, because the meaning behind the colors. Purple is often a symbol of royalty, which is something early Americans rejected. More than that, purple is not often used as a symbolic color in national flags in general. The most common colors are red, white, blue, green, yellow, and black.

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Comments

Buck on July 29, 2020:

Why you should not burn the Flag. The flag has flown and given respect to those that have passed on by. You may hear of other counties burning our flag because they disrespect us. This is False only a handful disrespect others, but if you truly watch and listen to these nations, they look up to us because of our freedoms for which they do not have. Bottom line is that if the flag is withered and torn. Give it to your local VET ORG for they will dispose your flag with dignity and the respect.

Robert on July 14, 2020:

Good work! I was impressed by its quality! Wish you good luck from Russia! :)

Anonymous on July 11, 2020:

Why is it wrong to burn the flag?

Julie Falkner Lunsford on November 10, 2019:

Actually the Pledge of Allegiance was as follows:

"I pledge allegiance to our Flag AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA; the Repuic for which it stands...One nation UNDER GOD, indevisible, with liberty and justice for all."

Whe van thank Michael Newdow for the exclusions.

Nob on September 24, 2019:

Not happy I have a 300 word eserf

Veronica Wolfe on September 02, 2019:

We need to respect our flag and what it stands for.

person on November 06, 2018:

thank you for writing this it help me with a two page essay about the american flag.

pm modi on October 27, 2018:

Indian flag is the bestest

Barack Obama on October 23, 2018:

I love the USA

Ava on October 21, 2018:

What does the American Flag symbolize? I understand freedom and states. But what else specific or un-specific. Thanks in advance.

shaylin on October 18, 2018:

Thank you soooo much for writing this.

unknown on October 18, 2018:

this a very good site for the american flag there is a lot of infomation

Ellie on October 17, 2018:

I love this website because i have a essay to do.

its_me_***** on October 17, 2018:

This country is amazing. #fortnite is dead

Abby on October 17, 2018:

I HATE trump

Donald J Trump on October 11, 2018:

I am very suprised that the blacks kneel which is a disgrace to there contry. I feel they should be fired or docked pay.

LilMurph02 on October 11, 2018:

I think that the players are kneeling because they don't honor the flag which is really stupid

iabella on October 05, 2018:

hi i love this

AUSTIN on September 25, 2018:

awsome job

The Old Dog on September 22, 2018:

What about the American Indians, they were here first and the white and black men took their land, raped, killed their people and nobody helps them. They put them on land that nobody else wants and when they do they put them some where else. These young protesting brats need to grow up and find a job or go home or get out of this country and see what they are messing up. PLEASE GOD HELP THIS COUNTRY BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE.

Democracy on September 19, 2018:

Wow! Your the exact reason that the players are kneeling. If you bothered to read their story you would know that they are not disrespecting the flag, but honoring what the flag represents. Absolutely clueless about what is going on right under your nose.

javez on September 18, 2018:

is there a black american flag!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

U.S.A on September 18, 2018: