

Flag Etiquette





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Red, White and Blue Facts

Flag Day gives every American the chance to celebrate and honor this treasured national symbol.

Here's a look back at some facts, rules and history courtesy of the National Flag Foundation and usflag.org, as we take special pride in the flag and all that it represents.

ORIGINAL DESIGN

For a long time, it was believed that Robert G. Heft, a 17-year-old created the design of our current American

flag. It is true that he submitted a design to a national contest in 1958. However, a reporter in 2022 looked into the story and learned that most of the details were fabricated. The design was likely a collaboration between many of the submitted flags.

ADDING STARS

There have been numerous variations of the American flag over the course of the nearly 250 years that our country has existed. The original flag, adopted in 1777, featured 13 stripes and 13 stars that represented the original American colonies.

As new states joined the Union, a

star was added to the flag for each one.

In all, there have been nearly 30 distinct versions throughout our history. The current flag has maintained its design for more than 65 years because no new states have joined the United States since the addition of Alaska and Hawaii back in 1959.

MEANING OF COLORS

The different colors of the flag all hold specific meanings: Red represents hardiness and valor, while white signifies purity and innocence. Blue stands for vigilance, perseverance and justice.

DAYLIGHT HOURS

The flag should primarily be flown during daylight hours, from sunrise to sunset, as mandated by federal law. There is a provision, however, that allows for the flag to be on display 24 hours a day: If you choose to display the flag at night, it must be well lit.

ABOVE AND BEYOND

The American flag has ventured beyond Earth, with six flags being placed on the moon during the Apollo era. Astronauts from missions 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17 all left their mark on the lunar surface by planting Old Glory.

The Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag has changed over time.

Created back in 1892, this simple statement of purpose allows us to honor the flag and everything it stands for at public gatherings. But it hasn't always been recited the same way, as American leaders continued to tinker with the wording. Even the way we salute while repeating the pledge has changed. Here's a look back.

ORIGINAL VERSION

The original version of the Pledge of Allegiance, written in 1892 by Francis Bellamy, stated: "I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." The pledge was amended the first time in 1923, in order to incorporate the phrase "United States of America": "I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

SALUTING THE FLAG

Author Francis Bellamy said he hoped the pledge would give citizens around the world an opportunity to show respect for their country. Initially, they performed a military-style salute as the words were recited – then extended their arm towards the flag. Over time, however, the practice of placing our right hands over the heart took hold. Today, we honor the flag in this way.

ALLEGIANCE RULES

The United States Flag Code lays out specific guidelines for correctly reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. Section Four says citizens should stand at attention facing the flag. Anyone who is not in uniform should remove non-religious hats with their right hand and hold them to the left shoulder, so their hand is over the heart. Those in military uniform should face the flag, remain silent and perform a traditional salute.

ONE MORE ADDITION

The next change happened in 1954, when President Dwight D. Eisenhower urged Congress to incorporate the phrase "under God" into the Pledge of Allegiance. The current version of the pledge now reads: "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."



Caring for Your Flag

Signs of slight wear or dirt don't have to lead to retirement.

Flying your flag outdoors can inevitably lead to grunge or tears. You can extend its life with proper cleaning and mending. The U.S. Flag Code offers some recommended tips for proper care.

WASHING THE FLAG

Allowing dirt and grime to accumulate can lead to irreversible stains, while strong winds can cause tears in the fabric. If your flag becomes dirty, try to promptly address the issue. Don't let your flag touch the ground when lowering it for cleaning, since that's seen as disrespectful. (It may also leave still more unsightly marks.) Always wash by hand. When cleaning your flag, use cold water and a mild detergent. After cleaning, lay the flag out flat to dry. This will help maintain its shape and keep the colors from bleeding together.

REGULAR INSPECTIONS

In addition to monitoring for dirt and other debris, regularly inspect your flag for any signs of holes or fraying. These inspections are particularly important for all-weather flags, which are subject to blistering sunlight, continual wind and severe storms. Remember that even minor tears can quickly develop into large holes in bad weather. Just exercise



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plenty of caution when sewing. Frequent adjustments may also alter the flag's shape and overall appearance.

TALK TO AN EXPERT

Consistent, careful flag maintenance and repairs will enhance the flag's appearance and extend its longevity.

Reach out to a local dry cleaner if you are uncertain about how to repair minor imperfections, or simply want to ensure that this important symbol receives the highest level of care. Their expertise in handling delicate materials will help extend the lifespan of your flag. Just remember to

carefully follow any care instructions they provide.

FLAG'S LIFESPAN

It is important to note that even well-cared-for flags don't last forever. Experts say the typical lifespan for an average cotton or nylon flag is approximately 90 days. That's under

optimal display conditions, when they're only flown from dawn to dusk without being exposed to inclement weather.

Flags that are displayed continuously, day and night, may only last about a quarter of that time before they begin to fray or fade.

Our Most Famous Flags

Museums across the country help us remember and preserve a shared heritage.

Important flags from throughout history can be viewed by history buffs and patriotic travelers. The famous Star-Spangled Banner, flags sewn by Betsy Ross and the flag from 9/11 are just some of the many historic U.S. flags on display around the country.

STAR-SPANGLED BANNER

The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., showcases the original Star-Spangled Banner, which inspired Francis Scott Key to compose our national anthem. This iconic flag was crafted by Mary Pickersgill, her daughter, two nieces and Grace Wisher, a freed African-American girl who was an indentured servant to Pickersgill.

BETSY ROSS FLAG

Contemporary historians tend to view the story of Betsy Ross as more legend than fact, and it's understood that she may not have created the first American flag. But Ross did sew several flags for the Pennsylvania Navy during the Revolutionary War. A replica can be found at the Betsy Ross House in Philadelphia, a popular tourist spot that also serves as headquarters for Philadelphia's Flag Day celebrations.

OLD GLORY

The Smithsonian National Museum of American History

in Washington, D.C., houses the original Old Glory. Capt. William Driver carried this flag with him around the world, later concealing it from Confederate soldiers who intended to destroy it.

IWO JIMA FLAGS

Two Iwo Jima flags are exhibited at Virginia's National Museum of the Marine Corps. A news photographer covering the Battle of Iwo Jima during World War II captured the iconic image of a U.S. flag being planted at the summit of Mt. Suribachi, and he earned a Pulitzer Prize.

9/11 FLAG

Among the more recent American flags of note is the one raised by firefighters at Ground Zero following the 2001 terrorist attacks, now on display at the September 11 Memorial and Museum in New York City.

The flag went missing shortly afterward and was only rediscovered some 15 years later.

MOON FLAGS

They're obviously a much rarer sight, but six U.S. flags have been planted on the moon.

Replicas of these flags are on exhibit at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. They're all approximately three feet by five feet in diameter.



Handling the Flag

There are specific rules to ensure that this important symbol is always treated with respect.

The U.S. flag should always be handled and displayed with the utmost care. Familiarizing yourself with the Flag Code will ensure that you're always following the proper protocols.

HOW TO FOLD IT

Folding the flag into its traditional three-corner shape isn't easy, so take time for some practice. Begin by holding the flag lengthwise and then folding it in half. Next, fold the flag in half lengthwise again, making sure that the blue field remains visible on the outside. You'll create a triangular fold from the opposite end, then repeat this process until the flag is completely folded. The final step is to secure the edge of the flag within the folds so that you're showcasing only the blue field and its white stars.

LOWERING THE FLAG

The Flag Code cautions that your flag should never touch the ground. This can be a particular risk when lowering flags at dusk. You'll extend its life by keeping the flag away from dirt and things that may tear at the fabric. Should the flag inadvertently fall to the ground, the Flag Code doesn't require its retirement. Instead, simply hand wash or dry clean



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your flag before displaying it again.

Note that presidents or governors can order flags to be flown at half-staff as a symbol of mourning. There are several established dates where flags are traditionally lowered, including Memorial Day on the

last Monday of May, Sept. 11, and National Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day on Dec. 7.

RETIREMENT PROCEDURE

Flags that are torn or frayed should be properly retired. The Flag Code recommends

that they be ceremonially burned. Begin by folding the flag in the customary manner then prepare a fire that is big enough to completely consume it. Exercise caution during the process, staying mindful of any applicable local or state fire regulations. Salute

as the flag is placed in the fire. Recite the Pledge of Allegiance, then observe a moment of silence. Finally, respectfully bury the ashes. You can reach out to your local American Legion post. Many of them organize retirement ceremonies on Flag Day.

Our First Flag

The original design of the American Flag dates back to the Continental Congress of 1777.

The first U.S. flag, as adopted by Congress, features 13 alternating red and white stripes along with 13 stars positioned in a blue field at the upper left corner. Both elements symbolized the original states: Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Jersey, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina and Virginia.

Charles Thomson, the secretary of the Continental Congress, said the colors of the flag were meant to represent specific things: red signifies valor, white symbolizes purity and blue represents justice and perseverance. The initial arrangement of the 13 stars formed a circle to ensure that no single colony was prioritized over another.

The flag was first introduced in battle on Sept. 11, 1777, during the Battle of Brandywine. Its first display over foreign territory was in 1778, following the capture of a British fort in the Bahamas.

LEGEND OF BETSY ROSS

History has long told us that George Washington appointed the Philadelphia upholsterer Betsy Ross to create the first



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flag based on these guidelines. But there is no documented evidence of that in Continental Congressional records or in Washington's diary. Ross did produce flags for more than 50 years, and many of them were under government contracts.

CHANGES TO THE FLAG

There have been almost 30

distinct iterations of the flag, which was updated as the union expanded. At first, both stars and stripes were added with each new state. Mary Young Pickersgill memorably sewed a 15-stripe version in 1795, after Vermont and Kentucky joined the U.S. This flag, currently on display at the Smithsonian Institution, was

believed to have inspired Francis Scott Key to write the National Anthem.

MORE 'OLD GLORY' UPDATES

After that, the flag reverted to 13 stripes, with stars added to represent new states. The next significant update in 1818 added five stars for the newly

admitted Mississippi, Indiana, Louisiana, Ohio, and Tennessee. The flag was affectionately nicknamed "Old Glory" by Capt. William Driver in 1831, at which point it featured 24 stars. The most recent modification dates back to 1960, as the flag transitioned to 50 stars in recognition of Hawaii's statehood.

Displaying the Flag Indoors

Make sure it's given the proper position of honor at any gathering.

The American flag is regularly seen in public venues, homes and businesses – but many people are unaware of the established protocols for proper display. Regulations put in place by the U.S. Flag Code can guide you to displaying the flag correctly.

The regulations govern how the flag is to be presented while on or off of a staff, with one or more other flags, and how it should be displayed in the window of your home or shop.

Once you've familiarized yourself with these rules, follow them when displaying the flag. You might also look around your own community to see if others are complying.

Share what you've learned about proper flag code if you find any flags that have been improperly displayed. Your neighbors might be unaware that the following rules are in place:

WITH A SPEAKER

If you're going to display the flag while someone is speaking, there are two sanctioned methods of presentation – a flat display or from a staff. When presented on a podium, the flag should be placed in front of the audience and positioned to the speaker's right as they face the audience. If the flag is not being raised on a



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staff, it should be positioned flat against a wall. It may be oriented either vertically or horizontally, but either way, the flag's blue square must be located at the top and to the left of the observer.

WITH OTHER FLAGS

If the American flag is dis-

played with one other flag, the staffs should be crossed with the U.S. flag located to the right. Its staff should be crossed in front of the other flag's staff. When displaying multiple state, local, or society flags, the U.S. flag should be positioned at the center. It should be at the highest point of the arrangement,

above any other flag. If it is displayed with other national flags, they should all be flown at the same height and on their own staff. The U.S. flag should be displayed to the left when at the same height as other flags on U.S. property. The American flag should be hoisted first and lowered last.

IN A WINDOW

When displaying the American flag in a window, note that the flag should be arranged for those viewing from outside. So, the blue square should be to your top right on the inside – and seen on the top left from the street or sidewalk.