

Revitalized Flag Magic: Flag Retirement Rituals and the Power of Talismans

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Abstract This paper attempts to begin a broader discussion of how the visceral, cultural power of the flag as a talisman can affect the ongoing evolution of flag usage and ritualistic employment of a national banner in any given political society. It examines a particular instance of this in the context of American society, but it seeks to begin dialogue for cross-cultural probing and evaluation of this phenomenon.

After a broad overview of how and why flag retirement ceremonies came to be significant in the patriotic culture of the United States, the paper zeros in on an interesting way some of these ceremonies have evolved over time, returning to an earlier practice of removing specific remnants rather than destroying the whole flag, and then subsequently using these talismans actively to provide some sort of “magical” protection. Parallels will be drawn between the use of talismans in religion and civil religion, and insights will be sought from anthropology to help us begin a larger, international evaluation of the historical practice and evolution of flag retirement ceremonies across cultures and varying religious groups.

Introduction

In the lead essay on the front page of the premiere issue of *Flag Research Quarterly*, Tony Burton says he wishes to challenge “the myth that flags are sacred.”¹ I agree that we need to be evaluating how the ongoing acceleration of globalization is affecting the function and role of national banners as identity symbols—and I suspect more data on the varying responses and reactions to this phenomenon in different cultures in different parts of the world might help us delve deeper into the process by which flags are invested with such power. However, it is not our role to deny that people have made or are making such attachments to these symbols of group identity, to raise them to the level of veneration—they assuredly are. I believe our time as scholars is better spent not suggesting there is no myth associated with civil religion in various societies—for there clearly is—but rather exploring how and why flags rise to this level of symbolic veneration, how they are interconnected with other symbols in that cultural process, what rituals they are included in to reinforce this shared sense of national identity, what myth(s) those rituals intend to reinforce, and if it possible, to also calibrate how and why some rituals appear more successful than others. That is a lot to do. I continue to assert that a most meaningful way vexillology can contribute as a social science is to push forward in exploring how flags function in investing group identity with a culture of patriotism—patriotism to such a degree that



citizens will willingly lay down their lives for the homeland. One fascinating group of rituals meant to serve this process that are deserving of deeper study and analysis are flag retirement ceremonies.

This essay will explain what the American flag retirement ceremony is and delineate some interesting ways it has developed or changed over time. At the core of this exercise are a few premises I wish to advocate to encourage deeper analysis of this phenomenon as it has occurred and evolved in the United States. I also want to suggest opportunities for cross-cultural comparison and contrast of similar ceremonies as they might be introduced or practiced in other nations or among other collective identity groups (such as fans of a particular sports team or practitioners of a particular religion). I believe adopting and adapting Ellis M. West's definition of civil religion, and employing it to collect and then analyze data on how flags are used in different cultural activities—whether by nation states, sport team fans, or devotees of any given religion—offers much promise in this regard.² Some fundamental assertions I wish to make to begin such deliberation include:

1. There is a visceral need to explain the unknown and to adopt an ideological structuring that gives a sense of purpose and meaning to one's life.
2. Religion can fill this need on a spiritual level, and the civil religion of a nation-state can fill it on a group identity level.
3. Both systems use powerful symbols reinforced in meaning through group rituals to remind and rededicate participants to shared group myths.
4. As cultural systems evolve over time, both religions and civil religions will go through periods of upheaval and reformation, attempts to get back to what is seen as a lost true faith but might often be an idealized romanticizing of a past that never really was.
5. The visceral need to explain the unknown, to have some personal control over powers beyond the self, will lead to the fetishizing of certain symbols or objects, and a belief that they can offer some special, magical protection or power.
6. When this occurs in American civil religion, it most likely occurs with our most hallowed national symbol since the days of the Civil War, the American flag.

When an individual's personal identity and larger belief system are both threatened, the desire or need for the fetish increases. An example that demonstrates this quickly in fairly recent American civil religious activity is the outpouring of U.S. flag veneration that immediately followed 9/11. However, before we explore in greater detail how these assertions and behavioral insights help us better understand the origin of flag retirement ceremony rituals and their ongoing modifications over time, I want to take a minute and ask you to reflect upon a practice from medieval Christianity that has, I will later argue, interesting parallels in some contemporary American variants of flag retirement ceremonies.

My epiphany with St. Teresa

When I was in junior high school, living in the rural mountains of western Pennsylvania, I accepted an opportunity to travel and spend a weekend at an Anglican Benedictine monastery named Holy Cross, which is situated on the Hudson River in New York directly across from the Vanderbilt Mansion which is itself not far from FDR's famous home in Hyde Park.³ I had never been in a monastery before, and the exotic



setting, the range of rituals, and the brothers in their robes all made a powerful impression on me. One brother named Bede (after the venerable historian of early England) took a liking to my inquisitive nature, noted my penchant for the mysterious, beckoned me aside, and told me he had something special to show me. He led me down a series of steps to a chapel in a crypt. To impressionable me, this was like being in a real life Edgar Allan Poe story or a Gothic romance. There, amid the dark shadows, with just the two of us present, after prayer, he opened up the sepulchrum and removed an ancient reliquary. He brought it over to me to examine closely. "Look upon the finger of St. Teresa de Avila!" he said. "Beseech her to intercede on your behalf; learn her methods of meditation."

I gazed upon the obviously antique reliquary and, sure enough, there was a bone more than four centuries old. A human bone. It was emphatically evident to me this bone was supposedly endowed with extraordinary power. On a spiritual level, I appreciated the sacred magic of the moment, on an intellectual level, the recognition that a human's body parts could be used in this manner centuries after that person's demise suggested an anthropological attribute of religious mysticism worthy of deeper understanding and study.

What I intend to now demonstrate is this: what happened to St. Teresa's body parts, to meet a religious need for Roman Catholics or High Episcopalians, is actually quite similar to what happens to some pieces of old American flags today, to meet a civil religious need for some patriotic citizens. On a parallel level, the same phenomenon occurs.

Flag retirement ceremonies – Origin and evolution

The U.S. Flag Code, which was adopted at the National Flag Conference in 1923 and then only slightly amended in 1924, originally contained this bit of direction on the subject of dealing with old flags: "When the Flag is in such a condition that it is no longer a fitting emblem for display, it should not be cast aside or used in any way that might be viewed as disrespectful to the National Colors, but it should be *destroyed as a whole, privately* [my italics], preferably by burning or by some other method in harmony with the reverence and respect we owe to the emblem representing our Country."⁴ This code of flag etiquette was formalized into U.S. law by joint resolution of Congress in June of 1942, later amended in December 1942, during the patriotic fervor of World War II. However, it is worth noting a slight shift that occurs here with regard to flag retirement procedure. The legally enacted Flag Code, which continues today as the guide for appropriate flag etiquette in the United States, has since 1942 on only had this one direct sentence on the subject: "The flag, when it is in such condition that it is no longer a fitting emblem for display, should be destroyed in a dignified way, preferably by burning."⁵

There are some things we should think about. First, why was there seen a need to have a rule for destroying old flags in the first place, when the 1923 regulations were codified? Second, what changes had occurred between 1923 and 1942 to warrant this slight revision in language? Was the prompt just a desire for a crisper, more direct use of English, or had some group ritual behaviors engaged in this activity, notwithstanding the original call for privacy, already become widespread in the society, meeting an obvious need?

In the nineteenth century, there was a tradition of cutting away pieces of flags that had been on site at special events or during battles, and giving these away as sou-



venirs or prized mementos. Perhaps these were seen as talismans by soldiers and sailors who had survived conflicts in which the flag was carried or flew. One very famous example of this is The Star Spangled Banner itself—you can see some of these pieces, later tracked down and acquired by the Smithsonian, on display near the revered banner in its place of honor on the National Mall.⁶ One contributing influence to this practice might well be the influence of Romanticism, just as that cultural movement led Victorians to save locks of a loved one's hair, or attach hallowed significance to a flower picked on a particular day in the company of a special someone, then pressed between the pages of a book. There was also a strong sense of the Romantic in the action some Civil War units took of cutting up their regimental flag into small pieces and giving each member one to avoid having to surrender their colors when captured.⁷ But it was the growing influence of the cult of the flag, which gained momentum progressively following the Civil War, then really came into its own during the Spanish American War, that must be acknowledged as the dominant factor leading to the creation of the Flag Code.⁸

As the cult of the flag emerged and conventions around practice began to be codified, the flag came to be symbolically understood as a living thing, as it was representing a living country—and this became the basis for all decisions about what is appropriate for the flag and how to treat it.⁹ Therefore, earlier practices of cutting up old flags had to be discontinued—for a “living” entity this is akin to dismemberment. Such was the clear rationale behind the 1923 Flag Code directions on this matter: don't cut it up at all—just destroy it in a dignified way, preferably burning, and do so privately. This latter admonition stems in part, I think, from the code of the gentleman, the sensibility of the gentry elite who were very much involved in the development and dissemination of the cult of the flag—people such as members of hereditary societies or those writing and publishing major children's periodicals of this period.¹⁰

Between 1923 and 1942 the public flag retirement ceremonies appeared, even though the Flag Code of that time still called for private burnings. This happened because of the success of the cult of the flag coupled with the very real parallel between religion and civil religion I am trying to elucidate. From an anthropological perspective, a funeral is really a ritual for the living: the purpose is to reinforce that the deceased's life had meaning, and, in whatever cosmological and theological construct the group is operating, that the memory (or soul) of the deceased will continue to have meaning, and that the religious construct is indeed a tenable one to which participants should continue to adhere. A flag retirement ceremony is, in essence, a funeral for an American flag. Although this particular cloth might be alternatively incinerated or buried—just as a dead man's body might be cremated or interred—it is important for the gathered community to take this opportunity to reinforce the power and appropriateness of American civil religion, and also remind themselves that despite the demise of this specific piece of cloth, the living embodiment of the nation will surely endure, represented in other flags.

It is the fact that these practices crop up in folk behavior, not following the letter of the law but satisfying this basic visceral need for magic around the fetish to be acknowledged communally, that strikes me as something we should work harder to understand and appreciate. We should ascertain if it does occur in flag usage in other societies, and if so, to then analyze this dynamic for possible insights gleaned from noted similarities and differences.

By 1937, a public flag retirement ceremony was formally recognized and promoted, its format circulated nationally, by the American Legion.¹¹ In an explanatory resolu-



tion, that organization's national council pointed out the growing number of aging or tattered flags once left on veterans' graves for Memorial Day observances that have now grown unserviceable, and they noted that their public retirement ceremony ritual can also help instill Americanism.¹² More than 75 years later, the American Legion is still a major sponsor of many such ceremonies across the country, as this sample poster illustrates (See Figure 1). The poster also suggests other aspects of the flag retirement ritual worth noting. Often, veterans' organizations, older male affiliative groups that were once the military, conduct these ceremonies with younger affiliative groups, such as JrROTC or Boy Scouts, youths that aspire to the military. Furthermore, an increasing participation of Girl Scout groups in such flag retirement activities suggests recognition of changing gender roles in society.¹³ Also, there is a blurring of some boundaries between civil and regular religion as the hosting sponsor is an Episcopal Church. In a country supposedly founded on the separation between church and state but dependent upon a civil religion to keep functioning cohesively and effectively, how and when these categories overlap is always an important area for scholars to probe.



Figure 1: Ad for a flag retirement ceremony, Waukegan, Illinois, Flag Day 2009.

One international influence that no doubt played a role in spurring the rise of public flag retirement ceremonies in America in the 1930s was the significant growth in totalitarianism in Europe. Huge public demonstrations of nationalism, replete with ceremony and ritual, became increasingly popular in places such as Italy and Germany. There is evidence to suggest they were effective, too.¹⁴ Hitler had risen to be the Chancellor of Germany by 1933. In the United States, itself grappling with the unease of the Great Depression, the trend toward conscious government use of such displays can be seen in the grand parade in New York City that year when a quarter million people marched for ten hours in a patriotic fervor to celebrate the National Recovery Act.¹⁵

The American Legion's ceremony, although now a public exercise, retained the 1923 Flag Code stricture that a retired flag should be "destroyed as a whole."¹⁶ The ceremony has a lot of vocalized reporting back and forth between officers to reinforce a sense of hierarchy of command, and it implies a nuanced hierarchy in hallowedness between flags that have flown on veterans' graves and American flags used for all other purposes, but in the end of the ceremony, at its most solemn moment, all of the flags together, in their entirety, are offered up in flames in an impressive spectacle of conflagration.¹⁷

Members of the American Legion were surely aware of the rules in the 1923 Flag Code when they created their ceremony, and they had clearly reinterpreted the boundaries of acceptable behavior in public space. No doubt they were influential in leading to some of the revision in wording for the 1942 Flag Code. It is noteworthy that they followed this up by passing another resolution at their national meeting in Chicago (after the enactment of the 1942 code) in 1944, emphasizing that their particular rite is "both legal and proper," calling for greater practice of it throughout the nation, and suggesting Flag Day as the most appropriate day to schedule such an activity.¹⁸

Flag retirement ceremonies - Cutting greater complexity

The American Legion was not the only group to develop a flag retirement ritual, but they were the most prominent early on. An interesting variation that subsequently



Figure 2. Brunswick, Ohio, Scouts have completed the red stripes portion of a flag retirement ceremony honoring Flag Day, 2010. Photo by Brian Lisik of *Brunswick Sun Times*.

developed, practiced by some Boy Scout troops among others, was getting more people involved in the ceremony by cutting the flag up into distinct categories—often the red stripes, the white stripes, and the blue field of stars—then burning those pieces, and usually in that order, granting the canton of the flag with a symbolic connection to the heavens the position of honor, just as it holds on the flag itself.

Perhaps this procedure was already widespread before 1942, for it should be noted that the earlier phrase “destroyed as a whole” becomes “destroyed in a dignified manner” at that time.¹⁹ Early in the twentieth century, there were certainly many patriotic poems and songs that attributed special symbolic significance to the different colors of the U.S. flag, and it could be that some innovator wished to integrate such references into a more complex ceremony. (One popular and recurring version of this is red stripes represent the blood spilt to defend the land, white stripes represent purity, and the blue field with white stars represents the union which must not be divided.) Or perhaps this slight change in language then freed those designing such ceremonies after 1942 to reason that removing the “as a whole” requirement was an implicit direction to cut up the flags during this ritual. Whenever it began, this penchant to sever the banner into component pieces certainly goes back many decades. In one online forum thread on this subject, a woman of unspecified age recalled such a procedure being the norm in her rural childhood, and implied the procedure had been the norm there for some time.²⁰ There is a practical aspect here, too: many of the guides suggest it is safer and easier to incinerate a flag that has been methodically cut into smaller, more manageable pieces.²¹

Whatever the case as to when flag cutting was first introduced into flag retirement ceremony rituals, variants abound today. Some versions of this say you must only cut the flag into two pieces, others into three, and others into four. Still others say each of the stripes must be removed separately. If one asks the quite logical question—“but isn’t taking a pair of scissors to a flag a form of disrespect or defilement?” defenders of this practice are quick to give this response: once you have cut up a flag it is no longer a flag so no harm is done. Some even have a euphemism for this: flag disassembly.²² In my humble opinion, as the Flag Code emphasizes the flag is to be symbolically seen as alive, this logic is faulty. Cutting up a human being, you could then argue the pile of body parts is no longer a human being, but that doesn’t mean the first stab wasn’t a sign of disrespect. Because the reasoning that cutting up a flag shows no disrespect to a “living” symbol of the nation defies logic yet many embrace it so emphatically, it obviously is tied to strong emotional beliefs in meaningful ways. Another striking similarity here between civil religion rituals and religious rituals is that, whatever the particular variant of these many diverse flag retirement ceremonies an individual has practiced or been taught, very often the chances are good he will be noticeably upset or at least concerned if that ritual he has learned is even slightly modified or done differently by someone else. There is often an anxiety implication that bad things will follow if the supposedly proper ritual is not exactly followed. After all, for Harry Potter to get his wand to work correctly, he needs to know the exact phrase to say, and how and when to say it, right?

Although some might be offended at the suggestion that there are many parallels to magic rituals here, anthropologists would agree: some years ago Carolyn Marvin, a professor of Communication at the Annenberg School, University of Pennsylvania, wrote a rather thorough book that deconstructed the American flag as a totem demanding the sacrifice of soldiers’ blood for ongoing nourishment.²³ Although I do

not think that is the only way to see or consider the American flag as a complex symbol for us to evaluate, it is a perspective every engaged vexillologist should acknowledge, and the case she makes merits reflection.

There are indications that, for a period in the 1980s, a Boy Scout publication entitled *Our Flag* did instruct all scouts to cut up flags before burning in such ceremonies, but that this was later taken out of the directions in the 1990s because of some push-back.²⁴ In 1997, some scoutmasters compiling a list of different optional flag retirement ceremonies noted this, and advised scouts to use their best judgment and follow the practices of their community. They also, however, made an argument for why cutting up flags in such ceremonies made sense, and eleven of the thirteen ceremony options listed in their entirety on two different websites integrated this activity of cutting up the flag into the ceremony itself, as is shown in Figure 3.²⁵



Figure 3. Mississippi scouts cut during a flag retirement ceremony, December 2012. Photo by Philip Hall of *The Enterprise Journal*.

On one thread discussing this “flag disassembly” practice, former NAVA President Peter Ansoff described such a ceremony as “grotesque,” adding it “sounds more like some sort of pagan ritual than anything patriotic.”²⁶ He might not approve of it, but he, too, sees the strong religious parallels. And as the following section demonstrates, this religious parallel grows even stronger with the introduction of some 21st century modifications.

Magic stars as talismans

In times of increasing social anxiety and cultural stress, communities will turn to revered symbols and familiar rituals with renewed vigor, seeking solace, support, and comfort. Such periods are often when new symbols or practices are introduced, or earlier now dormant traditions resuscitated, employed as strategies to speak to this need. In the 21st century, following the watershed event of 9/11 and as the United States became embroiled in war in Afghanistan and then later Iraq, some intriguing addenda to American flag retirement ceremonies arose.

It had long been the general practice, across the many different variants of doing these ceremonies, to submit the canton of the flag to the flames last. This occurred if the flag was placed on the fire as a whole banner in its entirety spread out; if the flag was put in folded, the fold would ensure the stars appeared on top. If the flag was cut into pieces, however many pieces, the canton remained a complete piece, representing the Union unbroken, a strong symbolic symbolism still echoing as a legacy from the flag’s rise to civil religious pre-eminence during the Civil War, and again, it went into the flames last.

However, a new practice developed of first setting the canton aside, and then cutting that up into smaller segments, each centered around one of the individual stars. Often, it would be Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, or other youth doing this, and the practice seems to have evolved out of Scouting retirement ceremonies.²⁷ Once removed, these stars are delivered and donated so each goes to an individual veteran in the community, or is mailed to a member of the military, preferably overseas or deployed for combat.

When some traditionalists spoke out against this practice on an online patriotic flag forum, one veteran responded this way:

Yes, there are organizatiions [sic] that remove the stars with a slight blue background around them to be sent to military personnel on active duty. They [sic] do this so the person in the military will know they are not forgotten by the folks

back here at home. Now that sure isn't being disrespectful but rather giving a new passionate, patriotic, life to a part of a worn and tattered flag that can no longer fly. By the way, time is taken to, in a dignified manner, burn the remains of the flags that have had the stars cut out of them. I am a veteran [sic] and would have greatly appreciated receiving a star when I was on active duty. Stop making a big deal over something that is of little importance when compared to the patriotic well being and comfort [sic] these stars instill in those who are far away and putting it on the line daily so we can have this discussion [sic].²⁸

Another vet, this one a Marine, also chimed in: "My eyes sweat every time I hear the National Anthem and the Marine Corps Hymn. When I received one of these stars just recently it truly touched my heart. Showing our troop we are there for them and that 'we've got their back' is the least we can do. Giving the symbol of our nation as a sign of our commitment to them just as they have committed their lives to protecting us is not disrespectful, it's an honor."²⁹

It makes sense in the civil religion of the United States as it is currently practiced that finding a way to connect the ceremony to deployed troops heightens the commitment to what Marvin describes as "blood sacrifice" to the "totem."³⁰ Although just how much actual abuse of returning troops from Vietnam truly occurred—being spit upon on in public, meeting with profanity in the streets, etc.-- and how much is legend effectively disseminated remains open to debate,³¹ the bottom line is the vast majority of Americans, in the decades since the Vietnam War, have come to accept this perspective and demonstrated a positive resolve to offer our service men and women greater honor and respect. Even in time of war those most against the government's military actions are generally eager to make clear that they still "support the troops." Thus, creating a talisman out of a piece of fabric from the most honored component of the national banner and then sending it to a member of the military in an enemy war zone integrates two distinctly powerful civil religious symbols to create a synergy of greater power, stronger magic.

A sailor serving in Baghdad asked on a flag forum in 2007 if others thought this was appropriate or not, and another Marine responded "I have just received one from one of my Staff Sergeants who got it threw [sic] mail. It has a little letter in it stating, 'I am part of an American flag which can no longer fly due to sun and wind damage. Please carry me as a reminder that you are not forgotten.'" His reaction? "Good Initiative, but Bad Judgement [sic]."³² Others, however, testify to how it brightened their day, strengthened their commitment, or even moved them to tears. As "Blue Star Florida Mom" summed it up:

I am part of project that chooses to touch the hearts of veterans and our troops - a star from a former flag that used to fly in all conditions, just as our military serves in ALL conditions. And I've received and given hugs to those same warriors and wiped some tears from [sic] those who were truly grateful to receive them. And the stars went into wallets, heart pockets, military shadow/memento boxes, and even caskets. The stars are ONLY from American made flags - NEVER a foreign made one. And NEVER sold or a contribution requested. There is an enormous amount of love and respect along with gratitude in preparation as well as giving them. Honey, if you have objections, check the labels and tags on your clothing, appliances, cars and other items in your household and THEN you can talk about lack of respect.³³



Ashes to graves

Some of the flag retirement ceremonies have integrated ceremonial burial of the ashes from the burned flags into their ritual, one scout leader describing a process in which the flag burning occurs around a campfire to end the evening and then the solemn gathering and burial of the ashes is the first order of business when the group reconvenes in the morning.³⁴ Others suggest that this follow-up task be completed but recommend it should be done privately, perhaps hearkening back to the original emphases of the 1923 Flag Code. However, in the 21st century, one scout troop from Pennsylvania has adopted an additional step to the flag retirement ceremonial procedure, and they are using social media with the goal to get it to spread and become a national practice.³⁵

Apparently, after seeing Boy Scout Troop 57 of Neffs, Pennsylvania, conduct a flag retirement ceremony in 2009, Joseph Zeller, former mayor of Emmaus and former member of the U.S. House of Representatives, and a World War II and Korean War veteran to boot, was so moved when he realized the majority of the flags being retired had flown over veterans' graves that he felt impelled to do something more.

Zeller helped the scouts by sifting the incinerator ashes to be free of metal grommets and unburned debris in preparation to return the ashes to the graves of our worthy veterans. Troop 57 eagerly adopted the "Ashes to Graves" concept and a week after the 2009 Flag Retirement Ceremony troop members were shuttled by their leaders to seven cemeteries to follow through. Each Scout was given a cup of ashes and a spoon from which a spoonful was returned to the Veterans' graves accompanied by a respectful salute to the fallen hero. Over the last few years, ashes were spread as far as the War Memorials in Washington D.C., and Antietam National Battlefield.³⁶

This practice's intention is certainly to heighten the already emphasized bond between the flag and the soldiers that can be found in the sending of disassembled Union stars to U.S. soldiers in hot combat zones. It suggests the continuing emphasis on solidarity with the military in post-Vietnam American expressions of patriotism and it fits nicely into Marvin's "blood sacrifice" paradigm. Sprinkling the sacred American flag—now transformed by fire to a new state—upon the graves of those who have fought or even died to protect the nation: this is a comingling intended to dramatically reinforce patriotic allegiance through ceremony. Now the flag need not only fly over these graves as a reminder, it can enter the very graves to spend eternity substantiating the exceptionalism of America. This is strong magic, indeed! Zeller has appealed to both the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars to help promote this ritual more broadly, on a national level. The Facebook page has only accumulated 25 likes so far, but it has only been two months since it first appeared at the time of the writing of this essay, so one cannot predict if, how, or when this practice will catch on. For the special five year anniversary of the first Ashes to Graves ceremony, scheduled to be conducted 18 June 2013, veteran and veterans' organizations from throughout the Lehigh Valley are encouraged to attend.³⁷



Conclusion

Flag retirement ceremonies can vary widely. They can be huge extravaganzas, such as the spectacle of 7,000 flags burning at once that was presented on Flag Day 2012 in Chicago,³⁸ or they can be smaller yet reverential events, such as the flag retirement ceremony in Corbett, Oregon, held on Memorial Day 2012 and sponsored in part by a representative of the Portland Flag Association (See Figure 4).³⁹ By closer examination, we can come to discern trends in who participates—such as more Girl Scouts as gender roles continue to be realigned, or more First Responders as EMTs, firefighters, and police all became more closely linked to patriotism in the public consciousness following 9/11.⁴⁰ We can gain insight from these and other historical shifts—one obvious one being, in a world where a sustainable environment is more and more a driving concern and in which flags are made, increasingly, of synthetic materials that can be noxious or dangerous to burn, “respectful” flag retirement can turn from burning to recycling.⁴¹ The introduction of these latest magical uses of stars from old flags as talismans for soldiers in war zones or to protect vets as they go about their daily lives at home, or the sprinkling of the flag ash upon the cemetery graves of dead servicemen—these are both new variants introduced primarily to youth affiliative groups by military veterans, a relationship dynamic that was used to usher in many flag rituals during the cult of the flag period in the nineteenth century. It could speak, in part, to growing status anxiety about the future of the homeland in a world where the war on terror will never end, where social behavior rule modifications and demographic shifts both appear to be accelerating, globalization, as Tony Burton and others wisely note, is challenging and morphing national identities in new ways.⁴²

Culture is a vibrant and fascinating thing—it is fluid and changes over time. So, too, do the rituals we perform, the people who participate in them, and the procedures they follow, though many citizens are more comfortable thinking that the meaning and procedure of rituals do not shift, just as they are more comfortable saying a symbol such as a flag has a definite meaning that does not change.

We know, as vexillologists, that the meaning of a powerful symbol like a flag is complex, open to debate, and capable of containing contradictions within itself. This should not disturb or deter us—it should challenge us! Using American flag retirement ceremonies as an example, this essay has attempted to suggest a model for tracing civil religious rituals associated with flags in any given society, noting parallels between the broader function and purpose of religious ritual and those of patriotic ritual. If we truly want to use flags to help us “understand more accurately and more completely the nature of human society,”⁴³ this is just one place among many—but to my mind, a useful one—where we could and should begin.



Figure 4: Corbette, Oregon Flag Retirement Ceremony, Memorial Day 2012. Photo courtesy of J. Patrick Genna & the Portland Flag Association's *Vexilloid Tabloid*.

Endnotes

1. Anthony (Tony) Burton, "Flagging Enthusiasm," *Flag Research Quarterly* #1 (March 2013): 1. Print.
2. West's definition: "A civil religion is a set of beliefs and attitudes that explains the meaning and purpose of any given political society in terms of its relationship to a transcendent, spiritual reality that are held by the people of that society, and that are expressed in public rituals, myths, and symbols." See as quoted in Scot M. Guenter, *The American Flag, 1777-1924: Cultural Shifts from Creation to Codification* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1990): 21. Print. Understanding a national flag's interrelationship with other patriotic symbols and myths and its use in ritual to advance civil religion is a significant cultural area worthy of vexillological exploration.
3. For more about this monastery today, see "Holy Cross Monastery: An Anglican Benedictine Community for Men," HolyCrossMonastery.com n.d. Web. 25 May 2013.
4. See Guenter 209.
5. U.S. Senate. United States Flag Code. PDF.
6. "The Star Spangled Banner: The Flag that Inspired the National Anthem," National Museum of American History. Smithsonian Institution. Web. 23 May 2013.
7. NAVA 1974 [Nick Artimovich] on American Flag Forum: American flag disposal-recycling un-serviceable U.S. flags? 1 September 2009. Web. 25 May 2013.
8. For more on the cult of the flag, see Guenter, Chapter 5, *passim*.
9. Guenter 208.
10. See Guenter, Chapters 5 and 6; see also R. Gordon Kelly, *Mother Was a Lady: Self and Society in Selected American Children's Periodicals, 1865-1890* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood press, 1974).
11. "Unserviceable Flags Ceremony," American Legion. Legion.org. Web. 24 May 2013.
12. "Unserviceable Flags Ceremony."
13. See, for example, the imagery presented at "Proper Flag Etiquette-Retiring Old Flags," National Flag Foundation. 2004. AmericanFlags.org. Web. 25 May 2013; Girl Scouts of Greater Chicago and Northwest Indiana, "Flag Ceremonies": 5-6, iCrossroads.org File 110408 PDF. 25 May 2013.
14. See William Crampton, "Flags as Non-verbal Symbols in the Management of National Identity," Diss., University of Manchester, 1994. Print. See also Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom, 1941* (New York: Owl Books ed., 1994).
15. "A Huge Crowd Marches in New York, United States during a Parade in Support of the National Recovery Administration," Critical Past. CriticalPast.com Video. Web. 24 May 2013.
16. Guenter 209.
17. "Unserviceable Flags Ceremony."
18. "Unserviceable Flags Ceremony."
19. U.S. Senate. United States Flag Code. PDF.
20. RodeoNan on American Flags Forum: American flag disposal-Proper flag disposal 20 December 2010. Web. 24 May 2013.
21. "Retiring Old Glory," U.S. Scouting Service Project, USScouts.org 2013. Web. 25 May 2013; Randy Worcester, *Flag Retirement Ceremonies*. Andrew Jackson Council, Jackson, Mississippi November 1997. Retrieved at "Boy Scouts of America-BSA flag retirement ceremony" at Docstoc.com. Web. 23 May 2013.
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5. Richard Burton of Pleasant Hill, California graciously shared this via Facebook. Retrieved 15 June 2013.

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