

Whitney Smith : Flag Abuse, Col. Plate I
(Illustrations from the Editor's Collection)



Fig. 1 Ireland's green, white and 'gold' flag from a Republican propaganda poster, c1918, whereas the actual colours of the Irish flag are green, white, and orange



Fig. 2 Irish and German flags. In the days of the Weimar Republic the German colours were derogatorily referred to as black, red, and 'mustard'.

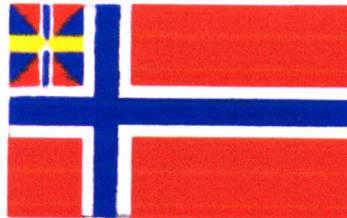


Fig. 3 The Flag of Norway under Swedish king Oskar I



Fig. 4 The second flag of the European Movement

FLAG ABUSE

Whitney Smith

Abstract:

Most uses of flags in society are intended to be positive ones, but there are also many negative practices involving flags. Vexillology has paid very little attention to these, which the author recommends be known collectively as "flag abuse." Particularly in the United States, people are familiar with physical attacks on the flag, generally referred to as "flag desecration." This involves a wilful disregard or intentional violation of flag law. Flag abuse is rather any usage involving flags which is intended to humiliate or challenge its symbolism. This may be expressed by the manner in which a flag is displayed or by verbal attacks on it or physical actions. Examples are given from Germany, Ireland, and Norway of criticisms levelled against flags with the intention of limiting their effectiveness by ridicule or false accusations of origin or meaning. The author encourages other vexillologists to expand upon the analysis of this phenomenon as an important contribution vexillology can make to political science.

The social context of flag usage is extremely broad. Flags are utilized on vehicles of all kinds, in advertising, in art, as awards, in funerals and other ceremonies, as interior and exterior decoration for homes and public buildings, in clothing, in electronic and printed graphics, on ships and airplanes, in churches and associations, in literature and the theatre, for practical purposes of signalling and warning, in celebrations and exhibitions, in schools, and in sports. Nevertheless, the primary usage of flags is and always has been as instruments of political expression found in such centres of power as elections, demonstrations, armed revolt, military and naval forces, and the ceremonies of organized religion.

Overwhelmingly, most flag usages are positive ones, at least from the standpoint of the users. A mass display of flags is intended to encourage enthusiasm for a particular program, party, or individual. The ceremonial hoisting of a flag or the deposit of enemy flags in a museum or church commemorates victory. The rendition of a pledge or salute to a flag encourages loyalty and reminds participants of civic duties. The recitation and publication of flag-related events from the past tend to establish a common mythology for a specific state, nation, or political organization. The respectful burning of a flag can evoke memories of sacrifice and instill reverence in citizens. Of course, from the standpoint of an opponent of the political system which is being vaunted, such usages may be seen as negative rather than positive.¹

If most "flag actions" are perceived as being positive, at least by those who create and promote them, nevertheless there are also many intentionally negative usages - ones which are derogatory, contemptful, slanderous, offensive, or otherwise harmful to a particular flag and those who support it or are represented by it. In some instances those perpetrating the abuse acknowledge the spiteful nature of their actions; others insist that they are only advancing the just and righteous standing, philosophy, and activities of their own flags and related symbols and that consequently their deeds and deportment are positive, honourable, even necessary.

Very little attention has been given in the literature of vexillology to such negative activities, which collectively may be labeled "flag abuse." Overwhelmingly, what documentation and analyses have been undertaken focus exclusively on only one area of flag abuse. Physical attacks on the United States flag - burning it, cutting or tearing it, trampling upon it, placing objects or inscriptions on it or modifying its design, spiting or defecating on it, etc. - are universally known as "flag desecration." Although such desecration occurs in many countries, emphasis on it in political dialogue is never so extensive or frequent as in the United States². The first recorded incident of flag desecration in what is now the United States occurred in 1634 in Salem, Massachusetts³. Despite the prominence and extent of focus by both the media and scholars on American flag desecration - or perhaps in part because of it - almost no consideration has been given to other

forms of flag abuse or to analysis of its existence in other countries. The present article is an attempt to correct this imbalance.

Flag desecration usually involves a wilful disregard or intentional violation of flag laws and of the established traditions and social norms concerning flag usage, expressed in an overt act performed on an actual flag. It is intended as a communication of attitudes and beliefs about the flag or, more commonly, about the institutions it symbolizes and the actions being carried out in its name. Just as the abolitionist agitator William Lloyd Garrison burned a copy of the U.S. Constitution because it had been used to defend the return of an enslaved man to his Southern owner, so Gregory Lee Johnson burned a United States flag in August 1984 to protest the policies of the United States at a time when Ronald Reagan was being renominated for president at the Republican National Convention in Dallas, Texas. The Supreme Court ultimately overturned Johnson's conviction as being in violation of the free speech provisions of the First Amendment to the Constitution.

Flag abuse relies on a wide spectrum of both words and actions involving the flag as a physical object, representations of the flag, and both written and oral communications concerning the flag. In its broadest sense, flag abuse may always be seen as the attempt to limit or destroy the sacred nature of a flag by whatever means appear to the perpetrators as likely to be successful. It may be defined as any usage involving the concept, representation, or physical manifestation of a flag which is intended to humiliate or disparage it or to challenge the veracity of the symbolism expressed by the flag and in particular the significance which that flag has for the nation or other group which it represents. The abuse of the flag and the ideals it represents may be expressed by physical actions, in verbal attacks on a flag, or in the way a flag is displayed.

The subject deserves extensive and intensive examination to broaden our understanding of the role of flags in human society. The present contribution cannot presume to address the myriad manifestations of flag abuse, their interrelationships and differences, and the degree to which one or another form of abuse is effective in achieving the intended political results. Instead, a very limited area is presented for consideration - verbal insults against flags designed to reduce their political effectiveness by making them objects of ridicule rather than dignified symbols of state. Among those verbal criticisms of a flag intended to undermine its dignity are those which raise questions about the soundness of the policies leading to their adoption and use. Such attacks often rely on sarcasm as a weapon. Quick jibes are easily understood and recalled, yet the humorous element may deter the flag user from attempting to make a serious rebuttal. Particularly to those who oppose the principles represented by a particular flag, but also among the wider public, there is considerable appeal in seeing powerful forces thus publicly deflated. In most cases, the negative comments only produce discomfiture, but there are some examples where a proposed flag has been withdrawn, based on sharp public criticism of its design or symbolism. In other cases its effectiveness has been reduced. Some examples follow from Europe, Germany, Ireland, and Norway.

Right-wing enemies of the Weimar Republic in Germany derided the artistic rendition of the eagle of its first coat of arms, calling it a "frightened parrot". The design of the coat of arms was subsequently changed. The Black-Red-Gold flag of that era, hated by those same enemies for its symbolic association with the failure of the Frankfurt Assembly and the German Confederation of 1848-1852, was labeled "the Black-Red-Mustard." In 1926 Chancellor Hans Luther tried, with right-wing support, to substitute the black-white-red imperial German flag (which already served as the civil ensign) for the Black-Red-Gold for use by German diplomatic and consular officers abroad. His idea was approved in May 1926 by his coalition government, but Luther lost a vote of confidence in parliament on the issue when the German Democratic Party defected. This was "the only known instance of a government falling on a flag issue"⁴.

Among many proposals suggested immediately after World War II as a flag to represent all of Europe was the one associated with the United Europe Movement, founded by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. The original design, displayed at the Constituent Congress of the European Movement in The Hague in June 1948, presented an E in red filling the hoist and the top and bottom edges of the flag, the remaining area being white. The flag had been conceived by Duncan Sandys, but his father-in-law, Winston Churchill, did not approve the design after he saw the flag. Displayed in great numbers at The Hague, it looked like decoration for a Communist party conference. The red

was subsequently changed to green, the symbol of hope⁵.

Critics nevertheless continued to denounce the new flag through letters to the editor of newspapers, correspondence sent to European integrationist movements, and other media. It was suggested that green recalled the flag of the Prophet Muhammad and the League of Arab States; use of a letter in lieu of some other symbol was rejected as simplistic and unheraldic. The appearance of the flag gave rise to the popular interpretation that it represented Sandys' drawers ('long johns'), spread out on the grass to dry. Gradually, the flag lost its role as the symbol of European unification and thereafter officials looked elsewhere for an alternative flag. The proposal for a blue flag with a ring of gold stars, made in 1951, was approved four years later by the Council of Europe and three decades afterwards was adopted by the European Communities.

For centuries, it was a fundamental policy of the British Crown to maintain sovereignty over all of Ireland and to resist any efforts by the Irish to establish any local autonomy which might lead to increasing pressure for independence. Official symbols representing Ireland as a whole were, consequently, always representative of power of the English if not actually created by them. For example, the three gold crowns on blue, today associated with the Province of Munster, were considered in the 14th century to be the arms of the English Lordship of Ireland. In the 16th century they were replaced by a blue shield bearing a golden harp below a crown - a design which, without the crown, remains today the arms of Ireland.⁶

Authentic local Irish symbols, on the contrary, were disparaged by the English until at least the 1960s and some individuals still maintain the old prejudices even today. For example, when Cecil King, an English flag expert, wrote in the 1920s about a possible flag for the Irish Free State, his proposals all revolved around the defaced British ensigns. Although a green flag with a golden harp had been in use by the Irish for almost 400 years, it never attained even the begrudging English recognition which the Cross of St. Andrew flag or the Red Dragon won in Scotland and Wales respectively. The aphorism of Samuel Johnson to the effect that the harp was the perfect symbol for Ireland since "it cost more than it was worth to keep it in tune" was frequently quoted. The Cross of St. Patrick flag, which Professor Hayes-McCoy has demonstrated was already in use in the 17th century, is still routinely dismissed as spurious in books on heraldry and flags written by English authors on the premise that only those saints who were martyred are entitled to crosses⁷.

The strongest accusation, however, was made against the green-white-orange tricolour, i.e. the national flag of the Republic of Ireland. Its antecedents in the early 19th century are clear, as are the symbolism associated with the colours. The two principal faiths of the Irish, Catholicism and Protestantism, are reflected in the green and orange, while white represents peace between the two. For an island with centuries of sectarian strife, the tricolour is thus a remarkably fair and evenhanded symbol reflecting a positive view of the cooperation necessary for resolving old hurts and for collaborating to build the future. Nevertheless a malicious interpretation of this flag has been made by certain rumour-mongers in England which cleverly twists the three colours into an interpretation directly contrary to their real intended meaning.

According to this interpretation, green stands for the "Emerald Isle," thus recalling the old nationalist harp flag and reflecting neither the gold-harp-on-blue arms of the English-dominated Lordship of Ireland nor the symbols of the Protestant minority of the island. Worse still, the white and orange are asserted to actually be white and gold (or yellow), thus "proving" that the republic has submitted itself to the pope and is committed to advancing Roman Catholic interests to the detriment of adherents of other religions. The historical record is clear: the flag always been *orange* and white, not gold or yellow and white. Moreover, in the early 19th century when those colours were chosen by the Irish, the white-yellow papal flag was used only by fishing boats, whereas the state and other principal flags of the papacy had a background of solid white. So widespread is the interpretation, however, the Flag Research Center has received many inquiries from individuals in the United States, Britain, and Australia, even during the present decade, asking why the "correct" green-white-yellow Irish flag is never shown in flag books.

A striking case of repeated flag abuse is manifested in the history of the Norwegian national flag. Norway had been under the rule of Denmark since the Middle Ages and flew Danish flags on the high seas. As a consequence of the Napoleonic Wars, however, the victorious allies deprived Denmark

of control over Norway, legal title being passed to the king of Sweden. The Norwegian desire for independence resulted in resistance to Swedish rule, which was finally imposed only with force. Subsequently the Swedish government did everything in its power to suppress Norwegian self-government and nationalist sentiments, although constitutionally Norway and Sweden were considered to be equal kingdoms united under the rule of the Swedish king.

In November 1814, the Norwegians chose the Danish flag as their own, adding in the upper canton the ancient arms of Norway - a golden lion holding an axe. Sweden restricted usage of this flag to North Atlantic waters. The Swedish insisted that Norwegian merchantmen sailing under this new flag would have no protection from the depredations frequently visited on European ships by pirates and privateers of North Africa, the so-called "Barbary Coast." Eventually, the Norwegian government paid the Swedish government for permission to fly the Swedish flag, which was protected by the tribute Sweden annually paid to North African states. Aside from the humiliation of having to use the flag of another country when sailing outside local waters, Norwegians were outraged to discover that their payments to the Swedish government were retained in Stockholm rather than paid to the North Africans for protection from possible piracy.

In 1818 a new flag was instituted by the Swedish king without his consulting the Storting, the Norwegian parliament. The basic design was the Swedish national flag into which supposed "Norwegian colours," in the form of a white diagonal cross on a red background, were introduced. Not only was the flag adopted without consultation with the people it was intended to symbolize, but the design reflected neither the gold and red colours of the Norwegian arms nor the cross of its previous flag. Indeed the St. Andrew's cross of the new flag was seen as an ominous portent because it recalled for Norwegians the Russian naval ensign and the fact that Sweden had lost its territory of Finland to Russia only a few years before.

In 1821 the Norwegians adopted their own national flag - the same design as is in use today - to be used only on land and in the North Atlantic. Instead of assenting to the flag bill passed by the Storting, King Karl Johan of Sweden established the new flag by royal decree in order to emphasize the prerogative he felt was his to approve all symbols and in order to deny the Norwegians any formal role in establishing their own flag. It was considered a great victory for the Norwegians 17 years later when the king granted them permission to fly the flag on Norwegian merchant ships anywhere in the world. Nevertheless, the Swedish flag with the "Norwegian colours" in the canton remained official and indeed continued to be the only merchant flag which gave Norwegian ship owners any legal protection.

When King Oskar I came to the Swedish throne in 1844, the flag situation changed again. Each country would now fly its own national flag - but with a special "union mark" in the canton which combined the Norwegian and Swedish flags in a diagonal arrangement. Norwegians continued to campaign for unrestricted use of the flag they had adopted in 1821. In this campaign they utilized their own form of verbal abuse against the Swedes. The Norwegian-Swedish union mark, for example, was contemptuously referred to by Norwegians as the "herring salad," while the Norwegian flag without the union mark was referred to as the "clean" or "pure" flag. One member of the Storting campaigned to have the union mark removed from the Norwegian flag and also to create a new version of that symbol in which the Norwegian part of the design would be given primacy over the Swedish.

In 1889 a motion was introduced in the Storting whereby the prerogative of establishing the flag of Norway would be reserved to that parliament instead of the Swedish king. When the king visited the Norwegian port city of Bergen, his host, the mayor, intentionally displayed the "clean" Norwegian flag on the pole in his garden. The king was offended and word was passed to his host, who reluctantly replaced the Norwegian flag with the city flag of Bergen. The king is reputed to have said that his host "might fly any bogus flag, so long as he does not use the pure one."

The final chapter in the struggle between the two countries over the flag issue took place in 1899. During three successive parliaments, the Norwegians had adopted a bill making the clean flag the sole civil ensign of Norway. The king twice refused to sign the legislation, but the third time he was forced by the constitution to accept the Storting's decision. The Swedish people were deeply offended by Norwegian attitudes and Count Douglas, a Swede who served as union minister of

foreign affairs, resigned his post rather than cooperate with the legal aspects of introducing the clean flag. Thus for a period of 85 years the Norwegians and Swedes traded insults and manipulated constitutional and political systems to abuse each others' flags. The actions and attitudes expressed in this "struggle for a clean flag" added considerable bitterness to the relationship between the two countries and was one factor resulting in their separation in 1905.⁸

Innuendo, slander, humiliation, exaggerated or distorted attribution, and similar tactics are common in all political intercourse. When they are applied to flags there is a tendency for those symbols to lose the sacred (or at least majestic) qualities which are essential to their effectiveness in binding people in a common cause, reinforcing ideological principles, and inspiring sacrifice. Such criticisms are difficult to answer directly, yet they tend to distract attention from substantive policies which have the possibility of influencing the economic system, social norms, military capabilities, technological advancement, and similar national characteristics of real significance. Agitation and invective over flag-related issues are, ultimately, not about flags at all but the principles and actions of political leaders and groups. Nevertheless to understand the endless struggle for power within a given polity or on the international level an understanding of symbolic action - including flag abuse - is always necessary. Here is an area where vexillology potentially can make a contribution to the understanding of social dynamics.

Notes

1. In January 1999, a Vietnamese-American couple in Los Angeles displayed the flag of Vietnam with its Communist symbolism and a photograph of Ho Chi Minh on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day to express their support for the free speech and other civil liberties characterizing their adopted homeland. Hundreds of other Vietnamese immigrants were deeply offended by the display and demonstrated against it, flaunting the yellow flag with three red stripes of the former anti-Communist regime in Vietnam. Tini Tran, Harrison Sheppard, and David Haldane, "Judge Disallows Flag; Retailer Speaks Out," *Los Angeles Times* (Orange County Edition), 22 January 1999.
2. Use of the word desecration, meaning to rob of sacred character, is significant: it manifests the widespread attitude of Americans that their national flag is a sacred object and not simply a concrete emblem of sacred principles.
3. Howard Milliar Chapin, *Roger Williams and the King's colours; The Documentary Evidence* (Providence: Society of Colonial Wars in the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1928). The best sources on the whole question are three volumes by Professor Robert Justin Goldstein, *Saving "Old Glory": The History of the American Flag Controversy* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1995); *Desecrating the American Flag: Key Documents of the Controversy from the Civil War to 1995* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996); and *Burning the Flag: The Great 1989-1990 American Flag Desecration Controversy* (Kent OH: Kent State University Press, 1996).
4. William G. Crampton, "The Life and Times of Ottfried Neubecker," *Flagmaster*, No. 72, page 2.
5. Markus Goldner, *Politische Symbole der Europäischen Integration* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1988), pages 41-45.
6. This serves both as the presidential flag of Ireland and as the "Irish quartering" in the royal arms of Britain.
7. No English flag book seems to have made note of the fact that St. George, whose cross forms the English national flag, originated as the pagan god Mithra and was, thus, neither a martyr nor a Christian.
8. Hans Cappelen, "The Struggle for a 'Pure' Norwegian Flag: Nationalism and Symbolism in the 19th Century," *The Flag Bulletin*, Vol. XXIV:3-5, pp. 87-97.

Whitney Smith

Whitney Smith, Ph.D., is director of the Flag Research Center and editor of *THE FLAG BULLETIN*. He helped to found the North American Vexillological Association and the International Federation of Vexillological Associations and served as officers in both. Formerly a professor of political science at Boston University, he has authored more than 20 books and scores of articles on many aspects of vexillology.



Whitney Smith, left, pores over the latest edition of *Album des Pavillons* with its compiler Armand DuPayrat, right.