

WHITNEY SMITH

The Flag in Advertising

Those seriously interested in flags must not fail to investigate every aspect of their actual usage. Despite the increasingly more sophisticated work which has been done in vexillology in recent years, there remain many areas where research has scarcely begun. The present is a preliminary report on one such topic, the flag in advertising.

There are two brief references to this subject in speeches delivered at the Second International Congress of Vexillology. Hints have also been given by those concerned with an analysis of advertising itself. For example, Warren A. Bahr notes that "retail advertising is somewhat like sign language, in that it triggers an identification through graphic styles and devices." Madison Avenue has even added a flag-related phrase to the English language—"Run it up the pole and see who salutes." Nevertheless, I believe it may fairly be claimed that this study makes an original, if not exhaustive, contribution.

From the beginning caution is required regarding several points. The raw material employed here is almost exclusively from American sources. This is not at all to say that Europeans and others have not used flags in advertising; rather, such usage is simply not examined here. There is also a limitation with regard to time. While fruitful work might be done by comparing the type and extent of flag usage in advertising today with that which has existed at various points in the past, my material is largely from the period 1969-71. On the other hand such a survey is not insignificant, for 86% of the growth in American advertising (measured in dollars) during the past century has occurred in the last 25 years. It is calculated that 18 billion dollars was spent on advertising in the United States during 1970.

The chief media of advertising are newspapers, magazines, television, radio, outdoor advertising, transit advertising, direct mail, and point-of-purchase advertising. Flags appear as motifs in all of these forms of advertising, except radio. Flags are also themselves a medium of advertising and figure in the commercial world as components of packaging, awards and incentives, displays in and on buildings, and in other situations where flags usually appear in the non-commercial world as well. Concern here, however, is not so much with flags in commerce generally, but specifically the flag as motif and medium in advertising itself.

Anyone who has seen a flag flying, whether or not he is a vexillologist, cannot have failed to be impressed by its ability to convey messages. The inherent qualities of color and motion always cause flags to attract attention. Sophisticated use of size and design in a flag and its placement can contribute to making it the most effective center of attention in any setting. For this reason we should not be surprised to find that a flag or pennant, perhaps made of cardboard for durability, signals a special display of items for sale in many shops. In other words it is an important element in point-of-purchase advertising, where great competition exists for the attention of the consumer.

Outdoors, flags—often plastic pennants on strings—attract attention to roadside eating places, used car lots, filling stations, department stores, motels, and other businesses the motorist might not otherwise notice. (Such usage has perforce been curtailed by the high speed roads favored today.) Flags are particularly useful along those stretches of road where there are many firms dealing in similar products and all utilizing more or less the same kind of architecture.

In addition to colorful pennants, which become visible and audible in every breeze, we will also note flags of arbitrary colors such as horizontal stripes of green, orange, and purple. Sunoco gasoline stations have recently been flying large plain flags of the "house colors"—dark blue and yellow, alternately. The national flag of the United States is frequently flown; historical flags and state flags are also sometimes seen. Places of business near borders, especially motels, flatter potential guests by flying the Canadian or Mexican flags, as appropriate.

The plasticity of the flag as pure medium does not survive a transition to the flag as advertising motif. Protovexilloids—usually pennant-shaped with words and slogans, appearing at the top of magazine or newspaper advertising—are usually very weak visually. Imaginary flags of this genre lack the motion and depth of real flags and their graphic impact is lessened in printed form.

Flags have also proven useful as promotional premiums. They fit perfectly into the definition of the ideal premium: they are non-competitive with the product to be sold, something that one never has enough of, and something which can be produced in a novelty form. In recent years the United States national flag (and to a lesser extent other flags) has appeared as tie tacks, lapel pins, decals, desk items, and on medals, pens, calendars, dish towels, watches, pants, jewelry, buttons, address labels, stationery, paperweights, stamps, etc. One novelty house describes its small flags as "the perfect giveaway ... your customers will welcome this patriotic symbol and wear it gladly ... excellent, yet

inexpensive." Another firm specializing in fund-raising items includes flag pins among the items which "guarantee profits."

As a way of stimulating sales, many firms have in recent years offered actual flags, usually of the 3' x 5' (90 x 150 cm) size, at nominal prices. Such firms as Goodyear Tires, Mrs. Filbert's Margarine, the 3M Company, Dole Pineapple, and others must consider them excellent advertising; generally, aside from the name of the firm itself, no mention is made of the product which the firm is selling.

When we get into the area of flags as an advertising motif, the great number of examples confronting us suggests the necessity for the categorization. It might be thought by someone who had not examined actual advertising that the flags most likely to be shown would be those of companies themselves, that is house flags. It is true that house flags do appear in certain ads. For example, we find them used fairly frequently by shipping companies and banks; by a few companies which have always used a flag such as Kemper Insurance, Borden's Milk, and Statler Hotels; and by firms which use a flag as part of a trademark or brand name, such as Metropolitan Coal and Oil, Black Flag Bug Killer, and the Flagler System Inc. hotel chain.

Such usage is, however, perhaps the least important area of flags in advertising. Investigation shows that in addition to companies' own flags, the flag of the United States, historical American flags, signal flags, foreign flags, and famous pictures involving flags frequently appear. The red, white, and navy blue colors of the American flag and its stars and stripes often are employed when the flag itself is absent. Although the flag is primarily a graphic symbol, much use is made of flag-related words, often with a tie-in to an appropriate picture.

The visual treatment of the United States flag in particular is quite varied. It may appear as the central theme, the selling point, the mood-setter for the whole ad. Or it may be in the background, even sometimes as an apparently coincidental aspect of the ad. The flag or part of it may be incorporated into the border or the clothing of persons in the ad or even the lettering in which the message is conveyed.

In recent years there has been a considerable growth of "flag fashions"—that is, clothing and accessories in which the United States flag is directly or indirectly represented. Naturally, advertising for such items tends to reflect the flag theme. Scarves, belts, ski pants, bathing suits, draperies, jewelry, sport clothes, shoes, etc. which incorporate the colors red, white, and navy blue or perhaps one or two stripes or stars become adequate justification in the minds of certain copywriters for using one or more stock phrases. We read about "star-spangled savings;" a "flag-waving collection" of shoes; "superb Americana." Two ads from February 1971 will indicate the extent to which this theme is sometimes carried: Jordan Marsh in Boston advertises a belt and suspenders as follows:

"Right on. Right now. Hickok presents patriotism at its flag waving best. It's a whole new thing for the aware male who's into fashion and shows it. 'Hang-Ups' come on strong in a stars spangled red and blue stripe suspender for fire-side fun time ... Another Betsy Ross inspired motif takes

shape in full grain cowhide belts. Available in Fourth of July stripes of red, white and blue with big brash 2-prong buckle."

Goldsmith Brothers in New York offers a desk pen set whose only connection with the flag is the fact that the pen is half blue, half white, and the base which holds it, red. Their ad runs as follows:

"Old Glory-fied desk sets by Sheaffer. Its New! Its Patriotic! Its Americana! Glory-fied desk sets ... a combo of taste and pride in Red, White and Blue. Slim sleek and very today. This colorful conversation piece is a useful and decorative addition to any desk ..."

When we examine the uses made of flags as components in the visual composition of advertisements, a number of categories become evident. Flags frequently appear, for example, in ads selling items related to situations where flags are actually used in real life. John Deere advertises a lawn-mowing tractor by showing one among golf flags, explaining that the tractor will give one more time for that sport. Dupont's Dacron shows signal flags and promises "the shipshape knit." Of course, advertising exists for the sale of flags themselves. Generally speaking, however, such ads show the least imaginative use of the flag as a symbol in advertising. In Pittsburgh the telephone company will not accept pictures of flags in its Yellow Pages advertising "Flag Manufacturers," because it appears to believe that it is illegal to reproduce the flag in anything (like a telephone book) designed for temporary usage.

Tourist advertising frequently makes use of flags for a number of purposes. For example, France, Mexico, the United States, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Venezuela, Canada, and several Canadian provinces show small pictures of their flags regularly in ads. The states of Maine, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and the city of Baltimore have employed the United States flag in tourist ads as a reference to or emphasis on the history of their respective areas. The copy in such ads frequently implies that it is highly patriotic for the tourist to spend his money in that particular state. Probably the simplest and most direct use of a flag in tourist advertising appears in the "Discover America" campaign. Suggesting that the country is "three thousand smiles wide," these ads show a face made up simply of two stars for eyes and a stripe bent into a smiling mouth.

Another motivation seems to have inspired the use of flags in tourist ads. For those concerned about the possibility of racial or other problems in a Caribbean vacation, the Union Jack in the colonial flags shown in ads for Bermuda and the Bahamas like the United States flag in ads for the Virgin Islands provides a form of reassurance. The theme of "exotic yet safe" is carried out in the copy of a Virgin Islands ad:

"Part of the American flag is made of sun and sand, hills covered with emerald tamarind trees, and high-masted sailing sloops. Sound romantic? It is. Sound un-American? It isn't. That's because you will find them in the U.S. Virgin Islands —three delightful islands that are as American as apple pie."

Perhaps the most sophisticated ad promising tourist reassurance for those who might be taking their first trip abroad is one published in 1971 by KLM. A photograph covering the top half of a full-page advertisement shows a canal scene shot from the door of a hotel in Amsterdam. Although it is clearly a Dutch setting, the hotel sign is in English and the hotel is flying the United States flag. The message plays up the fact that the tourist can expect to find extensive use of English, friendliness on the part of the Dutch people to Americans, and other things to make his trip easy.

In other advertisements where several national flags appear, the purpose seems to be to establish a sophisticated or cosmopolitan setting (Catalina Martin tennis gear) or to suggest historical roots (Five Flags Restaurant; Six Flags recreation park) or to promote mass-produced foods as exotic specialties (Nabisco Toastettes; S.S. Pierce foods) or to imply international standing or recognition (I.W. Harper Whiskey; Horizon magazine). Other such ads (ITT) may simply imply international coverage by the company.

Parallel to such usage is the display made by many branches of the United States government of the national flag, or the stars and stripes motif, in their own promotional campaigns. We think, for example, of the combined use of the flag and Minuteman statue in Savings Bond posters, or the use of an eagle or stocking decorated with stars and stripes for the same purpose. Many Postal Service posters use similar designs. Armed forces recruitment posters have made the flag their chief theme for many years. One such poster from 1971 used by the Army shows simply the flag, a soldier, and the slogan "Your flag, your future." Not only do such emblems appear in official symbols, but increasingly as well in logos, such as that of the National Guard.

Uses of foreign flags in American advertisements also include those situations in which they denote national origin, e.g. for an automobile (Ford Cortina), a tourist ship (French Line), a movie (Sexual Practices in Sweden), a book (Cuba), the British design for a raincoat made in the United States (Gleneagles), a hotel (Nassau Beach; Sheraton-Waikiki), or an airline (CSA).

Flags or flag motifs may also appear in product packaging, such as those for Campbell's Great American Soups, Union Jack Candy Bars, Stars and Stripes Bubble Gum, and the line of men's toiletries called Nine Flags whose slogan is "No man should be without a country."

There is a vague recognition on the part of some that such usage may not be entirely proper. Gilbert Weil in his Managing the Legal Aspects of Advertising notes that the Federal Trade Commission regulates the manner in which advertising is deemed to be fraudulent. He states that

"giving a French name to perfume, or dressing it in a package with labeling completely in French would be considered by the Commission to depict the perfume as made in France. Similarly, the use of symbols such as the country's flag or national insignia would probably be deemed an implication of origin ..."

Presumably it is for this reason that in some cases an imaginary symbol has been devised to suggest, without actually re-

producing, the actual symbol of a particular country. We have as examples Canadian Club whiskey, Canadian Lord Calvery whiskey, Mac Naughton Canadian whiskey, Gaston Andrey automobile dealers, and Continental Airlines.

The largest group of flag-related ads, however, seem to consist of those in which the familiar theme of the flag of the United States is used simply to express the idea that "buying our product is as American as the flag itself." A direct example is the can of Quaker State mushrooms which has on the top an American flag (in red and white--no blue--and with five rows of ten stars instead of the regulation pattern!) and the slogan "Buy! A 100% American product."

Some of these ads simply reinforce the word "American" or "national" as in "Gantner--America's first family of fashion," "Bourbon, the national drink," "Flag an American girl" (AGS Services), "Star Spangled Spring" (American House and Garden Centers), "Addressograph Helped Make It E. i. e., American Express credit card] an American Way of Life."

Some companies have gone so far as to modify the United States flag for use as a trademark or logo for stationery and other purposes. In this regard we think of the Union Pacific Railroad, United States Lines, the Hercules Division of the American Cement Corporation, the Acrilan Division of Monsanto, American Rent-a-Boat Inc., and "the Great American Look" of the Georgia-Pacific Plywood Company. Sheraton has even designed logos for its different hotels using local symbols of sovereignty from Puerto Rico, the Netherlands Antilles, Venezuela, Jamaica and the Bahamas.

It is true that the same characteristics which make for a good flag from the standpoint of design also tend to make good trademarks. This is implicit in some of the statements made by authors discussing trademark designs: one says that the usefulness of a trademark "depends largely on the extent to which it is distinctive and suggestive, the ease of recognizing it, its memory value, and the degree to which it has pleasant connotations." Another states that "desirable characteristics of good layout are simplicity, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, and sometimes structural and gaze motion." Certainly the same points could be made about flags.

In some cases the American flag or the stars and stripes motif seems to be almost exclusively a colorful border, a background, or a filler. However, given the care with which ads are prepared, it is difficult to believe that such usage is completely unintentional. After all, the flag is so familiar that it does not take much to suggest it to the average American consumer. The most subtle ads perhaps are those used by Pepsi Cola and Coca Cola. The former, under the slogan "Pair Up with Pepsi," shows a beach scene with a boy in red and white striped trunks and a girl in a dark blue bikini. Coke in a Fourth of July ad shows simply a large bottle with a red, white, and blue ribbon below.

Occasionally the reference to a flag is far-fetched, a mixed metaphor, or a complete incongruity. The worse example is the Mr. Sandman Teen Time Furniture advertisement showing a suite of bedroom furniture with the slogan "Bunker Hill--A warm Colonial Felling created in rugged pine with mar-proof tops." The flags

at the top have absolutely nothing to do with Bunker Hill; they are the thirteen-star United States flag and the Battle Flag of the Confederacy.

One technique of advertising is to employ for its own ends some current theme in fads or fashions within other communication media. Since the flag of the United States has become the focal point for much political debate in recent years, inevitably we find some advertisers "waving the flag." A department store selling tee shirts with the stars and stripes labels them as "heavy" symbols that really 'live,'" while a flag pin offered in the American Legion Magazine is promoted with the phrase "Protest the Protesters." A watch which displays the national flag on its dial is advertised in a newspaper with the copy "Honor America Watch with Red, White and Blue Freedom Strap; Show Your True Colors! Two Year Guarantee."

The theme of revolution has also become popular in the United States. Not only students and leftists, but President Nixon and Madison Avenue have also found that the word revolution attracts attention. Sears, Roebuck proclaims: "The counter revolution. Somebody had to start one. Sears did." The "counter revolution" referred to is a play on words: the company is trying to sell kitchen appliances. Graber Drapery Rods suggests that choosing drapes to go with their rods is like being Betsy Ross and having George Washington ask you to design a new flag. Blondes American Style promises "It's the American Revolution in Blonding" in a circle of 17 stars appearing in their ads. Master Hosts Inns announces "A Declaration of the Traveller's Independence ... Welcome to the Revolution." Pellon Non-Woven Textiles asserts that it is "Right in the middle of the Quality Revolution." To carry out this theme, a photograph is shown of three persons resembling the famous flag painting, "The Spirit of '76." (The same painting has been the model for a number of other ads.) Massengill promotes its vaginal deodorant with a "Freedom Now" button beside a spray can of the product and the slogan "You Like Freedom, Don't You?"

In contrast to such exploitation of political themes for commercial ends, some advertising seems to be sympathetic to a reinterpretation of the national flag or a social reorganization of the nation. Cases in point are ads sponsored by Helene Curtis Industries, Kayser Broadcasting Company, certain publishers, and the Westinghouse Broadcasting Company. Several advertising agencies themselves, in a series appearing in Time, made use of the flag motif or such familiar flag scenes as the planting of the flag on Iwo Jima to suggest reexamination or reaffirmation of national values.

Just as at Christmas and Easter religious ideas are developed for profit, sometimes being altered beyond recognition, so patriotic themes become major selling points on certain holidays. The greatest attention is focused on the Fourth of July, Lincoln's Birthday-Washington's Birthday, and to some extent Memorial Day, Flag Day, and Election Day. This custom was reinforced in 1971 in the establishment by Congress of official holidays on certain Mondays, rather than on the arbitrary days of the week on which they used to fall. The resulting long weekends and the abandonment of laws against store openings on holidays encourage the idea that a holiday, whether religious or patriotic in origin, is in fact chiefly of value today to sell more goods.

Washington's Birthday, falling as it does in February when car

sales are at their annual low-point, has become the focus for a traditional open-house at automobile dealers. The Fourth of July rather seems to call forth sales of food products. Advertising copy in these instances generally has only tenuous associations to make between its two themes, the commercial and patriotic.

It must not be thought that the flag is the only symbol subject to commercial exploitation. The White House, the Rock of Gibraltar, Betsy Ross, policemen and grandparents, and other familiar or reassuring themes frequently appear in advertising as well. Although in many cases there is some relationship between theme and product, this is usually visual or verbal rather than substantive and much of the advertising seems rather to be based on the copywriter's lack of imagination. A case in point is the ad produced by Astro Minerals Gallery of Gems for Mother's Day 1971 which featured the slogan "Mommies of the World—Unite Already! (You have nothing to loose but your change ...)"

After this survey of types of actual usage of flags and flag-related designs in advertising, it is necessary to ask some analytical questions. We are concerned first of all to know why flags, which have been traditionally associated with the dignity and power of the state, should become a motif in advertising, which is concerned with the advancement of commercial ends and above all, of private profit. Of course, at a very simple level we can answer this by saying, as President Coolidge did, "The business of America is business." In that boosteristic view, anything which promotes or increases business is acceptable and justified. But even this argument would not tell us why and how flags were of value to the advertiser.

In reading some of the literature concerning advertising, certain themes are repeated frequently. We are told that the purposes of an ad may be to win awards, to be talked about, to build a consumer brand name, to create a memorable communication, to reinforce other advertising, to create a particular image of a company, to reach a certain kind of audience, to introduce new products, to gain acceptance for change, to justify development costs, to make a promise, or gain a sales potential. Regardless of how the point is expressed, ultimately advertising must sell goods to justify itself. In order to do so an ad must involve potential readers through its use of words and pictures or both. The social control which advertising effects through the manipulation of taste and attitude, the spread of knowledge, and the allocation of economic resources all ultimately is based on its ability to find an audience for itself and to make itself believed. How does the usage of flags fit in with this concept?

For the moment, the appeal of the flag as an advertising medium—for example, the pennants at gas stations mentioned above—can be ignored. It is enough to note in passing that in a succession of tests, displays with motion were favored by 70% of the dealers, or given 88% of the prime in-store locations (compared with 47% for nonmotion displays), and produced an 83% average gain above normal shelf sales.

Perhaps the most obvious advantage of the flag as a motif—any almost flag, but certainly the Stars and Stripes in particular—is its great graphic strength and visual appeal. The contrast of red, white, and dark blue and of the stars and stripes, plus the inherent

motion of the design, make the American flag a striking pattern whether reproduced in whole or in part, in color or even in black and white, as the principal theme or a minor element.

Basically, it would appear that the use of flags in advertising is primarily related to two factors: 1) gaining attention for the ad in the first place and 2) converting that attention into a favorable disposition toward the message of the ad. Or, to express it a different way, the function of the flag is to communicate and predispose; only occasionally is an explicit promise made through the use of a flag motif.

In this regard the American flag is useful because it already has high recognition, recall, and favorable response from the buying public. However, its connection with a product is far from automatic, or even sometimes comprehensible, and the problem of credibility and potential over-use may arise. In some cases there seems to be an encouragement to distort the flag form for the sake of novelty. To the extent that this is done the inherent advantages of the flag design are lost.

Stars and Stripes appeals because of the high regard with which it is held by the vast market of Middle America. The average citizen finds in the flag a statement of reassurance, familiarity in a world of challenge, and the satisfaction of belonging to a powerful in-group. Such psychological factors help to sell gasoline, corn flakes, basic household items, and sports equipment as readily as the "mod" or "pop" use of the flag assists in the sale of travel, clothes, automobiles, liquor, and food to the affluent and/or young person.

In some cases, of course, the theme is exaggerated. After all, if we read between the lines of the Time-Life Books advertisement which shows Francis Scott Key writing "The Star-Spangled Banner" above the query "Is It Too Late to Inspire Love of America?", we discover that the message still resolves itself into "Please Buy Our Books." Yet the power of the flag should not be underestimated. As a multi-national, pluralistic, non-royalist society, the United States treats the flag as an emotional touchstone of loyalty and a common denominator. Favorable acceptance is immediate and thorough.

Indeed the use of a patriotic theme of any kind in advertising is, within the context of American culture, quite comparable to the traditional literary allusion, the use of biblical phrases in book titles and movies, the quotation of clichés by politicians, and the utilization of a similar melody in a piece of serious music. It seeks to put the audience in a favorable state of mind by reference to a known symbol in a new situation. In theory it produces a reflex response on the part of the viewer. The question which interests us ultimately, one about which we have very little scientific data, is the extent to which such symbols can be transferred in context without losing their meaning. Clearly men are willing to fight and die for a flag, but will they regard it as a seal of approval in making purchases? Is it true in that sense that "trade follows the flag"?

One aspect of the flag in advertising which has not been dealt with here at all deserves careful separate attention. Despite the numerous examples which have been chronicled here, use of the United States flag in advertising is in fact illegal in almost every state

of the Union. The flag desecration laws which today are being used to harass political and social dissenters were, in many cases, written in the last century in order to protect the flag from commercial exploitation. Space unfortunately does not permit an analysis of the reasons for the existence of this very blatant, widespread, and frequent disregard for a clear legal injunction against the use of flags in advertising. Suffice it to say that this is part of a larger trend in the country.

The American citizen is no longer surprised to see techniques of advertising, radio and television, and the theater and movies turned to the purposes of running government; nor the creation of art from commerce, as evidenced in oversized inflatable soup cans, recognition of the television commercial as an art form, and lettering styles based on computer-readable numbers. Since political symbols (including the flag) and advertising are both part of the wider realm of social communication and since advertising has "revolutionized the relation between the world of images and the world of reality" in almost every area of life, it should be no surprise that the flag finds a place in advertising. To paraphrase a former Secretary of Defense, if it's good for the country, why shouldn't it be good for General Motors?

In point of fact the flow works in both directions. Paul Gerhold, President of the Advertising Research Foundation, has noted that sometimes advertising phrases or slogans fall into the public jargon, are picked up by entertainers and writers, dramatized, made into jokes, and repeated endlessly by the young and the general public.

Some young people, opposed to the materialism of a capitalist society, have been reversed the commercial exploitation of national symbols by using commercial symbols for political ends. (For example, the STP decal is reinterpreted to mean "Stop the Pigs--Serve the People.")

All of this analysis, admittedly provisional at present, suggests finally a new and more comprehensive definition of flags: the flag is a graphic and plastic medium of social—usually, but not exclusively, political—communication.

III

WHITNEY SMITH

The Flag in Advertising

- 1 The colors and design motif of the United States national flag are frequently employed in advertising, even to the extent of being incorporated (as they are here) into the product itself.
- 2 In some instances the use of patriotic and commercial themes is mixed as in this "public service" outdoor advertising. This also provides an example where the flag is suggested without being directly represented.
- 3 The original 13-star U.S. flag did not exist when the Declaration of Independence was voted; the stars were not arranged in a ring; flag etiquette requires the canton on the viewer's left and forbids standing on the flag; this advertisement is justified only by the profit motive.
- 4 A well-known name is employed to attract attention and, in theory, to reassure the consumer about the quality of the product (except perhaps the vexillologist who knows about the lack of substantiation for the Betsy Ross legend).
- 5 Washington's Birthday weekend is the time of "open houses" at automobile showrooms. Leutze's painting of Washington crossing the Delaware has here been adapted to commercial purposes by the replacement of the U.S. flag with a Ford sign. (Note also the birthday cake held by the General.)



w from Hendrie's
October 1968, May 1970

Give the flag the values for "Star & Stripe" for Milk. American strawberries and liposoluble vanilla give wonderful new strawberries are milk sliced up legs on eating "the full" of flavor. These three for "Star & Stripe" for Milk.

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