

**CAUDILLOS, COUPS, CONSTITUTIONS AND CHANGES:  
AN ANALYSIS OF FLAG CHANGES IN LATIN AMERICA**

*Ralph Kelly*

**Abstract:**

The paper provides a review of historical changes in the design of national flags in Latin America since independence. Despite the perception that their national flags do not change, a number of Latin American countries have changed the design of their national flag since independence, either in minor ways or by adopting a completely new design. Some countries have experienced frequent flag changes in the past and only two Latin American national flags have never changed since independence. The paper undertakes a statistical analysis of the pattern of such changes and their reasons, which can be categorised into eight factors. The paper seeks to explain the past changes of the national flags of Latin America in the context of the unique history of the continent. Many flag changes in the past have been associated with changes of government, but in the past century the national flag is a more significant symbol than contemporary governments. The paper assumes an existing general knowledge of the designs and meaning of Latin American flags. Illustrations include reproductions from some of the major historical flag books of the Nineteenth Century and new re-constructions by the author.

**Text:**

The initial impression of Latin American flags is that they do not change. All of the national flags shown in "The Flags of the Americas" issue of *The National Geographic Magazine* in 1949 [1] continue in use today, unchanged, except for some minor alterations.[2] Indeed, the same can be said of the 1917 flag issue of *The National Geographic Magazine*. [3]

However, the lack of change in Latin American flags over the past 100 years hides a rich vexillological history, which has seen at least 136 different national flags being used by the 20 nations of Latin America since their respective dates of independence.[4] This paper seeks to identify statistical and historical patterns in these historical and current flags, with the intent of aiding our understanding of why national flags change. In particular, I started my research with an overarching question: why do some flags change, and others don't.

In the April 1992 issue of *Crux Australis* [5], I wrote a short article entitled "Why Flags Change" in which I set out what I thought were the primary reasons for flags to change. In the context of the continuing debate about the design of the Australian National Flag, I postulated four primary reasons why national flags change:

- Recognition of formal independence;
- Radical changes to society and political systems (e.g. Russia);
- Symbolic changes (e.g. Canada, Libya); and
- Minor evolutionary changes (e.g. new stars on the United States flag)

I also made the point that major constitutional changes are not necessarily related to flag changes, they are separate debates. Internationally, there are many examples of flag changes concurrent with political upheavals, and equally, where major political change is not reflected in a nation's flag, or the changes have been minor, such as the removal of communist symbols from traditional flag designs. The break-up of the Soviet Union also saw the restoration of historical flags as a sign of national continuity.

Today, I return to the analysis started by my 1992 article and examine what I described as the paradox of flag change in Latin America. The military coup has been elevated or reduced to an art form, yet the political upheavals of the past century are not reflected in the flags of the region.

The starting point for my analysis was to determine what changes have actually occurred in flags in Latin America since independence and to seek to categorise those changes. My first difficulty: when did independence actually occur? Mexico celebrates its Independence Day on 16 September, in commemoration of the day in 1810 that Father Miguel Hidalgo led a peasant revolt against Spain, though the Vice-Royalty of New Spain did not actually achieve independence until 1821. The five Central American nations all celebrate Independence Day on 15 September, in commemoration of the day in 1821 that independence was achieved from Spain, however they were almost immediately incorporated into Mexico, and then they became federated into the United Provinces of the Centre of America. It is more accurate to date their independence from 1838 to 1840.

The second difficulty: the information sources for the early flags of Latin America are relatively few, and there are considerable doubts about the accuracy of some of the published material, which range from old flag books through to the internet. Even government web sites were often found to be inaccurate or had major omissions. Nonetheless, my lecture will present flag information that is generally the most reliable available, but errors will inevitably be able to be found, especially by such an expert audience as here today.

## Independence

The flags adopted on or very near independence are generally familiar. Only two flags remain unchanged in every respect (Chile and Cuba), though nine other flags are substantially the same today as when independence was achieved [Figures 1 - 7].



**Figure 1**  
Haiti 1804



**Figure 2**  
Argentina 1816



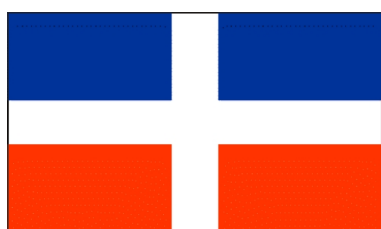
**Figure 3**  
Venezuela 1811



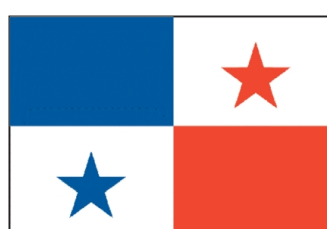
**Figure 4**  
Ecuador 1830



**Figure 5**  
Honduras & Nicaragua 1838  
and El Salvador 1841



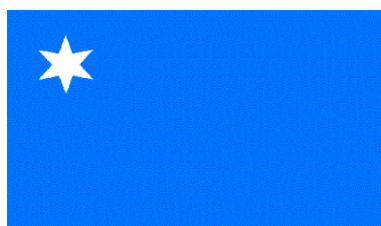
**Figure 6**  
Dominican Republic 1844



**Figure 7**  
Panama 1903

This is a timely moment to recall two vexillological concepts which were first described by Dr. Whitney Smith in his lecture at the 9<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Vexillology in Ottawa, 1981.[6] The "core flag" was designated as "those irreducible elements of graphic symbolism which in a given nation, despite even substantial variations, characterises that country". These nine independence flags are good examples of "core flags", as they remain recognisable in respect of their countries, though the details of their specifications has varied over the centuries.

The balance of the flags adopted on independence were generally short-lived, and several of these flags can also be regarded as "core flags". [Figures 8 - 16] It is beyond the scope of this lecture to review every flag that has existed in Latin America, so my comments will generally be limited to illustrative examples of the general trends and categories of design changes and their causes. The early flags of Paraguay are unclear, though the available information suggests that a light blue flag with a star in the canton was the first design to be used, though for less than a month. It has been described as "Francia's flag". [7] Uncertainty also confuses the early years of modern Colombia. The United Provinces of New Granada is understood to have initially adopted the flag of one of its main provinces, Cartagena, though the descriptions of the design are subject to different modern reconstructions.



**Figure 8**  
Paraguay 1811



**Figure 9**  
Colombia 1812



**Figure 10**  
Peru 1821



**Figure 11**  
Mexico 1821



**Figure 12**  
Brazil 1822



**Figure 13**  
Guatemala 1823



**Figure 14**  
Bolivia 1825



**Figure 15**  
Uruguay 1828



**Figure 16**  
Costa Rica 1838

### Federation and Separation

The second major cause of flag changes was the process of federation and separation that involved several countries, and explains some of the shared flag heritage of Latin American regions. The Federal Republic of Central America [8] adopted the Belgrano pattern of a celeste and white triband, which had been first used by the Salvadoran militia Colonel Manuel José Arce in 1822.[Figure 17]

Upon separation, each of the five Central American nations continued to use the Federal flag, with minor modifications.[9] Even the Federal shield, with its five mountains rising from the sea, rainbow and Phrygian cap within an equilateral triangle, continues today as the centre of the state shields of Nicaragua and El Salvador.

The major breakthrough in the war of independence in Venezuela was in 1819 when General Simón Bolívar made the bold move to cross the Andes and attack the royalists in New Granada, capturing Bogotá. The Congress at Angostura created the Republic of Colombia [10] on 17 December 1819 with its territory claimed to equal the whole of the former Vice Royalty of New Granada, with three departments of Venezuela, Cundinamarca [11] and Quito.[12] The federal republic modified the Venezuelan flag, adding three blue stars to the yellow stripe of the Mirandan flag. [Figure 18]-

The Peru-Bolivian Confederation of 1836-1838 represented Bolivia's take-over of Peru, under the rule of Marshal Andrés de Santa Cruz. The Confederation flag combined the shields of Bolivia, Peru and the Sun symbol of South Peru.[13] [Figure 19]

The other example of the impact of federation and separation is the division of Haiti from 1806. The south of Haiti rejected a coup by Henry Christophe and became the Republic of Haiti, using the independence flag [Figure 1] North Haiti used a vertical black and red flag [Figure 20] and was called the Kingdom of Haiti from 1811 when Henry Christophe made himself King Henri I. In 1820 the nation was reunited upon the death of Christophe.



**Figure 17**  
Federal Republic of Central  
America 1823 - 1838/41



**Figure 18**  
Gran Colombia  
1819 - 31



**Figure 19**  
Peruvo - Bolivian Confederation  
1836 - 38



**Figure 20**  
Kingdom of Haiti  
(North: 1805 - 20)

### Re-conquest and Independence Restored

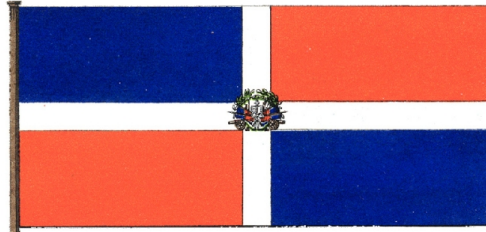
The third major cause of flag changes in the early years was the struggle for independence that involved a difficult war between the liberation forces and the Spanish royalists. In most countries, the suppression of early independence movements, and their flags, has been regarded, for the purpose of this analysis as having happened prior to effective independence being achieved. However, for Venezuela and Colombia, the extended wars of independence between Royalist and Liberation forces make it appropriate to regard the effective dates of independence as being the earliest dates of 1811 and 1812 respectively.

A Venezuelan flag was adopted upon the declaration of independence and its emblem in the canton is evocative of the Batavian Republic naval ensign as well as the flag of Francisco de Miranda's failed liberation expedition of 1806. [Figure 3] Control of the capital changed a further four times, until an army led by Simón Bolívar finally defeated the Spanish and royalist forces in 1821.[14] [Figure 21]

The Dominican Republic under the dictator, General Pedro Santana sought protection against economic collapse and from Haiti, which had made three invasion attempts since independence. [Figure 22] Remarkably in March 1861, Spain accepted the invitation of the caudillo to annex the country as the Province of Santo Domingo. However, his people did not support the return of colonialism, leading to a War of Restoration resulting in the Spanish abandoning the territory in 1865.



**Figure 21**  
Venezuela 1817



**Figure 22**  
Dominican Republic  
1844 - 1861 and from 1863

### Monarchy and Republics

The role of monarchy in Spanish tradition is a foundation stone for Latin American history and its flag heritage. The Spanish King Fernando VII was deposed by Napoleon's invasion of Spain in 1808, which led to a number of local juntas being established in his realms in both the Iberian Peninsula and Latin America. These regional governments derived their power from the traditional Spanish political principle that "in the absence of the king, sovereignty lies represented in all the kingdom and the classes that form it".[15]

The subsequent restoration of the King to the Spanish throne led to an attempt to unwind the local autonomy and rights that had been enjoyed in the Vice-Royalty of New Spain. A royalist officer, Colonel Agustín de Iturbide assumed leadership of the autonomy movement that advocated the independence of Mexico under a Spanish prince as constitutional monarch, continuing within the broad Spanish Nation.

Independence was formally declared in September 1821, and when no foreign prince accepted the throne, Iturbide became Emperor Agustín. [Figure 23] His downfall after only a year and a half and the subsequent revival in 1863 of the concept of a foreign born Emperor, Maximilian were marked by changes to the stylisation of the arms of Mexico on its flag. [Figure 24]



**Figure 23**  
Mexico 1821 - 1823



**Figure 24**  
Mexico 1864 - 67

Napoleon's conquest of Portugal led to King John VI transferring his court to Rio de Janeiro in 1808 and subsequently Brazil was recognised as an equal realm within the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil and the Algarves. When the King returned to Portugal, the Crown Prince stayed, and when local autonomy was threatened in September 1822, he declared himself King of an independent



Brazil, and shortly thereafter, Emperor Pedro I. A green flag with a yellow lozenge bearing the royal arms represented the new nation. [Figure 25] By 1889 the conflict between federalist republicans and the centralist monarchy resulted in a coup which deposed Emperor Pedro II.



**Figure 25**  
**Brazil 1822 - 1889**

Haiti also experienced flag changes as a consequence of the assumption of power and later falls of Emperor Jacques Dessalines (1804-1806), King Henri Christophe (1811-1820) and Emperor Faustin Soulouque (1849-1859).

### Constitutions

The Constitutions of twelve Latin American countries refer to their *Símbolos Patrios*, including the national flag, though only one provides a detailed description. Most only state that the flag is established by law, though the Cuban constitution eloquently phrases the position as "the national symbols are those that have presided over one hundred years of the Cuban fight for independence... the flag of the solitary star." [16]

A constitution defines the institutions, practices and principles of a system of government and on a number of occasions, the adoption of a new constitution has been marked by the adoption of a new flag. Sometimes the flag change has been minor, such as a change in name of the country on the coat of arms on the flag. [17] The current flags of Dominican Republic, Peru and Uruguay were adopted at the same time as the constitutions that established the governments for the newly independent countries. [Figures 22, 26 and 27] Their flags have become part of the nation's institutions and ideals, and their flags have remained substantially unchanged despite the turmoil of political and social change that has led to other constitutional details changing over time.



**Figure 26**  
**Peru 1825**



**Figure 27**  
**Uruguay 1830**

Other examples from the mid-nineteenth century show how a new design for the national flag has symbolised the adoption of constitutions that mark major changes in political and power structures. Between 1848 and 1852, Liberal governments came to power in three Central American countries, representing a break with the Conservative political traditions that had little changed since the break-up of the federation. Liberal President Castro Madriz formally established the Republic of Costa Rica and a new flag, adopted in September 1848, added a wide red stripe to the historical blue and white triband, together with new arms. [Figure 28] Creating a flag in the French colours was an acknowledgement of Liberal influences of the French Second Republic.

In April 1854, Liberal President Fruto Chamorro also signalled a break with the Conservative past with a new constitution for the Republic of Nicaragua, symbolised by the adoption of a yellow, white and pale red flag with new arms. [18] [Figure 29] The meaning of these colours is unknown, but perhaps they are an allusion to the red, white and yellow flag of the Spanish galleons of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries



**Figure 28**  
Costa Rica 1848



**Figure 29**  
Nicaragua 1854

In modern times, the rule of Haitian President François "Papa Doc" Duvalier was tightened by the adoption a new constitution in May 1964 and the return to the red and black vertical flag first used in 1804 by Jean-Jacques Dessalines. The new flag [Figure 30] was asserting the original Dessalines principle of the Haitian revolution. The black reflected the early Duvalier ideology of pride in African heritage, freeing blacks from the economic dominance of the mulatto and making material sacrifices to achieve a national spiritual revolution. [19] The traditional coat of arms was unchanged except to show the panoply of flags in the new colours and, perhaps as a portent of the legacy of the Duvalier regime, the Phrygian cap was deleted.



**Figure 30**  
Haiti 1964 - 86



## Political

Caudillo is a Spanish word to describe the archetypal political figure in Spanish America, particularly in the first century after independence. He was usually a man of common birth from regional areas, had risen to power, frequently having had a military career leading to political power as a populist and often an autocratic leader. Political power rested almost exclusively in the hands of the economic and social elites, but there were a number of conflicting interests, with issues common to many of the countries.

Argentina is a good example of the struggle between centralised power and regionalism. The national government of the United Provinces of Río de la Plata collapsed in 1820, not being fully restored until 1862. During that period the Province of Buenos Aires represented the nation in international affairs, whilst the Argentine Confederation of 1831 was a loose union of the provinces. Buenos Aires continued to use the blue and white triband, whilst a darker blue flag with the addition of four Phrygian caps was designated as the naval ensign of the Confederation.[20] [Figures 31-32]



**Figure 31**  
Buenos Aires 1822 - 1862



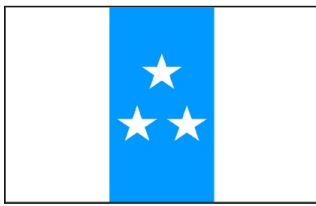
**Figure 32**  
Argentine Confederation 1833 - 1852

When the Empire of Brazil was replaced by the Republic of the United States of Brazil in November 1889, initially a flag consisting of thirteen green and yellow stripes and twenty-one stars on a blue canton was proposed. [Figure 33] This federalist flag however only lasted four days, being replaced with the current flag type, more reflective of the centralist and conservative provisional government.

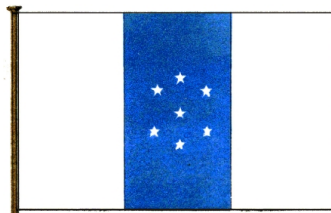


**Figure 33**  
Republic of United States of Brazil 1889

The other main struggle was between conservatives and liberals, and the issue came together with regional rivalry in Ecuador in March 1845. Liberals from Guayaquil ousted Conservative President Juan José Flores, who had ruled Ecuador from Quito for most of the period from independence. Inspired by the 1820 independence flag of Guayaquil, a new vertical blue and white flag was adopted. Initially with three stars, the flag was changed to seven stars to represent the provinces of Ecuador.[Figures 34-35] The 1859 loss of Amazonian territory in the south to the occupying Peruvian army outraged the Conservatives, who seized power in Ecuador. The Mirandan colours were restored in September 1860 with the observation by President García Moreno that the treason of the Treaty of Mapasingue (signed January 1860 recognising Peru's territorial claims) had humiliated the bicoloured flag with an indelible stain. He declared "that the old Ecuadorian flag, sealed with the blood of the heroes, always is consecrated like the standard of the people and pride of our national glories." [21] [Figure 36]



**Figure 34**  
Ecuador March 1845

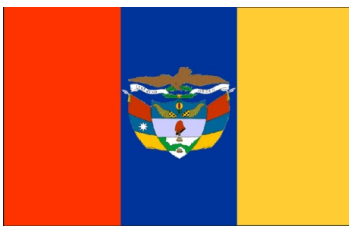


**Figure 35**  
Ecuador November 1845



**Figure 36**  
Ecuador 1860

In the Republic of New Granada during the period from 1834 to 1861 six flag changes occurred as rival political forces and the military reflected their differences in four changes to the coat of arms and consequently the flag.[22] [Figures 37-42] However, by November 1861 the country name of Colombia and the horizontal striped flag had been re-established and it has remained unchanged through the subsequent political turbulence of the country. Indeed it seems that the very instability of the past and the removal of the coat of arms from the flag encouraged the subsequent flag stability, notwithstanding that the constitutional and political turmoil continued unabated.



**Figure 37**  
New Granada 1834



**Figure 38**  
New Granada April 1854



**Figure 39**  
New Granada Dec. 1854



**Figure 40**  
New Granada 1855



**Figure 41**  
New Granada July 1861



**Figure 42**  
Colombia Nov. 1861

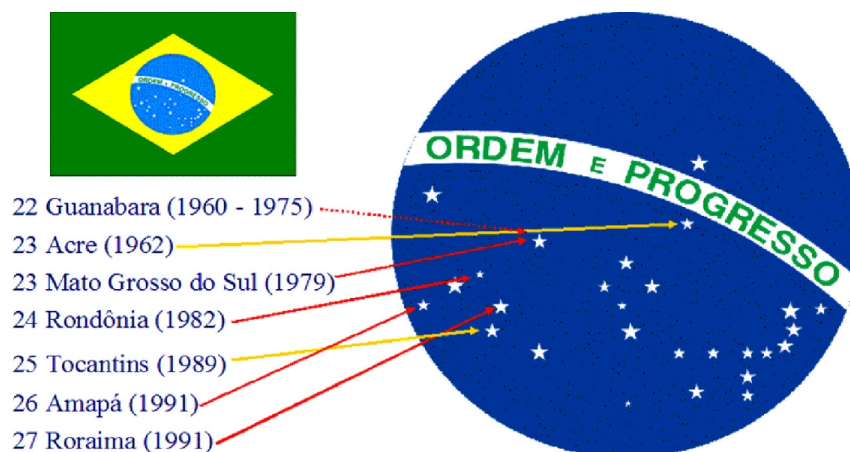
In Nicaragua, the long years of dictatorial power of the Somoza regime ended in a revolution in 1979, which brought to power the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). Dual flag usage developed, with the FSLN red and black flag effectively becoming a second national flag until President Daniel Ortega lost power in 1990 after a democratic election.[23] **[Figure 43]**



**Figure 43**  
Nicaragua 1979 - 90

### State Changes

The three changes in the flag of Brazil from 1960 to 1992 to reflect changes in the number of states and territories constituting the Federative Republic of Brazil are well known. However the changes were not automatic, with the creation of the new states of Acre in 1962 and Rondonia not being recognised for 6 years and 10 years respectively. **[Figure 44]**



**Figure 44**  
Brazil 1960 - 92

Less well known are the variations of the El Salvador flag from 1865 to 1912 where the flag of 9 stripes and 9 stars changed into flags with 11, 12, 13 and 14 stars as departments were created. **[Figures 45 - 47]**



Figure 45  
El Salvador Apr 1865



Figure 46  
El Salvador Feb 1869



Figure 47  
El Salvador 1877 - 1912

Some other flags or coats of arms on flags have also changed to reflect changes in the number of political sub-divisions. An interesting classification question arose in the case of Bolivia's change of arms in 1961. The number of stars on the arms increased from 9 to 10, ostensibly to recognise the department of Pando, though its true political nature can be seen when it is noted that Pando was made a department in 1938. The 10<sup>th</sup> star actually represents the department of Litoral, which had been lost to Chile in 1879 during the War of the Pacific.

#### Design Changes / Causes not identified.

The last category of change in my analysis concerns changes due solely to an intent to improve the design of the flag, with no overt external reason. By its nature, this category also includes circumstances where the reason for the change is not recorded in the available vexillological material or the cause is not apparent from a review of the political or constitutional events happening at about the time of the flag change.

The best example of such design changes is Mexico. The changes in Mexico's flag reflect my view that vexillology is a form of art, more than they support a socio-political causal relationship behind the flag changes that are observed in other parts of Latin America. Mexico adopted a national flag on 2 November 1821, shortly after it had declared independence and its core design has remained unchanged since. However there have been nine official variations in the detail and styling of the Coat of Arms. [Figures 48 - 54] Whilst the early changes are based on the switch in constitutional status between Empire and Republic, each of the subsequent changes appear not to be overtly linked to any politically significant changes. The stylisation changed between the French-influenced open-winged eagle and the indigenous eagle in profile, with the current version being introduced as part of the lead up to the Olympic Games of 1968.



Figure 48  
Mexico 1823 - 67



Figure 49  
Mexico 1864

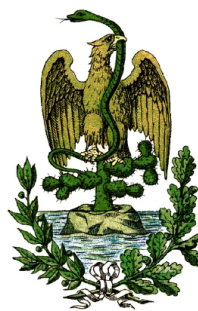


Figure 50  
Mexico 1881



Figure 51  
Mexico 1899





**Figure 52**  
**Mexico 1918**



**Figure 53**  
**Mexico 1934**



**Figure 54**  
**Mexico 1968**

The introduction of the Spanish red and yellow colours into the flag of Guatemala in 1851 highlights the difficulty in categorising a flag change, in the absence of a specific contemporary explanation. I noted earlier that between 1848 and 1852, Liberal governments came to power in three Central American countries and this was reflected by changes away from the former federal form of flag for Costa Rica and Nicaragua. In the case of Guatemala, Conservative governments continued in power during the relevant years. However, it is possible to hypothesise that President Mariano Paredes wished to reinforce the Conservative's respect for tradition by going back to the earlier heritage of the Spanish colonial era with the addition of the red, white and yellow flag of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century shipping ensign. Whilst it is possible that there was a political dimension to the 1851 flag [Figure 55], the change in 1858 appears solely to be due to a desire to incorporate the Spanish colours more clearly than the co-joined flags approach of the initial design. [Figure 56]



**Figure 55**  
**Guatemala 1851 - 58**



**Figure 56**  
**Guatemala 1858 - 71**

The other examples with which I would like to finish my sampling of flag design changes are the early flags of Peru. Peru shows an interesting progression from the complex to the familiar. Upon Independence, Peru adopted the flag of the liberation army under the command of General José de San Martín. Divided diagonally, or to use heraldic language; per saltire white and red, with a coat of arms, the flag proved difficult to make. [Figure 10] The colours were retained and a horizontal red and white striped flag with a red sun was adopted. [Figure 57] Presumably, this design was inspired by the Belgrano flag, but using the Peruvian colours. At sea, the new flag appeared to be the Spanish ensign, so the stripes were changed to vertical. [Figure 58] When the Constituent Congress met to determine a new constitution, a further change to the flag occurred, with the sun emblem being replaced by a newly adopted coat of arms. [Figure 26] All these changes clearly reflect the search for an effective and practical flag design, which, when found, has well stood the test of time, even with inclusion of a coat of arms, a device vulnerable to change in other countries.



Figure 57  
Peru March 1822



Figure 58  
Peru May 1822

### Statistical Analysis

Interesting as it is to delve into the history of each country's flags, the purpose of this paper is to try and identify patterns in the changes, which allow us to perceive trends which generally applied to most countries in the region. My research identified a total of 136 distinct flag changes from independence for the 20 countries in Latin America. [Chart 1 When flag changes occurred] Arranged sequentially in a way that shows when each flag was adopted and how long it continued in use, Chart 1 can be regarded as a kind of DNA pattern for the flags of Latin America.

## When flag changes occurred

Length of each box shows period flag in use

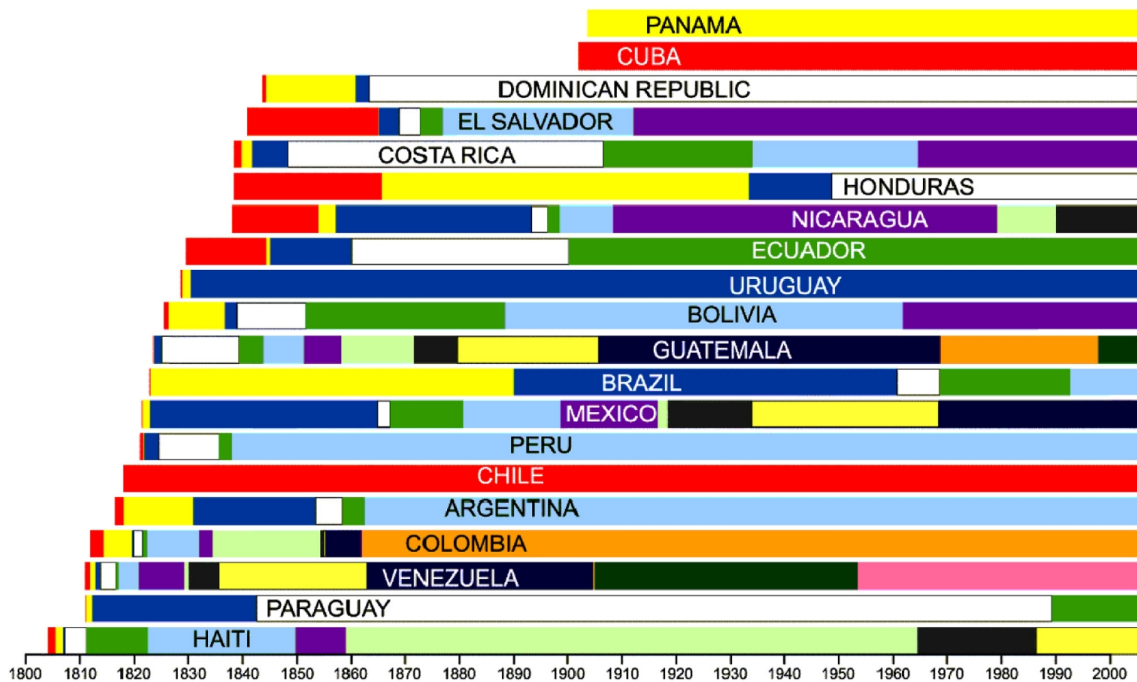


Chart 1



There have, in fact been more flag changes if full regard is had for the changes in flag usage as between civil and state versions of national flags on land and sea, variations in the detail of drawings of coats of arms, changes in the specifications of proportions and colours and the multitude of unofficial variants caused by indifferent quality in the manufacture of flags. However, I have in most instances only recognised these minor changes in specification when they corresponded to a specific government decree changing the official exemplar.

What are the messages that can be derived from this DNA? These 136 flag changes have been identified and these are analysed as to:

- Cause
- Type of change
- Period from Independence
- Longevity of flag

The analysis of the various flag examples has categorised the flags into eight broad causes, and these are illustrated in Chart 2 Causes of flag changes.

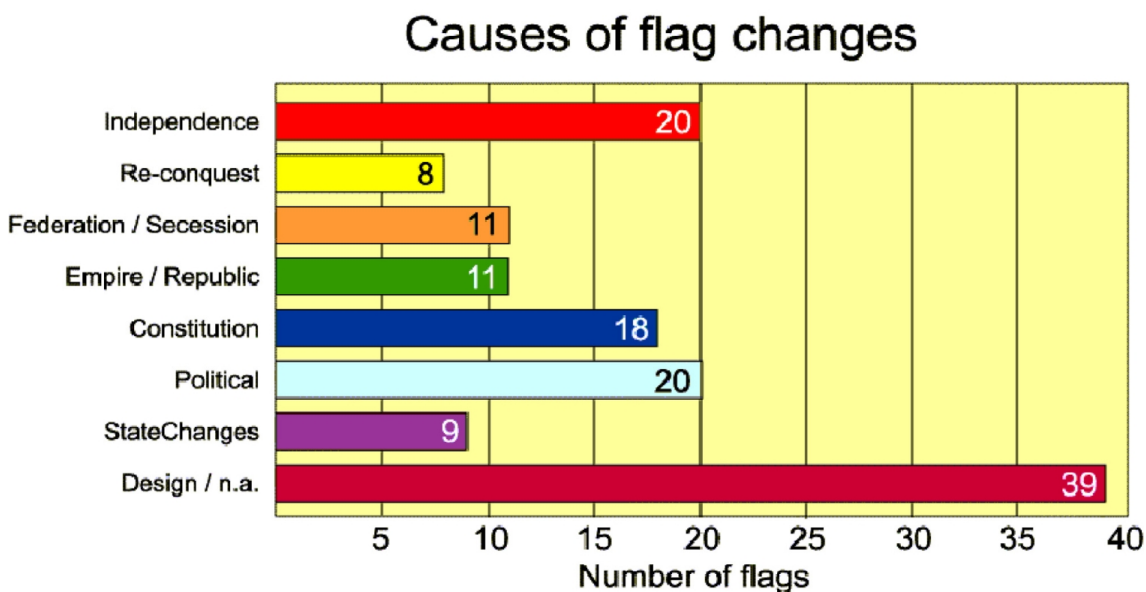


Chart 2

The graph shows that

- Independence was the cause for 20 flags to be adopted;
- 8 flags arose because of the territorial re-conquest by the colonial power and subsequent restoration of independence;

- 11 flags were due to the process of countries joining federations, separating or being reunited as a single nation. Note however, that the separation of the Central American countries was treated as their effective independence date;
- 11 flags were adopted due to the conversion of a country from, or to a monarchy;
- 18 flags are associated with other constitutional changes;
- 20 flags have a clearly identifiable political nexus, though for some, on the evidence to date, the connections is circumstantial,
- 9 flags were modified to reflect changes in the composition of a federal country; and
- the largest category, with 39 flags were changed solely for design purposes, or the underlying cause was not able to be identified. Many of these flags would include a political element in the reason for change, but they were not emblematic of a change of government or an explicit political purpose.

A further, more detailed analysis indicated that there was no significant pattern as between the various causes of flag change and the time that each flag existed before a further change occurred.

The other dimension that was analysed was the broad type of flag, specifically was the flag of a new design type or a modification of the existing flag. [Chart 3 Types of design changes]

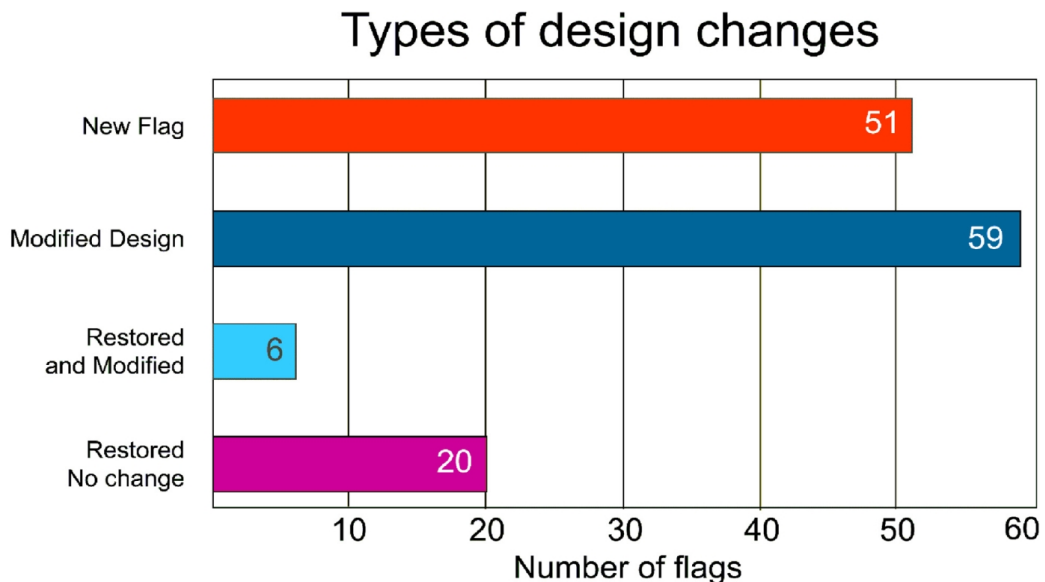


Chart 3

To the extent that the flag change was that the usage of a former flag was restored without modification, the number of different core flags is only 116. But many of the flag changes were relatively minor, so there are materially fewer new design types.

Categorising the flag changes by the extent of the change in design shows that:

- 51 flags can be regarded as new designs, though this would include flags where there were elements of evolutionary design continuity;
- 59 flags were modifications of the existing flag;
- 6 flags were former flags re-adopted, but with some design modifications; and
- 20 flags that were restored, unaltered.

That 37.5% of the flags of Latin America over the period were sufficiently different as to represent new flag types was a little surprising, given the general perception of no or little change in the region's flags. Again, there was no significant pattern as between the various types of flag change and the time that each flag existed before a further change occurred.

However, when the flags are categorised by time, some interesting trends emerge. I chose to categorise the flag changes by the period that had elapsed from independence. This allowed each country's chronology of flag changes to be equalised by reference to the stages of nation building, disregarding whether independence occurred early or late. [Chart 4 Rate of change of flags]

### Rate of Change of Flags

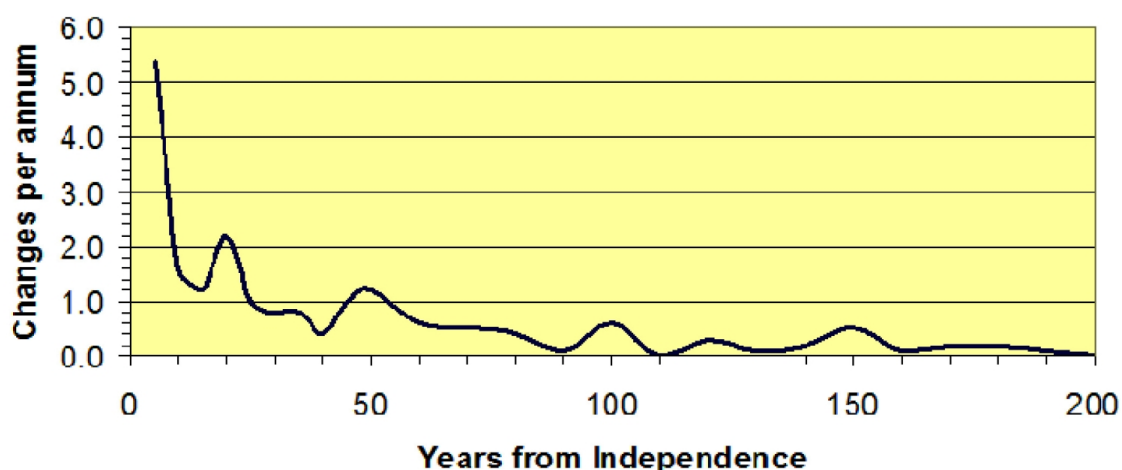


Chart 4

The analysis of the rate of change of flags revealed the following patterns:

- 27 flags were adopted within 5 year of independence, of which 11 had been adopted within 1 year. This represented an average of about 1 per 2½ months in the first years after independence. Expressed another way, on average, each country changed its flag each 5½ years.
- A fairly constant rate of flag change then tended to occur, with 51 flag changes occurring over the next 45 years. This was an average of about 1 per 10½ months, or on average each country changed its flag each 17½ years.
- After 50 years of independence had passed, the rate of change of flags further slowed with only 39 flag changes in the periods from 50 years to up to 200 years from independence. This was an average of about 1 per 4 years in the period longer than 50 years from independence, or, on average each country changed its flag each 75 years.

When the causes of changes of flag are overlaid upon this broad chronology, then some patterns do exist. The impacts of re-conquest, federation and independence being restored all applied within 20 years of independence. Constitutional changes leading to flag changes occurred mainly within the first 50 years of independence, whilst political changes have been a fairly constant factor over time. Design changes without any overt political cause were most prevalent within the first 5 years of independence and after 50 years of independence.

If the types of design change are tracked over time, then the analysis shows that completely new designs represented about 40% of flag changes which occurred in the first 30 years, but only 10% of later flag change. Modified flags equalled 40% of flag changes in the first 30 years and 75% of later flag changes.

The last dimension of my statistical analysis was to examine what was the period of usage of the flags after they had changed.[Chart 5 How long flag stay unchanged]

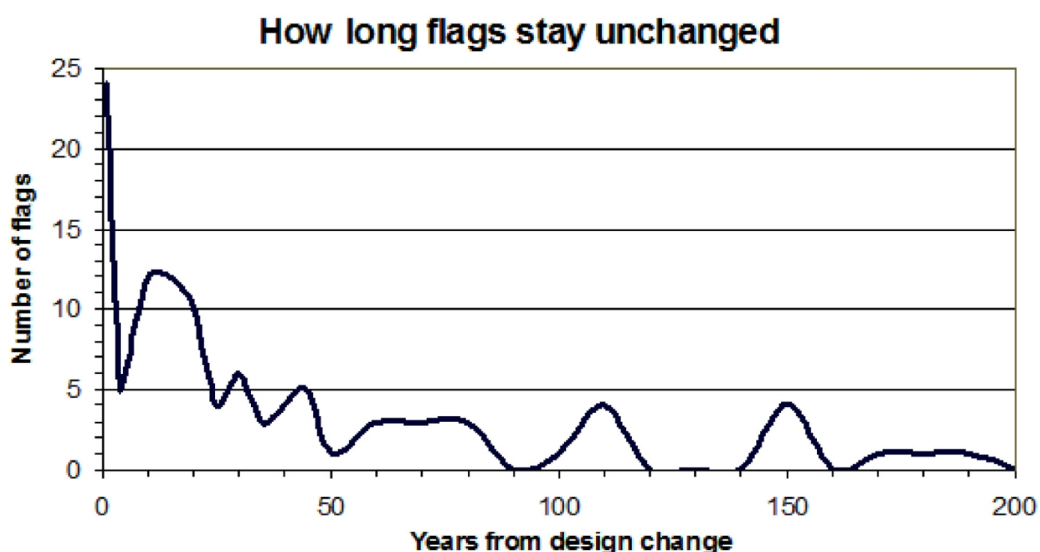


Chart 5

On average, each flag in Latin America was in use for 25 years. However, behind that average is a more complex pattern. 70% of the flags had a life of less than the 25 year average, 20% of the flags were in use for over 25 years, and the remaining 11 flags are (or have been) in use uninterrupted for over a 100 years with not even minor design changes.

## Conclusions

Combining this statistical analysis with the more detailed examples of flag changes, it is now possible to draw together some conclusions about flags in Latin America.

- Firstly, I think all can agree that there is a far richer history of flag usage and design in Latin America than is widely realised.
- The available information outside of the continent is generally superficial and has little new material. Some recent internet material does provide new information, but it has highly variable reliability and is prone to contradiction.[24] Historical records and antiquarian flag books and charts are equally inaccurate and incomplete, whilst current official government sources rarely go beyond the basic facts and repeat the old ideological design interpretations.
- I am not aware of any similar survey of the flags of Latin America as a whole - I believe my approach provides new insights as to the trends and patterns of flag changes. I have tried to investigate the field a little beyond the same old goat track that most vexillological authors have traversed.
- My research and analysis establishes a strong correlation between the flag chronology and the general history of Latin America and of the respective individual countries. There are some excellent one-country flag reviews, but much more needs to be done, and what has been done needs to be more accessible.
- The overarching trend of frequent flag changes in the first 20 years of independence, and subsequently evolutionary modifications of a constant flag type reinforces the important role of flags and other *Símbolos Patrios* in modern Latin American political and social life. The flag provides an element of stability in a sea of change and occasional turmoil. Irrespective of the legitimacy of the path to power of a regime, its claims to be the rightful ruling elite are assisted by the maintenance of the core national values, including the flag, until the inefficiencies of its rule lead to another usurper of power, or in recent times a move to a genuine democratic system.
- The tendency for a number of countries to have retained, or returned to the core flag type at independence, notwithstanding that the core flag design can be the same as neighbouring countries and one-time federal partners, is significant. Most commentators seem to focus on some sort of historical inertia, or continuing regional fraternity.[25] However to me, it suggests that the legitimacy of rule within a country that is provided by invoking the flags of the war of independence and early nation building [26] are a more powerful and continuing symbolic purpose than any perceived need to highlight the transitory merits of the contemporary political

elite by risking change or merely to increase the relative distinctiveness of the national flag in an international context.

- The reversion to former flag designs after a politically inspired flag change suggests that where a flag design has become symbolic of a particular political persuasion, then the national flag can fail in its primary purpose of representing the nation as a whole, rather than the ruling regime.
- The statistical analysis and specific examples show that there is a large proportion of Latin American flags where the political and constitutional circumstances of the historical time have been symbolised in changes in the national flag. However, a myriad of other examples could be described where the same or similar political and historical circumstances have existed and the flag has not changed. This is the paradox of my statistical analysis the political events that have caused flags to change in the past no longer induce symbolic changes. I think the answer lies in the power of continuity of usage to prevent change. In the first 50 years of independence, in some countries, flag designs changed as a by-product of political change, whilst in the later years the national flag seems more significant than the contemporary political issues.
- A majority of Latin American flag changes of the past century have been design changes with no political causality, mostly changing the artistic rendition of the arms on the flag, or similar minor evolutionary modifications. They indicate a willingness to reflect modernisation of society, without altering the traditions of the *Simbolos Patrios*. Such modest design changes may be part of a wider political agenda, but still represent a very cautious approach.
- There are also, I believe, a range of deeper social and political characteristics about Latin American society which have contributed to the modern stability of Latin American flag designs. In starting my research I had hoped to obtain sufficient knowledge and insights to be able to postulate some hypotheses that would enable vexillologists to better understand these flags in a socio-political context. However, as an English speaker in a distant country with no Hispanic tradition, it would be pretentious of me to do so, lest I betray the superficiality that has marked so many past writings about Latin America. I can only hope that my paper will stimulate local vexillologists to further study, in a socio-political context, the rich flag heritage I am pleased to have researched in the past year.
- My paper has, I believe demonstrated that the pattern and specifics of flag changes show strong politically symbolic links at key periods of history with the vexillological history of Latin America. The study of the region's flags needs to go beyond the relatively superficial analysis of the design elements, similarities and creation myths of flags in the region. Latin American flag heritage is far more than legends about flamingos and sun bursts on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May.[27]
- In conclusion, I note that the mass displays of national flags in recent political protest rallies from Venezuela to Bolivia indicate that the respective national flags are now regarded as the flags of the nation and the people, whereas in the past, the focus on the state flag versions suggests that the national flag has been the emblem of the ruling elites and government. The modern prominence of flag usage in many countries demonstrates that flags continue to be an integral part of the national consciousness and passion of Latin Americans.



### Illustration Sources:

- Figure 1 All illustrations not otherwise listed are drawings by Ralph Kelly
- Figure 3 Kelly, primarily based on drawing of arms by Lucien Philippe in "Flags of Colombia" by Lucien Philippe, *Flagmaster* Issue 15)
- Figure 11 Spanish ensign of 1785, as no new flag was initially adopted upon declaration of independence. (Source: "Album des Pavillons, Guidons, Flammes de toutes les puissances maritimes", by M.A. Le Gras, Au Dépôt des Cartes et Plan de la Marine, 1858, Paris)
- Figure 12 Image modified from Le Gras
- Figure 16 Kelly, primarily based on drawings of arms by Lucien Philippe in "Flags of Costa Rica" by Lucien Philippe, *Flagmaster* Issue 14
- Figure 17 Kelly, primarily based on drawing in *Flagmaster* Issue 14
- Figure 19 Kelly, primarily based on drawing in "Flags of Bolivia and Peru", by J.G. Fuentes, *The Flag Bulletin*, Volume 57
- Figure 22 "Flags of Maritime Nations", United States Department of the Navy, 1889, Washington
- Figure 23 Kelly, primarily based on drawing by Alfred Znamierowski in "Symbols of Mexico", by Teodoro Amerlinck, *The Flag Bulletin*, Volume 97, originally a lecture at the 9<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Vexillology, 1981, Ottawa
- Figure 24 Kelly, primarily based on drawing in *The Flag Bulletin*, Volume 97
- Figure 25 Le Gras
- Figure 26 Le Gras
- Figure 27 United States Department of the Navy, 1889
- Figure 28 Le Gras
- Figure 29 Kelly, primarily based on drawing by Roberto Breschi in "Bandiere: Passato e Presente" at [www.rbvex.it](http://www.rbvex.it)
- Figure 30 Kelly, based on digital enhancement of drawing of arms in "National Heraldry of the World" by Geoffrey Briggs, J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd, London, 1973
- Figure 31 Le Gras
- Figure 35 Le Gras
- Figure 36 "Flags of all Nations", British Admiralty, 1889
- Figure 37 Kelly, primarily based on drawing by Jaume Ollé in "Republic of New Granada (1831-1856)" on Flags of the World web-site
- Figure 38 Kelly, primarily based on drawing by Ollé
- Figure 39 Kelly, primarily based on digital enhancement of drawing of arms by Lucien Philippe in "Flags of Colombia - 2" by Lucien Philippe, *Flagmaster* Issue 16

Figure 40 Le Gras

Figure 42 British Admiralty, 1889

Figure 48 Le Gras

Figure 49 Kelly, digital enhancement of drawing by Alfred Znamierowski in *The Flag Bulletin*, Volume 97

Figure 50 United States Navy, 1899

Figure 51 Digitally modified by Kelly from image in collection of Gerald Naughton, original source unidentified

Figure 52 "Flaggenbuch (Fig. B.)" published by German Kriegsmarine 1939, Berlin

Figure 53 "Flags of all Nations (B.R. 20(1)) Volume I", Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1955, London

Figure 55 Le Gras

Figure 56 United States Navy, 1876

Figure 57 Kelly, sun from flag of Peruvian Rear Admiral in United States Navy, 1899

#### Endnotes:

- [1] "Flags of the Americas" by Elizabeth W. King, *The National Geographic Magazine*, May 1949, Volume XCV Number 5, pages 633-657, National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C.
- [2] There are nine minor differences between today's specification and 1949 drawings Honduras (positioning of the stars), Mexico, Costa Rica and Venezuela (drawings of shield), Bolivia (10 stars on shield), Brazil (27 stars on globe), Guatemala (size of shield), Haiti (drawing and size of arms) and Paraguay (revised shield)
- [3] "Flags of the World" by Byron McCandless and Gilbert Grosvenor, *The National Geographic Magazine*, April 1917, Volume 32 Number 4, pages 281-420, National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C.
- [4] The term "Latin America" is usually regarded as the collective description of those countries in North, Central and South America and the Caribbean which are independent and were formally under the colonial power of Spain, Portugal or France.
- [5] "Why Flags Change", by Ralph Kelly, *Crux Australis*, Volume 8/2 Number 34, April-June 1992, pages 59-60, Flag Society of Australia, Melbourne.
- [6] "The Future of Vexillology", by Dr. Whitney Smith, *The Flag Bulletin*, Volume XXI: 1/92, January-February 1982, page 11, The Flag Research Centre, Winchester

- [7] Some sources claim the Francia flag was used from 1826 to 1842, though it seems more plausible that it was only used in 1811 when José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia was part of the Junta, rather than from mid way through his period as Supreme Dictator, which had commenced in 1814.
- [8] Initially called United Provinces of the Centre of America from 10 July 1823 to 10 April 1825. The Federation progressively dissolved with the exit of Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Honduras in 1838, Guatemala in 1839 and had effectively dissolved before the formal exit of El Salvador on 2 February 1841.
- [9] For the purposed of my analysis, I have followed the flag history of Guatemala and Venezuela and regarded the separation of the other countries in the two federations as their effective independence dates. I have ignored the four subsequent attempts to revive the Central American Federation as they were all short-lived and did not appear to supplant the continued use of the national flags of the member states, though Federal flags did exist. These were: Confederation of Central America 17 July 1842 -1 December 1844 (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua); Federation of Central America 13 October 1852-10 November 1852 (El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua); Republic of Central America 1 November 1898 - 30 November 1898 (El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua); Federation of Central America 13 June 1921 - 7 February 1922 (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras)
- [10] The Republic of Colombia from 1819 to 1831 is now known as "Gran Colombia", though this was not part of its official title.
- [11] Bogotá (capital of Cundinamarca) and Cartagena were the main cities of the United Provinces of New Granada, which approximates modern Colombia.
- [12] The Audiencia of Quito was initially called the State of the South of Colombia and became the State of Ecuador upon Independence in 1830. The territory included the former Provinces of Guayaquil and Cuenca.
- [13] Peru was divided North and South under the influence of Marshall Santa Cruz. The State of North Peru retained the Peruvian flag and arms. The State of South Peru was created on 17 March 1836 and adopted a flag with a vertical red stripe at the hoist and the field was divided horizontally green over white. A golden Inca sun with four gold stars was placed on the red stripe. See "Flags of Bolivia and Peru", by J.G. Fuentes, *The Flag Bulletin*, Volume XIV: 5/57, September - October 1975, pages 122-40, The Flag Research Centre, Winchester.
- [14] Royalist forces defeated the republican army and Spanish rule was restored in July 1812. The republican forces regrouped and were joined by an army led by Simón Bolívar. Bolívar re-established the republic in August 1813, but Bolívar was defeated and went into exile in June 1814. Bolívar returned to eastern Venezuela in December 1816, re-established control of Caracas in May 1817, but civil war continued until June 1821 when the Spanish and royalist forces were finally defeated.
- [15] Quote from "Testimonio de la sesión celebrada por Ayuntamiento de Mexico, el 19 de Julio e 1808", quoted in "The Independence of Spanish America" by Jaime E. Rodriguez O., pages 53-54, Cambridge Latin American Studies, 1998, Cambridge, U.K. Francisco de Goya painted two portraits of King Fernando VII in 1814, both of which showed him wearing the blue and white sash of the Order of Charles III.

- [16] "Símbolos Patrios" in "Análisis comprativo de constituciones de los regímenes presidenciales", Base de Datos Políticos de las Americas, University y Organisation of American States, Georgetown, 1998. The Dominican Republic constitution fully describes the flag and shield. Simplified descriptions exist for Peru and Venezuela.
- [17] Venezuela in February 1954 changed the inscription on the ribbon below the arms from United States of Venezuela to Republic of Venezuela. Colombia in November 1831 changed words around the shield from Republic of Colombia to State of New Granada.
- [18] Sources conflict on the description of this flag. The flag is described by Emil Dreyer as being "three equal and horizontal stripes of (from top to bottom) white, yellow and red (escarlata). The arms consisted of a circle with a volcano between to oceans, the whole surrounded by a wreath of laurel." "Flags of Central America" by Emil Dreyer, page 1 of Research section of *Flag Institute Bulletin* Serial: 004, May 1978 (subsequently re-designated as *Flagmaster* Issue 22). Roberto Breschi arranges the colours from the top as yellow, white and "an ink of problematic definition "madreperla" (mother of pearl), "Bandiere: Passato e Presente", 2003-04 at [www.rbvex.it/ameripag/nicaragua.html](http://www.rbvex.it/ameripag/nicaragua.html).
- [19] See also "Current Flag Usage in Haiti" by Whitney Smith, *Report of the Third International Congress of Vexillology*, published in *The Flag Bulletin*, Volume X: 2-3/37, Spring-Summer 1971, pages 179-186, The Flag Research Centre, Winchester.
- [20] "Flags in Argentina" poster by Gustav Tracchia, privately published, New York, 2000 at page 10 of companion booklet.
- [21] "La Bandera del Ecuador" on website of Ministry of External Relations of Ecuador, [mmrree.gov.ec/gobierno/bandera1.htm](http://mmrree.gov.ec/gobierno/bandera1.htm). Ecuador continues to claim the lost territory, with the claim extending to the Marañón River. Most of the claimed territory is in the Peruvian department of Loreto. Peru and Colombia had disputed ownership of the area since independence. The area had been controlled by Colombia from 1829 to 1859, when Peruvian army captured the territory. The Treaty of Mapasingue was signed between Peru and Guillermo Franco who claimed to represent Ecuador. However, Franco was only in control of part of Ecuador and his capital, Guayaquil was under Peruvian military occupation. A major military conflict occurred between Ecuador and Peru in 1941 and fighting has also occurred in 1981, 1991 and 1995.
- [22] "Flags of Colombia" by Lucien Philippe, translated by William Crampton, *Flagmaster* Issue 16, Winter 1975, The Flag Institute.
- [23] Decree No.66 dated 13 September 1979 issued by the Government Junta required oaths to both the national and Sandinista flags. Jeffrey Sutter, "Sandinista Flags: Part II" in *The Flag Bulletin*, Volume XXII: 5/101, September - October 1983, pages 228-236, The Flag Research Centre, Winchester.
- [24] I do however have to acknowledge that the research for this paper could not have been achieved but for the wealth of information on the Flags of the World site. In addition, the World Statesmen website ([www.worldstatesmen.org](http://www.worldstatesmen.org)) was invaluable in identifying many of the political and constitutional changes that corresponded to the timing of flag changes. Roberto Breschi's Bandiere website was also very helpful, particularly in helping to clarify conflicting data from other sources.

- [25] This is exemplified by Jos Poels in his "Illustrated Guide to Flags" (PRC Publishing, 2003, London) at page 95 where he states "All three states recall their common history in their national flag; nowadays they all make use of the colors and pattern introduced by De Miranda."
- [26] The same point has been made by Professor P.C. Lux-Worm in "Revolutions? Si! ¡New Flags? ¡No!", *The Flag Bulletin*, Volume XXX: 1/139, January-February 1991, pages 22-24 He states: "That flag [the flag finally identified with national independence] has been associated with the nation , not the government or a specific regime. Thus not only those in power but opposition parties, pretenders, and revolutionaries - even when strongly ideological all cling to the national flag as a symbol of legitimacy."
- [27] The red and white flags of Peru are claimed to originate from the favourable omen of flock of flamingos taking to the air being sighted by General José de San Martín upon his arrival in Peru. See "Flags of Bolivia and Peru", by J.G. Fuentes, Op. Cit. at page 126. The Sun of May on the Argentine flag is claimed to originate from the favourable omen of the sun appearing from behind the clouds on the day that the Spanish Viceroy transferred power in Buenos Aires to a local junta. See "Vexillological questions posed to The Flag Research Center", by Dr. Whitney Smith, *The Flag Bulletin*, Volume XXXVIII: 1/185, January-February 1999, page 20.



**Ralph Kelly** is an Australian vexillologist from Sydney. He has presented papers at four previous International Congresses based on his research into the history of Australian flags, his involvement in the Australian flag debate and general interest in world flags. At Stockholm he put forward his perspective that vexillology is more akin to art than science.

Ralph is Treasurer and a former President of the Flag Society of Australia. He is a regular contributor of articles and illustrations for "Crux Australis". Ralph is also a Director of Ausflag where he provides a vexillological perspective on that entity's promotional and political lobbying for a new Australian national flag. By profession, he is an investment banker and company director.

