

## Unpledged Allegiance: Golden Jubilee of the 50-Star Flag

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### ABSTRACT

July 4, 2010, marked the **Golden Jubilee** of the 50-star American flag, the longest-flying flag in our country’s history of 27 official flags. This anniversary was greeted with a colossal yawn not only by a great majority of ordinary Americans, but also by most flag enthusiasts, flag manufacturers, patriotic organizations, schools, veterans groups, government agencies and news media.

**Question:** Why did a country so conscious about its flag allow this anniversary to pass practically unobserved?

This paper presents a range of possible answers, some based on historical perspectives, others on interviews with news outlets, veterans, school teachers, flag-involved individuals and organizations.

The story I would like to share with you today is the story of a non-event. You’d be perfectly okay to wonder how a non-event could make for an interesting story. I wondered about that myself. But within that wonder, I think, lies a story.

**To review:** July 4, 2010, marked the **Golden Jubilee** of the 50-star American flag, the longest-flying flag in our country’s history of 27 official flags. The anniversary was greeted in my country with, to coin a phrase, ‘the yawn *not* heard around the world.’ Lack of interest was the non-event. And I believe that the story lies in this question: Why did a country so reverent about its flag allow this anniversary to pass practically unobserved?

It would be wrong, of course, to say that no one in America paid any heed to the Golden Jubilee. Several NAVA members marked the occasion: California’s Teacher of the Year and FOTW stalwart Ed Mooney taught extensively about it in his classroom. (1) He also designed an elegant flag to mark the occasion [slide 1]. Another NAVA member, whose name I can’t recall right at the moment, offered a floating flag salute to the hemisentennial [slide 2]. Past NAVA President Nick Artimovich honored the day; (2) Ted Spencer flew 50-, 49- and 48-stars flags in his Lewes, Delaware, backyard; and David Ott reported hoisting two celebratory flags on both June 14 and July 4, 2010. (3)

Yet the country at large remained *silent as the shadows*. The Jubilee was mostly observed by non-observance. U.S. media coverage was borderline nonexistent, (4) *NAVA News*’ was nil in 2010 and National Flag Foundation’s interest couldn’t be documented, even though the last is pledged to honor and respect the history and protocol of the star-spangled banner. (5) Flag manufacturers, schools, veterans organizations, government entities – all crowned the event with near-total neglect.

And still, neglect turned out to be the *good* side of the news. The worst news came from Hawai'i. 21 August 2009 could have been a celebration of Hawai'i's 50 years of statehood. But there was to be no celebratory parade. Instead, a group of ethnic Hawaiian secessionists staged a demonstration in Honolulu, featuring a star-burning party [slide 3], with a protester caught grinning through a hole in the flag. [slide 4] (6) What reasonable person could expect, in this environment, that Hawaiians would rejoice at a flag jubilee less than a year later?

Amidst all this desolation, it was left to Michael Faul and Graham Bartram in the Mother Country to save their ex-Colonials' flagging honor and provide, in *Flagmaster* no. 135, the one luminous point of light in this story: A thorough, thoughtful, scholarly, informative journey dedicated to the history of the American flag and precisely timed to hit the streets just before July 4, 2010. Well done, you two!

With this brief background, let's turn again to the questions: What happened? Why wasn't the Jubilee noticed?

Over a period of more than two months I posed these questions to flag enthusiasts on three continents, to teachers, veterans, active-duty soldiers, newspaper people and flag-business owners. The typical American first reaction: People seemed embarrassed, crestfallen, even humbled that they hadn't heard or read anything about the flag's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It seemed a violation of that special bond they felt with the Stars and Stripes.

Foreign reactions covered a wider gamut. Sophie Rault wrote from France that she was stunned by the total absence of any mention on the Web, especially for *a country like yours that declares loud and strong its patriotism, the importance of the flag, the pledge of allegiance etc!"* (7). An antipodal opinion came from Australia's Ralph Kelly, who wondered, *Since the current flag is the 27<sup>th</sup> variation on the same basic theme, is it really deserving of commemoration? OK, it has proven to be the longest serving, but is that enough to excite the public?* (8) Apparently not. Fine, so the public is excused. But what about those who are supposed to excite the public – our schools, veterans organizations, government agencies, vexi-publications, the media generally, our flag manufacturers? What are their stories?

Let me highlight a few themes:

- **Our Government.** Well, we're close to the seat of our government, so let's start with it. Kelly summarized it well: *Governments and politicians seem to "lead from behind" - they support things that have popular or media support, and rarely will show vision, inspiration or leadership. "I listen to the people, and I will lead them where the public tells me to go". There are no votes in flags, only votes to be lost when you don't wear your flag pin.* (8)

• **Our Schools.** The quality of our primary education – in most fields, but especially American history, civics, social studies – is in a downturn. Teachers have to deal with rigid teach-to-test requirements, emphasis on cross- and multi-cultural subjects that distract from the basics, student apathy and lack of motivation. *We're disenfranchising a whole generation of young people because of our obsession with standardized testing*, writes Ed Mooney. Discipline is fading and means to enforce it are inadequate. NAVA's past president Nick Artimovich made the point succinctly: *We have lost some of our interest in the details of history. In an era where school children can't grasp that during the 1860's we fought a Civil War to reunite the nation and abolish slavery and that during the 1960's we fought for Civil Rights to unite the nation and abolish segregation, not remembering that the 50<sup>th</sup> star was added to our flag 50 years ago is understandable.* (9) So much for the new normal. The new abnormal is a report from a friend who wrote that in 2010, for the first time in 25 years of teaching, not a single student would stand for the Pledge of Allegiance. Given this scholastic environment, marshaling interest, let alone excitement, in a flag anniversary seems a bridge too far.

• **Our Flag Manufacturers.** America's flag industry, long known for minimalist marketing and near-zero research and development, has been coming out of a severe recession. In consequence, as Lee Herold notes, *there's very little room to experiment with inventory, nor a budget for advertising to promote [novel flags].* (10) I would call the industry's public stance, with a bow to Samuel Beckett, a *Waiting-for-Godot* marketing strategy. In this usage, *Waiting-for-Godot* marketing assumes that something will happen simply because we're waiting for it to happen. In the case of the Golden Jubilee, no Godot, no special flags.

• **Our Media.** Randy Smith points out that the media is driven primarily by news with an emotional component. If it bleeds, it leads, in the professional jargon. And since there's little emotional value in a flag's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary – especially absent the push-pull of politics, which is also largely powered by emotion. (11) Not even Hawai'i's flag-cutting, star-burning parties seem to have caught anyone's serious attention on the mainland. No blood, no bleeding, no coverage.

• **Our Military Veterans.** Owing to their service experience, a majority of veterans are probably comfortable with a military mindset: Top-down, chain-of-command thinking and action. It's a mindset foreign to most vexillologists, which is why I suspect few vexillologists have volunteered to fight our wars. But to the veterans I spoke with, a military mindset is second nature. It may help to explain why, when the Jubilee failed to register on the radars of the Department of Defense and the Department of Veteran Affairs, there were no blip-blips at the national headquarters of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, or those of the American Legion, or Korean War Veterans. As a result, no flags went up at the state level of these organizations, and of course none at local posts. From federal to local, the whole system apparently went dark.

Allow me to close with a couple of overarching themes expressed by the people I interviewed.

One theme was that we appear overwhelmed by a surfeit of information, by daily responsibilities, a seemingly unending flow of everyday crises, small and large, pulled in ever more directions by the latest edicts of political correctness, prodded to consume, consume – and in the process, losing focus. Because of the dimming focus, we often take our flag and our history for granted. Whether it starts in our schools or whether the schools mirror our society is largely irrelevant. The bottom line is that, while reciting the required pieties, we rarely stop to consider the symbols and ideals that nourish us as a country and unite us as a family.

A final theme was this: Americans tend to see the flag as timeless and unchanging. Three generations have lived under primarily two flags since 1912. The 50-star flag is merely the 27<sup>th</sup> embodiment of our national symbol. We regard the Stars and Stripes as 234 years old, and therefore the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of any particular version is likely to be unexciting.

Thank you kindly for your attention.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Mr. Mooney e-mailed the following remarks about his Golden Jubilee teaching activities:  
I divided my usual flag presentation into three parts, with special accent on the 50 year mark:

### **The US Flag - Past, Present, Future**

**PAST.** I brought in a few examples of the other star patterns from the past and we discussed how our flag evolved. By the way, that was in May, as school was out in early July. I went over how long each had flown. We read the original "Resolved, the flag of the United States..." text. I wonder if schools being out for the summer made it tough. Even Flag Day is after most schools let out.

**PRESENT.** I hung up a large 50 star flag and we discussed how the stars were arranged (showing the photo of Eisenhower unveiling the flag and the story of the Ohio man who says he designed it). We discussed the proportions and how the flag should be displayed. I then brought out a photo of myself at 4 years old – when the flag was first official in 1960. THAT seemed to surprise them! I then showed them the golden 50 you had made of my design [50 gold stars instead of white]. They liked it.

**FUTURE.** I had a discussion about any more stars - with the question, "Is this the final US flag star design?" The class seemed unwilling to add more stars, by the way.

**2.** I ordered three American flags flown over the US Capitol on that day in recognition of the 50-star flag's Golden Anniversary and that was so stated on the certificate from the Architect of the Capitol accompanying each flag. They will join the flag I had flown on 4 July 2007 when the 50-star flag surpassed the 48-star flag as the longest lived American flag. Not to mention Capitol flags flown on 17 September 1987, 14 June 1977, and 4 July 1976. (Nick Artimovich, e-mail communication)

**3.** Ted Spencer and David Ott, e-mail communications. Mr. Ott wrote: On July 4 I flew your Golden Jubilee Flag and another one I bought from you, a US flag with the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights on the red stripes. I also flew it on June 14 for Flag Day.

**4a.** July 4, 2010 Marks 50th Anniversary of 50-Star U.S. Flag  
Jun 9, 2010, Katrena Wells, on [www.suite101.com](http://www.suite101.com)  
<http://www.suite101.com/content/july-4-2010-marks-50th-anniversary-of-50-star-us-flag-a247175>  
(Research: Sophie Rault)

**4b.** <http://www.aolnews.com/2010/07/03/50th-birthday-of-the-50-star-flag/>  
(July 3) -- This Fourth of July marks the 50th anniversary of something special: the birth of the 50-star flag. (Research: Sophie Rault)

**4c.** <http://www.aolnews.com/2010/07/03/50th-birthday-of-the-50-star-flag/> by Chris Epting  
(Research: Ralph Kelly)

**4d.** <http://www.newstimes.com/local/article/New-Milford-flag-aficionado-honors-50-star-822829.php>  
by Nanci Hutson

**5.** Author's e-mails seeking details and clarifications were not answered. No reference to any Jubilee observances could be found on the foundation's website, *cf.*  
<http://www.americanflags.org/index.flash.html>

**6.** The events of the Golden Jubilee of Hawaii Statehood Day, 2009, which included cutting the 50th star off the flag and burning it, are documented on a webpage at  
<http://www.angelfire.com/big09a/StatehoodGoldenJubilee.html>

The events of Statehood Day 2006, which included threatening a high school band with violence and then swarming and disrupting the celebration, are documented in a webpage at  
<http://www.angelfire.com/planet/bigfiles40/statehoodday2006.html>

**7. Mme Rault added:** J'aurais imaginé:

- \* plusieurs mois à l'avance, des articles dans la presse pour parler de l'importance du 4 juillet 2010 : 50ème anniversaire du drapeau actuel!
  - \* plusieurs émissions télé/radio sur l'adoption du drapeau à 50 étoiles (avec peut-être interview de vexillologues comme Whitney Smith)
  - \* qu'on en parle dans les écoles/collèges/lycées pour l'instruction des enfants et adolescents
  - \* des petites cocardes bleu/blanc/rouge marquées "50" au centre, présentes un peu partout à travers les USA.... en décoration des maisons à côté du drapeau le 4 juillet 2010, ou épinglées sur les vêtements lors des parades de ce jour là
- En résumé, pour moi c'est totalement incompréhensible que, en recherchant dans Google, je n'aie jamais RIEN trouvé sur une quelconque célébration de ce 50ème anniversaire : cela reste un mystère...

**8. Mr. Kelly's complete response on this subject:** Generalising from the Australian experience, can I offer some observations on your theme:

1. The change in the number of stars on the US flag is a relatively minor change to the "core flag" (a term that I recall was invented by Whitney Smith). Since the current flag is the 27th variation on the same basic theme, is it really deserving of commemoration? OK, it has proven to be the longest serving, but is that enough to excite the public? The main patriotic game is the celebration of "the flag" and, like ANFA [Australian National Flag Association], it suits partisan patriotic promoters to emphasise the continuity of the association of the flag with the birth of the nation more than the history of the flag, let alone the most recent variant of the details of the flag design.

2. Again, using the concept of the "core flag" - the design is recognisable in even its most distorted form, so why get excited about an anniversary of the details of a change in its specification? I think that many of those who view the flag don't "see" the flag, only its concept. (In Australia's case - they don't "see" the Union Jack on the Australian flag). So if there is a World War II movie, poorly made, few would notice that a 50-star flag in the background is an inaccuracy.

3. More fundamentally, most flag changes occur in conjunction with some other historical event, such as independence, a major constitutional or political change that substantially alters the nation, or the changes are relatively minor design variations. Therefore if the event that induced the flag change is the event whose anniversary is commemorated, perhaps illustrated by the flag, It is only when a flag changes independently of a major national event that the anniversary of the flag change takes on a significance that merits change. The 1965 flag change in Canada was symbolic of a number of nation-building changes in Canada, and I understand that the anniversaries of its adoption have relatively significant commemoration.

4. Veterans groups have an ambivalence to commemorating flag change. The veterans "fought and died" under their national flag, and it is inconvenient to acknowledge any changes to the

design of the flag. It is more comfortable to ignore the change once it has happened (either dramatically, in the case of Canada, or minor in the case of USA) and to vehemently resist any changes that are proposed (as in Australia or New Zealand).

5. Most flag manufacturers in Australia have almost no interest in the product that they manufacture. The national flag is their mass-market product (usually with a price/quality trade-off) and they will make any other flag a customer cares to order, without much concern about its significance. Promoting a flag anniversary is something that might sell some more flags, but the government can do the promoting, if it wishes.

6. Almost all patriotic flag enthusiasts in Australia have little knowledge of the national flag and its history - they just wave the flag as a mark of their nationalism, and confuse the flag with the nation it represents.

7. Vexillologists often are intelligent, liberal (or libertarian) and internationally focused, and cynical about flag patriotism, and, I believe, will tend to have relatively little regard for the artificiality of centenaries and anniversaries of anything, let alone a particular flag. ...

8. Governments and politicians seem to "lead from behind" - they support things that have popular or media support, and rarely will show vision, inspiration or leadership. "I listen to the people, and I will lead them where the public tells me to go". There are no votes in flags, only votes to be lost when you don't wear your flag pin.

9. The media these days are more interested in scandal and over-hyped and ill-informed criticisms of politicians, institutions and public figures – is there a 15-second "sound bite" or an unfair comment to be had involving a flag?

9. Nick Artimovich, e-mailed communication.

10. Lee Herold of Herold Flags, e-mailed communication.

11. Randy Smith of Advertising Flag Company, telephone communication.

## PICTURE CREDITS

A. The 50<sup>th</sup> star being burned: Photo from Honolulu Advertiser August 21, 2009, with original URL <http://www.honoluluadvertiser.com/apps/pbcs.dll/gallery?>

B. The flag with a hole where 50<sup>th</sup> star had been and a protester grinning through the hole. Photo from Honolulu Advertiser August 21, 2009, with original URL <http://www.honoluluadvertiser.com/apps/pbcs.dll/gallery?>

C. Flagster testing flag aerodynamics without flagpole: Photo by Chris Ware of *The News-Times*, reproduced by permission.