Alexandru Dan Mandru:
Moral Concepts surrounding Flags - an Analysis

Abstract: *Starting with the first Latin vexilli, and ending with the modern, diagonal-lined ensigns, flags have always contained a heavy load of morality and philosophy, bearing symbols of great importance for their using body. This is the reason why the burning of flags is considered today as an act of great defying, against the entity which uses the flag. This paper contains a research of how are the moral principles reflected in flags, the manner in which an idea can be vexillologically illustrated within a piece of cloth.*

1. Introduction: Essential Values and Principles reflected in Flags

The existence of a flag is a consequence of a certain degree of sovereignty, independence or autonomy. Thus, a certain degree of self-reliance of the using body (whether it is a country, a territory or a corporation) is asserted within the simple bearing of the flag. This paper presents a new approach, regarding the moral content existing in flags. The range of moral concepts which will be analysed encompasses values, principles and abstract ideas, which find a way of concretisation with their appearance in flags.

The colours tell much about the meaning of a flag. They can mean patriotism, the blood shed for the fatherland or love for one's territory (red), or the connection with nature, faith, even mineral wealth (green).

Nationalism is an important element in flags. The flags which express a nationalist attitude are charged with traditional colours, national symbols, etc. they can't be used otherwise than as a national symbol. One should make a difference between a flag which, being flown, and heavily used, has become a national symbol, like the United States of America, and an essentially nationalist flag, which contains elements unique to the people or territory that uses it, like Canada.

For many years, flags have been used as symbols of revolt and defiance. The bearing of a flag or another could have meant a position towards a certain political regime, a certain view over one territory, etc., so the defiant flags – symbols of revolt or secession can help us understand the vexillological phenomena better.

One of the most encountered moral concepts in flags is liberty. It can be understood in its several philosophical categories, depending on the using body's history and collective psychology.

The forms of government and political ideologies bear a heavy load in some flags. We shall see that there are many common characteristics which reunite flags of republics, of monarchies, of fundamentalist, far-right or far-left regimes.

Common history and acknowledgement between countries is a characteristic often encountered, depending on a very important event in diplomatic history or the quality of some countries as role models for other ones.

2. The Transfiguration of Moral Concepts into Flags and its Means

Any attitude, vision, value or principle can be reflected somehow in a flag. The great challenge of today's vexillographers is to merge different and/or opposing concepts. As shown in figure 1, through the process of stylisation and with the aid of art theory, an abstract concept may become a visual element, thus it could be included in a banner. We tried to design a path, which could be generally applied, by making a theory after the practice of symbolization: the figure below shows the path which needs to be followed by a moral concept, in order for it to become compatible with flags. This may be a variant of a connection of Philosophy with Vexillology.

Symbolistics Art theory
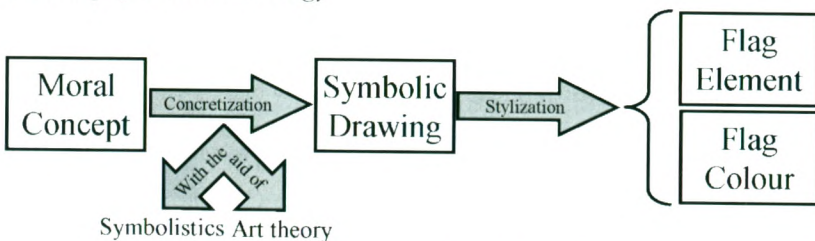
1 *From moral concept to flag element/colour*

2.1. Nationalism

In order to identify the axiological roots of flag colours, we need to possess all the information available on the design of the flag i.e.

historical circumstances, vexillography, flags used before (or after), and the context of changing the old flag or making a new one.

We shall consider the example of Lithuania. Between 1795 and 1918, this Baltic country has been under foreign rule, in the 18th and 19th century, it was ruled by the Russian Czar, and, during the First World War, it was occupied by German troops. In 1918, Lithuania proclaimed and achieved its independence, so a special commission was appointed to design a new flag, to be used by the new national government. This government belonged to the nationalist wing of the Lithuanian political spectre of those times. The flag of Lithuania which, with a slight change in the ratio, is still flown as national flag contains the three colours which are the most worn in the traditional Lithuanian outfits. By using these particular colours – yellow, green and red – and not others, the flag reflects a *nationalist* attitude. Thus, the use of traditional colours results in the reflection of nationalism into flags, as in table 1.

The emphasis of the national specific character results in its assertion in a historical context. Each and every flag which expresses a nationalist attitude or emphasizes local tradition was adopted in a moment of affirmation of the national identity, e.g. declaring independence.

The flags begin to emphasize the national specific character of the countries which they represent, starting with the period of romantic nationalism. The affirmation of essential national features and ethnic tradition in such a high level meant a clear national awakening, in the context of mass social and political agitations. There are some flags which, because they're mainly used by nationalist movements (i.e. *Front National* in France or *Noua Dreaptă* in Romania), are considered to express nationalism, by being flown alone, despite the fact that they don't. We shall not consider these as single nationalist flags.

In Europe, the opposite term to "nationalism" is the concept of *europatriotism*. A pro-European attitude is also present in flags. The European Union's flag has inspired the national flags of countries which have the long-term goal of achieving the status of EU member, like Bosnia and Herzegovina, and also, the flag of the Bruxelles region, in the centre of Belgium. This flag is an example of the unity between regional

patriotism, i.e. localism and europatriotism, showing a golden iris, a typical plant in the region, on a dark blue background, thus representing a specific element, in a "European" view.


Pro-European flags: Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Bruxelles Region,with the flag of the European Union

Even if the bearing of a flag means nationhood, there are some examples of non-nationalist flags outside Europe: China, whose flag only emphasizes communism; the flag of Pakistan – which represents Muslims and non-Muslims, which will be discussed in the next chapters.

2.2. Separatism and revolt
Some of the flags which express a nationalistic attitude may be defiant, or of revolt like in figure 3.
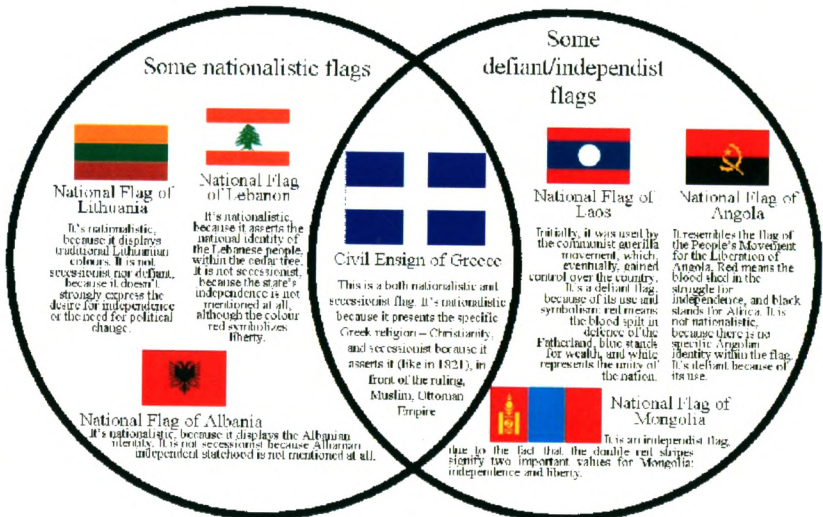
Examples of nationalist and independist flags

During the second half of the 20th century, since the birth of the guerrilla and independence movements, the vexillological image of the radical secessionist part of the political spectre has improved.

The separatist organizations which focus on the traditional/historical identity of the territory that they would like to achieve independence for have vexillologicaly nationalist flags and ensigns charged with traditional symbols. The emphasis of the specific national character of the state whose independence is stated is noticeable. This type of separatist organizations could be encountered in more civilized regions, like Basque Country, Catalonia (Spain), Padania (Italy), Confederated States of America, a.s.o., not having a strong political ideology, sharing only the strong goal of gaining independence for their desired territory. Since their place on the political axis is somehow in equilibrium, these organizations won't focus on their doctrine, but on the traditional and nationalist element of the desired independent country.

A: Basque Country; B: Padania; C: Catalonia, independist flags which emphasize the historical identity of the proposed state

Meanwhile, in geographical zones with less prosperity and more political turmoil, like Africa or South America, the independence movements also share a political doctrine, mainly far-left. Besides gaining independence for their territories, these guerrilla, highly-organized paramilitary groups have the goal of installing a communist, totalitarian regime. In their flags, along with the independist component – which is mainly the star with five points - they also illustrate, through colours like red and black, their political ideologies (see 2.5.). The star, unique in the flags of guerrilla movements is mostly inspired by the *La Estrella Solitaria*, belonging to the Cuban flag.

A: Sandinista Front for National Liberation (Nicaragua); B: People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola; C: National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, independist flags which emphasize their ideology and goals of independence

One important characteristic of independist flags is the lone star – *La Estrella Solitaria* in a triangle, initially used only in the Cuban flag. At the moment of its design (1849), the sign represented the light towards freedom, inspired by the flag of Texas. The triangle is inspired by the motto of *liberty – equality – fraternity*. The flag of Cuba has inspired the flag of Puerto Rico, where the star represents the Fatherland, and the triangle symbolizes the above-mentioned republican ideals, and also the Catalan *Estelada* flag.

A: The Cuban flag and the flags it influenced: B: The flag of Puerto Rico; C: The blue Estelada flag of Catalan separatists

2.3. Liberty

There are as many ways of expressing liberty as there are flags which feature it. In most cases, liberty is characterized indirectly by the colour red, signifying the blood shed in the struggle for independence. The universal goal of freedom and liberty can be vexillologicaly expressed in diverse ways. It all depends on the way the using body considers liberty.

According to the DeAgostini Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, liberty can be viewed as self-determination, when the *option* is very important. One should note that the option, the possibility of choice which results from self-determination is vast. For example, once Lenin came to power in 1917, he granted the Baltic peoples the right of self-determination, hoping they would freely choose to continue their development along with Russia. Instead, they proclaimed independence.

We shall study several examples of countries around the world, and their evolution towards independence. **Estonia** was populated by the Estonians, a Finno-Ugric population, since the 8th century. The Estonians were dominated by either Germans, Scandinavians or Russians. They were forcibly christianized by the Teutonic Knights. Starting with the 14th century, Estonians had become just a tolerated population, meant to serve the German aristocracy. The Swedish domination of Estonia started from 1561, and in 1721, the country was taken over by Russia. Estonians proclaimed their independence in 1918, and it was finally subjugated by the Russians, via the USSR in 1940. In 1990, the Nordic country again proclaimed its independence, and it is a full member of the European Union since 2004.

The Estonian people have never initiated a war for its independence, i.e. for *obtaining* it. Estonians only fought for *maintaining* their independence. The National Awakening of Estonia, called *Ärkamisaeg* occurred in the second half of the 19th century. The Estonians' desire for independence has been expressed in a cultural way, through Song Festivals and the highly successful attempts to create and promote a national literature. The aim was the possibility of choice. The final result was the Proclamation of Independence of Estonia in 1918.

Every time the Estonians had the opportunity to proclaim independence, they did it. They haven't explicitly *fought* for that. Thus, in our opinion, in the Estonian space, liberty is understood as self-determination, which matches Aristotle's definition on freedom: "only the one who is the cause of himself is free". The result is a more peaceful definition of liberty, which, in the subconscious, generates the desire for quiet, for calm. This peaceful way of considering liberty has been reflected in the psychological roots of the Estonian flag: the blue-black-white tricolour can be regarded as a symbol for equilibrium, avoiding the intense national feelings so present in other flags. Freedom is present in this flag within the colour white.

As well as Estonia, **the Philippines** were subjugated by foreign powers for a long period of time. The islands were christianized in the 16th century. The official beginning of the Philippine National Movement is the year 1872. Although the independence of the Republic of the

Philippines was proclaimed in 1889, the power in the Islands was handed over to the United States of America, which granted them a limited autonomy. Finally, the Declaration of Independence of the

Katipunan

Mandiwang

Magdalo

First Philippine Flag

Flags of the main factions of the Philippine national movement

Modern Philippine Republic was signed in 1946.

During the second half of the 19th century, the Philippine National movement had deployed a very intense activity, against the Spanish rule. All the four main factions had red flags. Thus it was normal for the designer of the Philippine flag, leader EMILIO AGUINALDO, to include this colour in the new national flag. The red field of the Philippine national flag (fig. 8b) symbolises courage and valour. The eight-ray star represents the first eight regions which revolted against Spain.

In this case, liberty is perceived as self-reliance and righteousness. The concept of "positive freedom" was defined by JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU, as liberty being "the obedience to the laws we designed ourselves". But in the Philippines and not only here, liberty is not a calm, peaceful virtue, but a quality for which one should fight and devote all his aims. Thus, in these two flags (fig. 8), liberty, i.e. freedom is viewed from different angles.

A: The National Flag of Estonia; B: The National Flag of the Philippines

After a long colonial domination by Britain, the state of **Bangladesh** became a Pakistani province in the 20th century. Independence was proclaimed after the Bangladesh Liberation War, in 1971. The new proposed flag of Bangladesh was, for the first time, raised at the University of Dhaka, in 1971. The red disc represents the sun over

Bengal, bringing rays of liberty, in the memory of those who died in their struggle for an independent Bangladesh.

Thus, because there has been a *fight* for independence, for freedom, the Bangladeshi view of liberty is like the one in the Philippines: liberty is understood as self-reliance and justice. This view is reflected in the flag: the sun is a symbol of hope. Hope occurs only in the conditions of a negative state. For example, if one lives in a good society, he doesn't hope for a good society, maybe for maintaining its own. Also, the colour red, symbolising the blood spilt in the struggle for independence, is specific to the countries who had won their freedom in a violent manner.

Soon after their discovery, the islands which today form the Republic of **Palau** were taken over by the Spaniards. At the end of the 19th century, the islands were sold to Germany, but after the First World War, their control passed over to Japan. In 1944, the United States recognized the islands as a sovereign power, and in 1978, they approved a new constitution, forming the new Republic of Palau. At the end of the 20th century, this country has signed an agreement of free association with the United States. As in the Bangladeshi flag, the Republic of Palau includes a circle, near the hoist. In this case, the circle represents the moon, a time when traditional activities are carried out. According to Alfred Znamierovski's *World Encyclopedia of Flags*, "the blue stands for the final transition from foreign domination to independence".

Here, liberty in its nature has never been a goal, apart from the 1979 diplomatic event, when Palau and the Marshall Islands declined to constitute themselves, along with the islands which today form the Federated States of Micronesia in a single Micronesian state. In this case, freedom is understood as self-determination, a peaceful goal, characterized by the possibility of option. This may be a reason why Palau is not as sovereign and independent as most of today's states, having a Treaty of Free Association with the United States, since 1982. As in the previous study, here liberty is understood in different ways. There are many more examples of differences between nations,

regarding the views over a moral concept, which we will not mention here.

A: The National Flag of Bangladesh; B: The National Flag of Palau

To summarise, liberty has many types and categories. The only tangible, day-to-day liberty that one could feel is the political one. On the other hand, in vexillology, the most credit is granted to the philosophical, abstract side of freedom. This is why liberty, in essence a stable concept, is illustrated in flags in a variety of modes.

2.4. Forms of government and political ideologies

In most of the flags of monarchies, we have noticed a strong bond to religion, to patron saints or simply to the Royal family. Also, information shows that the monarchies use the oldest flags available. Our conclusions regarding the relationship between the flag and the main religion in the monarchy or the Royal family are in table 2.

Another flag sub-family regarding monarchies is that of the flags which represent the local nature or an important historical fact regarding their countries, like the national flags of Spain, Belgium and Luxembourg.

Although most of the flags of monarchies either represent the main religion, the Royal family or their local nature and fatherland, there are few exceptions: Andorra, which has taken its colours from Spain and France, Lesotho, which emphasizes peace, Norway – where liberty is the main virtue expressed, and also the Netherlands – which bear the oldest tricolour in use.

We have not included in our study the flags of the Commonwealth monarchies, most of which don't have a representation of the monarchy in their flags, and those of them who have, bear the Union Flag in canton, which is a state well described in the chapter "Common history and acknowledgement between countries".

We have seen that the monarchies, which generally share a rather liberal economical regime, put a stronger emphasis on the countries' historical and identity-related side, meaning patron saints, local nature, Royal family, etc. The flags of far-left and far-right regimes resemble each other a lot, because they emphasize their doctrine. The exceptions are very rare. In figure 10, some comparative illustrations of the flags of the same countries during different political regimes are shown. The pictures on the left show the contemporary flags of the countries, which highlight their historical identity, and on the right, the flags of these countries during extremist political regimes are shown.

Top row: Actual flag of Latvia; Flag of the Latvian SSR, Bottom row: Actual flag of Afghanistan; Flag of Afghanistan during the Taliban regime

In the first example, the flag of Latvia as a member of the Soviet Union is presented. The specific, national Latvian element doesn't exist at all, the waves in the lower part of the flag being the only element to differentiate this flag from that of the USSR. In the second example, all the flag consists on the *Shahadah*, the Muslim statement of faith, black on white. Thus, these political regimes tend to exclude, even in the flag, everything that doesn't belong to them. Their ideas are the only ones which can exist in flags. Of course, there are exceptions: the flags of the satellite countries of the Soviet Union, which were not Soviet Union republics were only charged with their communist badges, which were cut off since the beginning of the fall of communism.

2.5. Common history and acknowledgement between countries

Common history and acknowledgement between countries is the main reason for which flag families exist now.

INFLUENCES OF THE FRENCH *TRICOLORE*

One of the most influential flags ever to exist is the national Flag of France. It has influenced many flags around the world, as shown in figure left. Apart from other flags which can be encountered in flags, the French flag has different types of influences: diplomatic ones – on associated states and overseas territories, due to common history – which could be encountered in former colonies, and through the ideas expressed, influences found on countries who share the same purpose of liberty, equality and fraternity, as the French people.

Acknowledgement between countries can be reflected in flags when one country changes its flag or designs it in order to be more related and less distinctive to a foreign power, for which it wants to express thankfulness. A notable case is Bulgaria which has chosen to express its thankfulness to the Russians by adopting an almost identical tricolour. The green stripe in the Bulgarian flag represents freedom. Thus, the Bulgarian tricolour is a member of the Pan-Slavic flag family, and distinctive, because it gives the country and its people a separate identity.

Nowadays, this practice can be encountered when a certain country would like to assert its identity, to be suitable for a certain context, usually to identify itself with a sum of conditions, like the Estonian proposal of designing a new flag for the country, one which could be regarded as closer to the Nordic countries' flags. Also, Bosnia and Herzegovina changed its flag, in order to match that of the European Union.

Nordic Cross proposal of the Estonian flag

As for the United Kingdom and its ex-dominions, the relationship between the peoples of Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, etc. and the British is highlighted by the Union Jack in the canton of their flags.

3. Conclusions

Moral concepts are the most important load a flag can bear. The moral concepts within *define* the flag; they classify it, integrating it into certain categories. Each and every element present in flags signifies an attitude. We tried to demonstrate how can an abstract concept find its correspondent in the colourful reality of vexillology, how can a philosophical category fit into a flag family, and how are certain concepts understood throughout the world – though they mean the same, they are reflected in different manners, in flags around the world. We tried to realize an approach between philosophy and vexillology.

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Table 1

Country	Flag	Meaning	Year of adoption	Historical context
Canada		The maple leaf symbol is a homage to Canadian nature, and red is a traditional colour of Canada.	1965	The flag's adoption was the result of the Great Flag Debate in Canada. It was designed as a modern variant of the Canadian Red Ensign.
Cyprus		The map represents the country and the copper symbolizes the natural resources of the island. The olive branches mean peace.	1960	The flag's adoption is the winning design of a flag contest, deliberately not including red and blue, Turkish and Greek colours.
Greece		The nine stripes symbolize the nine syllables of the Greek freedom motto, used around 1821 (the year of independence), which is *Eleftheria i Thanatos*, meaning "Liberty or Death"	1822, as naval ensign; 1969, readopted 1978	1821 marks the year of independence of Greece. This flag was adopted as a naval ensign, and the national flag was a plain white cross on a dark blue background (similar to today's flag's canton). The cross-and-stripes version became very popular, and the national flag was changed, in the 20th century.
Kyrgyzstan		Red is a traditional colour of the Kyrgyz people. The 40 rays of the sun stand for the 40 legendary Kyrgyz tribes. Also, the sun is charged with a typical *yurt* covering device.	1992	The flag was adopted in 1992, then the Kyrgyz Socialist Soviet Republic gained its independence from the USSR.

Lebanon		Red represents liberty, and the cedar tree is the symbol of the Maronite Christian Community of Lebanon.	1943	The first use of this flag was in 1943, when the French Mandate over Lebanon had come to an end.
Lesotho		The black *mokorotlo* is a traditional piece of headwear, worn by the Basotho people in Lesotho.	2006	This new flag was introduced as a celebration of 40 years of independence from the United Kingdom, defining a new, more peaceful orientation of the country.
Lithuania		In 1918, a special commission was appointed, in order to design a new national flag for Lithuania. It has chosen the three colours which are the most used in the Lithuanian traditional dress.	1918	After the end of the so-called "Freedom wars", and the signing of the Lithuanian Act of Independence, the new flag was adopted for Lithuania to gain a different aspect in the world, apart from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth or the red Bolsheviks.

Table 2

Country	Flag	Year of adoption	Connection to religion
Bahrain		2002	The five triangles stand for the Five Pillars of Islam.
Brunei		1959	The coat of arms, placed in the centre of the flag contains a crescent – symbolizing Islam and a parasol – symbol of monarchy.
Denmark		13th century, confirmed 1625	There are many theories regarding the origin of the flag. However, the Romantic legend of its appearance says that, in the Battle of Lyndanisse, in 1219, the flag simply fell out from the sky, in a critical phase of the battle. The result was the victory of the Danes.
Jordan		1928	Though it uses the pan-Arab colours, meaning a closer approach to the fatherland, the only symbol featuring the monarchy in this flag is the red triangle – the symbol of the Hashemite Dynasty.
Japan		1870 in current form: 1999	The legend says that, during the Mongol invasions of Japan from the 13th century, a Buddhist priest offered the sun disc flag to the monarch, considered a descendant of the sun goddess Amaterasu.
Liechtenstein		1937	Blue and red are the livery colours of the Principality's royal household in the 18th century. The princely crown was added in order to distinguish this flag from the Haitian one.

Malaysia		1963	The crescent represents Islam and yellow is the royal colour of Malay rulers. The 14 rays star represents the states of the Federation.
Morocco		1956	The red colour symbolizes the Arabian heritage of this north-African country, and the star, called the Seal of Solomon represents the connection between God and the country.
Monaco		1881	The two colours are the heraldic colours of the Grimaldi family.
Nepal		1962	The two triangles stand for the two main religions in the country: Hinduism and Buddhism. The red triangular flag is a Hindu symbol of victory. The two celestial bodies depicted in the triangles originally represented the monarch and the head of government, but also the wish that Nepal will be eternal, like the Sun and the Moon.
Saudi Arabia		1973	The Arab inscription present on the flag is the Islamic declaration of faith: "*There is no god but Allah. Muhammad is the messenger of God*".

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Sweden		1906	The roots of the flag come from the Coat of Arms of Eric the Holy, who, according to the legend, saw a yellow cross in the sky, as he landed in Finland, during the First Swedish Crusade in 1157. Considering it a sign from God, he allegedly placed it on his personal seal.
Thailand		1917	The three colours supposedly represent the unofficial Thai motto: *nation-religion-king*. The colour blue is the colour for Friday, the day king Vajiravudh was born.
Tonga		1875	The flag is a symbol of Christianity, a deep-rooted belief in Tonga. The red cross and the colour red stand for Jesus' sacrifice to save the world, and white represents purity.
The United Kingdom		1801	This flag has a red cross of Saint George, fimbriated white – the patron saint of England. The white saltire is the symbol of Saint Andrew – the patron saint of Scotland, which has a blue-background flag. The red, diagonal cross belongs to Saint Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland.
Vatican		1929	The yellow and white colours are the colours of the Roman Catholic church. The coat-of-arms includes the Papal tiara, and the keys of Saint Peter – symbols of the identity and origin of the Pope, which, apart from being the leader of the most widespread Christian denomination, is the monarch and ruler of the Vatican City.

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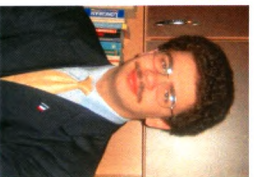
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