

Heraldic Politics: Why Flags Still Matter

Edward Lucas

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The Estonian flag is a blue-black-white tricolour. Or at least it should be. As a foreign correspondent in 1990, I was puzzled to see that the flags sprouting across the country as Soviet rule crumbled sometimes featured a dingy yellow bar at the bottom, instead of the correct crisp white. The reason was illuminating. These flags had been stored in secret during the past forty-five years of Soviet occupation — an era when possessing any symbols of the pre-war republic was a serious criminal offence. The fact that the flags could be flown again not only exemplified the dawn of freedom. It paid tribute to the dogged bravery of those who had cherished these fading pieces of cloth at a time when the restoration of independence seemed as unlikely as the re-emergence of Atlantis.

Flags are the most potent form of political art. People will kill for them, suffer and die. Even their existence can arouse fury. Taiwan's flag, for example, is taboo in the eyes of the mainland Chinese authorities. They regard the offshore democracy as a rebel province and its claims to statehood as an affront to national unity. So how should an international airport signal the right visa queue to Taiwanese passengers? One option is to show the Taiwanese flag. Another is to replace it with a bland TWN on a white background.

Flags, wrote the late Whitney Smith, an American pioneer of vexillology (the study of flags) 'are employed to honour and dishonour, warn and encourage, threaten and promise, exalt and condemn, commemorate and deny'. They 'remind and incite and defy...the child in school, the soldier, the voter, the enemy, the ally and the stranger'.¹

Flags' origins are lost in the mists of time. An Iranian standard made of beaten copper dates back 5,000 years. Their function was originally military: an identifiable rallying point on a confusing battlefield, possibly with religious connotations — a holy relic, for example. The switch from military heraldry to politics can be traced

back to the 16th-century Dutch revolt against Spanish rule, when the ancient red, white, and blue colours of the Charlemagne era came to symbolise not a monarch, but a people, a language, a culture, and a cause.

Flags are the simplest way of encoding national myths, with all their errors and ambiguities. Britain's Union Jack comprises the cross of St George, the white diagonal Scottish saltire (St Andrew's Cross), and the red diagonal St Patrick's cross of Ireland. This is odd. Only Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, and Wales, very much a constituent country, is not represented. The US flag is a complicated and slightly inaccurate representation of the country's composition (the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico are short-changed when it comes to the 50 stars). The Estonian flag combines blue for the sky, black for forests, and white for snow.

Religion plays a big role. Crosses reflect Christian origins (the oldest national flag in continuous use is Denmark's white cross on a red background, dating from the 15th century). Muslim countries use Koranic texts or crescents.

Flags send more detailed signals too. Before the advent of radio, flags were the most effective way of communication across water. Their use, with special knots tied at high speed to flag halyards, to send complex (and coded) naval signals is one of many all-but-lost nautical arts.

The rules about flags can seem arcane. Protocols about lowering, raising, and folding — when to fly them at half mast, for example — are fussy and detailed. British pedants insist, wrongly, that the flag of the United Kingdom should be called the Union Flag when flown on land, and the Union Jack only at sea.

But flags are not going out of date. They went into space on the rockets that launched the Soviet Sputnik satellite and were planted on the moon by American astronauts. Afghan embassies around the world still defiantly fly the red-green-black of the fallen pro-Western regime, not the Taliban's stark black and white version emblazoned

¹ 'Obituary: Whitney Smith, vexillologist, died on November 17th' *The Economist* (London, 10 December 2016) <<https://www.economist.com/obituary/2016/12/10/obituary-whitney-smith-vexillologist-died-on-november-17th>>, accessed 15 February 2022.

with a Koranic verse. That continuing defiance recalls the Baltic states' embassies in Rome, Washington DC, and elsewhere, which throughout the Soviet era signalled their countries' surviving de jure statehood by flying the national flags.

As political technology, flags are still highly effective. A daily salute, a pledge of allegiance, marchpasts, and other ritual displays help entrench patriotism and cohesion. Foreigners visiting the United States do well to remember the particular veneration that Americans have for the Stars and Stripes (though oddly, this does not preclude its ruthless commercial exploitation).

Aesthetic concerns, however, usually come second. Crests and symbols create clutter. The ideal flag is attractive, memorable, and significant. Whitney Smith designed the flag of Guyana, with its red diamond (for steadfastness), gold arrowhead (Amerindians and mineral wealth), and green background (verdure).

Distinctiveness matters. Austria's horizontal scarlet-white-scarlet is easily confused with Latvia's, which uses maroon. Chad and Romania have identical flags; Andorra and Moldova use the same blue-yellow-red tricolour, but with different crests. Monaco and Indonesia use the same red and white format, though the Mediterranean micro-state's version is a tad shorter. Ireland and Chad have the same tricolour, but with the colours in reverse order. Australia and New Zealand are almost identical (both using the British Union Jack), with differences in the depiction of the Southern Cross constellation.

For those with fervent vexillic attachments, outsiders' ignorance can be vexing. I lived in Washington DC during the Soviet crackdown in Lithuania in January 1991. As my friends in Vilnius stared death in the face, I hung the beleaguered Baltic state's tricolour from my window as a sign of solidarity. It features a yellow stripe (for sunrise), a red one (for dawn), and a green one for the country's fields and forests. A few days later my neighbour stopped to ask me — slightly puzzledly — about my support for Rastafarianism, a religion whose flag uses the same colours but in a different order.

But overlaps can be useful too. The souvenir shop at Tallinn airport does a brisk trade in patriotic-themed souvenirs. Its staff were understandably bemused when vast quantities of their stock were bought up by burly visiting Britons. The blue-black-white colours just happen to be the same as Bath Rugby Club, and its diehard fans, in Estonia by chance for a stag weekend, were delighted to find a new source of team memorabilia.

Just don't call it cultural appropriation.