

The union mark

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Flags figure prominently in the unification of nations and of other political entities. Such unification, whether created by conquest or voluntary agreement — or even through dynastic marriage — and whether resulting in a unitary state, a dual government, or a federal system, is always an event of the greatest interest. Symbols of unity — “union marks”— often serve as a means of proclaiming the existence of the new participant in international affairs. For the populations directly involved these symbols not only represent a new future, they often express the direction to be taken by the ruling elite. Thus President Léopold Sédar Senghor suggested that the program of the future Federation of Mali might be read in its flag.¹

A flag may contravene certain fundamental aspirations held by the population or it may express those aspirations so well it is hard to imagine that any other flag could have been adopted. These two cases are exemplified by the flags successively used by South Arabia and Southern Yemen.² The new emblems may conflict with preexisting ones or simply supplant them — or they may coexist with the older symbols. The three possibilities are exemplified in the histories of the Cypriote, Indian, and Swiss flags.

Some new union symbols are derived in whole or in part from traditional forms, allowing those who owe them allegiance to find familiar elements in the new political situation. Although a new union mark when first introduced may appear incongruous or belabored, many symbols which now seem natural and proper gained that position only through long usage.

In addition to the symbols of unity which occur in flags, there are many other forms of symbolism which can and do express union. Verbal and active symbolism such as speeches, slogans, war cries, party programs, edicts, parades, ceremonies, and rituals are necessary to reorient the pre-unification *Weltanschauung*. They are followed by corresponding changes in stamps, coins, monuments, uniforms, etc.

When Upper and Lower Egypt were combined, the pharaoh acquired a crown composed of the two older crowns and architects included the plant badges of both territories in their motifs. In the Crusades, as that name implies, men from different parts of Europe all utilized the cross as a sign of their common endeavor, although each national group had a distinctive color. Osama bin Laden has spoken of a war between the banner of Islam and the flag of the Crusaders and Jews.

In the modern world the gold-bordered red star and the hammer and sickle device



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were used by those who support Communism, with variations indicating ideological differences. Thus the class structures in Eastern Mongolia and Khorezm, respectively, were symbolized by a horsewhip and mattock and by a sickle and spade instead of the usual sickle and hammer.

When French forces arrived as allies of the American army in 1780, a joint white and black cockade was created. Nine years later Louis XIV added the Parisian cockade of red and blue to his own white cockade, thus giving impetus to the use of those three colors to symbolize the unity of French king and country.

The most explicit and systematic symbols of union have been those current in heraldry, which deserve a separate and detailed treatment. The rules regarding the display of two or more shields together are known as marshalling, of which three basic patterns exist. A new sovereign entity may be symbolized by the adoption of new arms (or other para-heraldic emblems such as the Nazi swastika), by the combining of existing arms, or by the joint display of existing arms. When an armorial achievement was granted to the stillborn West Indies federation in 1957, for example, its graphic inspiration was wholly new.

Direct combination of arms already in use may be effected by dimidiation, impalement, quartering, or use of an inescutcheon or border. Instances of these types are exemplified by the arms borne by the Cinque Ports (dimidiation), Schleswig-Holstein (impalement), Spain (quartering), Czechoslovakia (inescutcheon), and Portugal (border). The joint display of existing emblems to form a new coat of arms may be either in the form of equal shields (couché, as for the Peruvian-Bolivian Confederation or accollé as for Austria-Hungary [1915-1918]) or of a principal charge environed with lesser charges as in the seal of Switzerland and the arms of the Russian Empire.³

The United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil and the Algarve appears to have been unique in representing its union by superimposing one shield directly on another, although this might be interpreted as a variant form of the inescutcheon. There are also arms, such as those of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, which have been composed or compounded of older symbols.

The laws of heraldry are only in part applicable to vexillology and — except in the case of certain clearly armorial designs — dimidiation, quartering, impalement, and the inescutcheon and border are practically unknown as means of indicating political union on a flag. Even where the general heraldic system is retained it is frequently subject to modification consonant with the nature of flags, that is with their usual oblong shape, their double-sidedness, their flexibility of form, and the techniques involved in their manufacture.

Thus there have been “impaled” flags where the division is diagonal (the house flag of the Chinese Eastern Railway Company), off-centre (the Sri Lanka national flag since 1951), horizontal (the unofficial United Arab States flag of 1958), or even with different designs on either side of a single flag (the proposed Hawaiian protectorate flag of 1851). Even the orthodox form of impalement, exemplified by the Austro-Hungarian civil ensign of 1869-1918, was modified slightly when the flags of the New York Port Authority and the old Danzig Harbor Administration were created.

Quartering in the heraldic sense is not unknown in vexillology, although most of the cases are flags based on coats of arms, e.g. Maryland, Cromwell’s Commonwealth, and the modern jacks of Spain and Italy. Other examples are only proposed flags such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s suggestion for an Anglo-American flag. In at least one

outstanding case, the Swedo-Norwegian union mark of 1844-1905, the division lines were diagonal.

The state flags of Jersey and Northern Ireland present rare examples of the inescutcheon as a sign of union. The red and blue ensigns employed by some British colonies might appear to be distinctive instances of the inescutcheon, but in view of their origin and use it would seem that they might more appropriately be related to the heraldic system of cadency. The pine tree added to different versions of the Red Ensign in New England (1686-1775) might be viewed in the same light.

The canton, which for artistic reasons is preferable in flags to the chief as an ordinary, is often called the union of a flag because the British and Americans have positioned their union emblems in this area, but this is not an invariable rule. In many cases — for example, the county flags of Liberia and the flags of Togo and Syria under French rule or Moldavia under Turkish rule — the canton has been symbolic of subordination of one state to another rather than of unity or parity between states. Elsewhere, as in many air force ensigns, the union is simply the emblem of nationality used to distinguish otherwise similar service flags.

There are some flags in which the canton and field serve in tandem to represent union. The Japanese puppet regimes in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia represented the union of nationalities in this fashion and Sark bears the flag of England and the arms of Normandy to symbolize local culture and history.

Flags cannot be *accollé* or *couché* in design, but the joint display of flags serves the same purpose. Nevertheless the hoisting of two or more flags, especially if each stands for a sovereign power, is ill-suited to proclaim unity and there have been only a few cases where such usage has been attempted. Most proved to be of a transitional nature — for example, the dual flags of Germany (1933-1935), South Africa (1927-1957), and the United Republic of Tanganyika and Zanzibar (April-June 1964). Elsewhere, two equal flags have generally meant either condominium status as in the former Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and the New Hebrides or some other form of multiple jurisdiction, as in the Transkei and Swat.

In Cyprus a single national flag emblematic of the unity and independence of the state was created in 1960, but political realities dictated the simultaneous official recognition of the antagonistic flags of the Turkish and Greek communities. In the Netherlands the unity of the royal house and the nation is expressed by the hoisting of an orange pennant above the Dutch flag, while solidarity of the Ryukyu Islanders with Japan was reflected in the flag and pennant combination established in 1967.

Not included in the modes of “marshalling” flags cited above is the most common form, that of combining existing motifs. Two principal types of composition are possible — the combination of designs or of colors. For the latter, the tricolor — usually horizontal but often vertical — is favored. The state flags of imperial Germany, Yugoslavia, Tanzania, and the Central African Republic fall in this category. The Rumanian flag includes the traditional colors of Walachia, Moldavia, and Transsylvania with its blue-yellow-red stripes and Belgium the heraldic colors of Brabant, Flanders, and Hainaut in the black-yellow-red of its flag.

One author has attempted to account for the difference between the vertical and horizontal disposition of such stripes by claiming the former as a federal and the latter as a unitary symbol, but this thesis⁴ finds confirmation neither in other works nor in the flags in question. Combinations of national and political colors have figured in the

flags of Finland (1918), India, Uganda, Iceland, Czechoslovakia, and the Union Republics of the U.S.S.R.

On a more general level, there are also certain color combinations employed in differing patterns to suggest a sense of international solidarity or of common cultural background among nations. The pan-Slavic red-white-blue, the Central American blue-white-blue, the South East Asian red and white, the pan-Arab red-white-black-green, the pan-Turanian light blue, and the pan-African red-green-yellow or red-green-black are examples.

There are a number of internationally recognized symbols which reflect historical if not present-day unity, such as the Muslim star and crescent, the Scandinavian cross, the red star of Communism, the revolutionary Arab tricolor-and-star, and the crossed naval ensigns of Commonwealth members. Similarly, within a nation there may be certain symbols suitable for combination in the creation of a new emblem linking the several parts of country.

The British Union Jack originated in precisely this fashion, by the combination of the crosses of the English and Scottish patron saints to which the cross of Ireland was later added. There were even two versions of the Union Flag for over a century and a half, the unofficial Scots form giving precedence to St. Andrew instead of St. George. The Sardinian flag of 1814-1848 used superimposition in displaying the crosses of Savoy, Sardinia, and Genoa. The flag of South Peru appears to have been constructed of the Bolivian and Peruvian colors; the 1949 Libyan flag was obtained by adding stripes for Fezzan and Tripolitania to the standard of Cyrenaica; and the flag of Tanzania is also an instance of design melding.

Another variation of this system involves the multiplication of a single common emblem to stand for new units in the state. The union of the United States flag created in 1777 was described as "13 stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation." In 1795 two additional stars and two stripes were incorporated in the flag for new states and in 1818 the present pattern was set whereby the stars are automatically increased when a new member enters the Union. This model was followed directly by the Confederate States of America, El Salvador (1865-1912), Venezuela, Brazil, the United Arab Republic, and the Ghana/Guinea/Mali union.

Malaysia and Australia have varied the number of points on a single star to indicate their constituent parts and Malaysia, South Viet Nam, and Hawaii have used stripes for the same purpose. On the other hand a distinctive new symbol, essentially unrelated to the past, was adopted to proclaim the unity aspired to by the West Indies, South Arabia, St. Christopher-Nevis-Anguilla, Somalia, the Mali Federation, and many international organizations.

Interest in the typology of symbol formation should not distract attention from the different types of union which may be involved. Geographical entities may be officially united or informally linked by ideological bonds or population groups, such as social classes and nationalities, which may be the referend of the symbol. In the first group the territories may previously have been separate, as were the constituents of West Indies, Cameroon, Hawaii, and Australia; or, before the adoption of the flag, they may have been under a different form of government which did not recognize them as separate units, as was true of the Philippines, the United States, Brazil, the Congo (1960-1963), the Comoros, and the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. In Laos the traditional three-headed elephant of Luang Prabang was conveniently reinterpreted to

stand for the unity of that kingdom with Vientiane and Chieng Mai.

The Union Jack is an interesting example of an international flag of unity. Its usage as a state flag linking all the parts of the Empire was once unquestioned, but with the evolution of the Commonwealth and its looser bonds, laws were passed in a number of countries explicitly recognizing the status of this flag.

Until fairly recently the representation of the unity of social classes in flags was manifested largely in the symbolization of a presumed alliance between royalty and the masses, a theme stressed (often unsuccessfully), when monarchs have feared the power of the nobility or of a rising bourgeoisie. Examples include the color combinations of Malay state flags, the tricolor and arms adopted by Italy in 1848, the tricolor with an imperial canton of Russia created in 1914, and certain flags of Afghanistan and Liechtenstein.

The 20th century instead usually emphasized unity between national, racial, or cultural groups within a country (as in Ireland, the Ivory Coast, Madagascar, India, Suriname, and Botswana) or of political groups (as in Panama, the People's Republic of China, the 1919 German civil ensign, and the state flag of Austria). The 1928-1994 South African flag, ostensibly reflecting the historical origins of the nation, in fact divulged in its formulation and usage a complex statement relevant to the whole cultural, social, and political development of the nation over the past century. Likewise the fortunes of pan-Arab unity may be read in the flags of the Near East since 1945.

Whether symbolizing a union of parts or the unity of a preexistent whole, the single flag emphasizes alike to those within and outside the state the oneness of its legal personality. When this formal status is seconded by a strong and continually developing infrastructure of links in the social, internal political, cultural, economic, and communications spheres of the nation, its flag and other symbols tend to experience a parallel growth of vitality.

This can most effectively be measured by the degree to which such a union mark becomes an everyday motif in the folk art, songs, literature, architecture, sports, and similar areas of life and by the influence which it has on other symbols. For this reason union marks which can be used separately as a badge, such as those of Britain and the United States, have some advantage over those which are intrinsic parts of a larger design.

The union flags of the United States and the United Kingdom have penetrated other areas widely as model symbols, as well as enjoying high domestic saturation. In practical terms such pervasive qualities become significant when the state is threatened by fissiparous tendencies. Alternative symbols find little room for development when the union mark of the existing system is interpreted as being inclusive, if not of all conceivable aspirations and programs, at least of all the desirable ones.

Even when a union is dissolved its symbols, if they have been firmly rooted, tend not to be entirely lost but are retained as ideals of the past and of a possible future. Thus the original Arab Revolt Flag of 1918, which was to be resurrected in 1958 as the Arab Union flag, spawned the flags of the Hijaz, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, and Palestine. The arms and flag of the United Provinces of Central America constitute a similar example.

The political reorganization of the state, whether it involves a new constitution or regime or the addition or loss of territory, generally calls for the modification of old symbols or their replacement by new ones better suited to express the new conditions.

At the very least a reinterpretation of symbols is called for. Thus it is a necessary consequence of the attainment of independence that the symbolic bonds with the past be broken by the hoisting of a new flag.

When the dominant myth of authority undergoes significant change, as for example when François Duvalier and Juan Perón came to power, even long-established symbols can be called into question. There are some cases where this appears not to have happened. Indonesia originally was only one of a number of republics in what had been the Netherlands East Indies, yet when it acquired sovereignty over the other states no modification was made in the symbols used by the new federal regime. The reason, which parallels the one applicable in the case of Eritrea's union with Ethiopia, is that Indonesians viewed the process as a regaining of *terrae irredentæ*, of the legitimate extension of rule over usurped territories for which no special symbolic recognition was necessary.

A similar logic operates in the instance of federal regimes which increase their possessions, as when Brazil acquired Acre: as a subordinate political unit such an area may not be considered entitled to any mark of distinction. Finally the evolutionary processes of colonial liberation, evidenced in Suriname, the Netherlands Antilles, Australia, New Zealand, and a few other countries have, in contrast to the revolutionary principles prominent elsewhere, resulted in a delayed or gradual formulation of differentiating symbol-systems.

There is ample evidence from Canada and South Africa, however, that the postponement of symbolic self-assertion, of establishing before the world a clear identity framed in terms of autochthonous flags, arms, badges, and the other regalia of state (as well as their verbal and ceremonial adjuncts), involves the risk that later union marks will be less readily accepted. These and the other aspects of the important roles that symbolism plays in political life throughout the world are deserving of thorough analysis through a series of relevant case studies.

Notes

¹ Cf. his *Nation et voie africaine du socialisme* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1961), p. 73.

² Cf. the author's "Arab National Flags," *Middle East Forum*, XXXVI (October, 1960), pp. 19-25, and "New Flags," *The Flag Bulletin*, Vol. VII, No. 1 (Winter 1968), pp. 3-17.

³ K. Dunin-Borkovskii in his article, "Gerb" [cost of arms] in the *Entsiklopediya gosudarstva i prava* (Moscow: Kommunisticheskaya Akademiya, 1925), Vol. II, pp. 566-579, noted the inequality implicit in the arms of the Russian Empire where the Russian shield was central and larger than the others, although he did not acknowledge the same inequality implicit in the ordering of the mottoes in the Soviet arms.

⁴ Cf. Emile Gevaert, *Héraldique des provinces belges* (Brussels: Vromant, 1918), pp. 60-61.

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