

Peter Orenski:
Vexilogorhea – A Culturally Determined
Amerikanische Flaggensünde
 [American vexillological sin]

Abstract: *American State flags are unique among the world's first-level subnational banners in the number of words they display. This paper explores a range of cultural factors peculiar to American history – revolution against a monarchy and its symbols, independent self-governing colonies, belief in the rule of law, pragmatism, influence of political idiocracy – that may have been determining factors in the development of this amerikanische Flaggensünde.*

American State flags are unique among the world's first-level subnational banners in the number of words they display. I will explore several cultural factors peculiar to American history – rebellion against aristocratic symbols, lack of native heraldic tradition, pragmatism, improvisation, ignorance, political idiocracy – all factors I believe contributed to this *amerikanische Flaggensünde*.

Flaggensünde – now there's a word loaded with Biblical original sin. A flag-offence or transgression. I use it with a wink, of course. But I also use it quite soberly to imply that a great number of American State flags, especially when compared with other first-order subnational flags – German *Länder*, Swiss cantons, Dutch provinces, pre-*logochonnerie* French regional flags, Canadian Provinces, Australian States – compared to these, a surprising large number of our State flags are – ready for this? – BAD flags. BAD?

Yes, bad. Not in the sense they'll endure eternal hellfire, of course – bad in the sense that they are INEFFECTIVE. Much as a new drug is ineffective, a vaccine is ineffective, a scientific theory is ineffective – they are ineffective to accomplish the primary task for which flags should be designed, namely, to symbolize a community's identity in a unique, easily recognizable manner. This simple-yet-difficult task a great many of our State flags fail to do.

I will argue that one reason why so many U.S. State flags are ineffective is the largest concentration of words on the flag-planet. Or, to coin a word – Vexilogorhea.

This uniquely American *Wortfest* raises some basic questions: What happened? How did we get to this point? Why only in America?

The short answer is: Vexilogorrhea is found primarily in the seals displayed on our State flags. So we can say what happened: Seals happened. Seals carry the heaviest burden of vexilogorrhea. Coats of arms and their mottos also happened, but their word content is more modest; I deal with them in the expanded & annotated version of the paper. In the remaining time I'll try to answer How seals happened and Why their imagery was often transferred completely unchanged onto our State flags.

Let's start by giving the patient a general look in the first slide.

FIGURE 1 – American State Flags + DC



We note here an interesting mix: Some memorable flags – Colorado, Maryland, New Mexico, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas; we also note some interesting flags – Arizona, California, Wyoming. And then ... there's an ocean of ineffective blue creations, far too depressing to put on a Figure.

The good news, however, is that we now have a new flag celebrating this uniquely American achievement – the seal-on-a-bedsheet.

FIGURE 2 – Seal-on-a-Bedsheet

And then we have our 'sigilloid flags from *Dummköpfe*.'

FIGURE 3 – Help from *Dummköpfe*

Sigilloids are images derived from seals and *Dummköpfe* are political idiots who vote to advertise the State's name on the flag. That's to help people remember what State they happen to be in, I assume. Some do it more than once – the idiots in Idaho and South Dakota made sure to write it twice.

California may be releasing the Conan the Barbarian Sigilloid Flag. The State's name, as you can see, would be changed so the Governor could actually pronounce it. KAHLIFOANIA, here we come!

FIGURE 4 – Rambo’s Kahlifoania



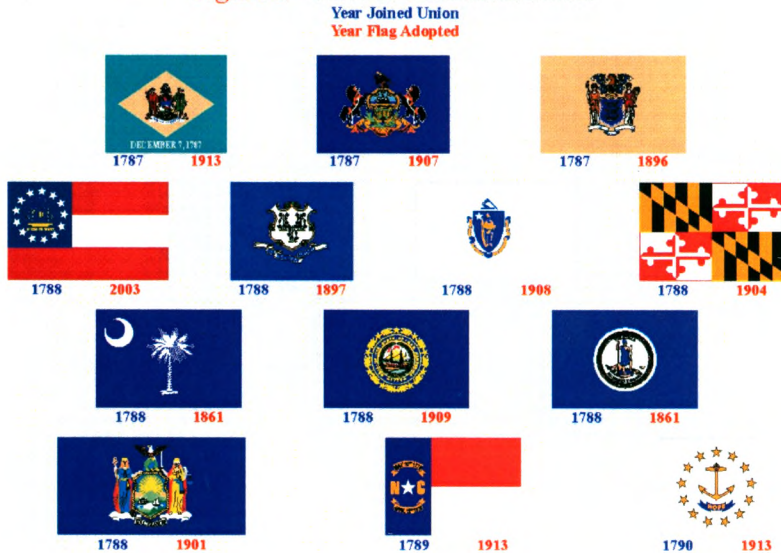
Flights of fancy aside, we need to explain this bounty of seals on American State flags. Let me suggest the following logic:

- Independent political or administrative organizations adopt, as one of their first tasks, formal seal designs for conducting official business. Using seals to authenticate documents is a statement of legitimacy and authority as old as writing itself.
- In America, sovereign States had or quickly developed exclusive seals. Several of the first 13 States adopted them long before they adhered to the Union. For example, Virginia adopted its seal in 1776, some 22 years before it joined the Union; Massachusetts did much the same. The first seal of Connecticut dates to 1644, and even its current seal is 223 years old.

But obviously such practices differ little from those of newly minted political entities anywhere else in the world. What was unusual in America happened during the transition from seal adoption to flag development.

Let us start with the first 13 States, shown in the next Figure in order of joining the Union.

Figure 5 – First 13 American States



You'll note that usually a little over a century passed between joining the Union (year in blue) and adopting a State flag (in red). The notable exceptions are South Carolina and Virginia whose flags have survived unchanged since the start of the Civil War in 1861. Peachy old Georgia is yet another exception, the most-frequently changed flag in the Union, we all hope it's going to settle down now for a while.

I think it's important to remember that the symbology of many American State flags was conceived during a revolutionary period, in a mood of rebellion against monarchy and aristocratic privilege. From this flowed a powerful aversion to symbols associated with royalty, including a disregard for classic heraldic norms.

I couldn't find a more dramatic way to exemplify this willful break with the past than the next Figure – Virginia's arms before and after the Revolution.

FIGURE 6 – Virginia Crowns & Breasts



1619-1707



1776- present

From crown-laden Stuart symbolism to crown rejected – what better illustration of the breathless arrival of republican spirit? You'll note, by the way, how brave republicans triumphantly discarded royal privilege ... but sensibly preserved the naked breast.

How credible is the hypothesis that revolutionary fervor greatly affected symbols present on U.S. State flags?

Well, at least two objections could be raised to it: (1) State flags were created a good century after the Revolution and one might suppose rebellious fire subsided a notch during that time; (2) There's plenty of apparently old-fashioned heraldic imagery in several of the flags – Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and so on – why didn't the Revolution sweep those aside as well?

The next two Figures address the first objection. Yes, our State flags were created more than a century after the 1776 Revolution, but the symbology of their arms and seals originated during or shortly after the War of Independence, as we see from the dates of adoption of seals and arms in the next Figure.

You'll note the close correlation in most cases between symbolism displayed in seals, arms and flags.

FIGURE 7 – Flags, Seals, COAs

FIGURE 8 – Seals, COAs, *ct'd*



As for the second objection, you'll find it addressed in the expanded version of this paper,

for now we need to move on.

But not before making one interesting comparison. I'd like to show you the first-order subnational flags of two great nations, both former subjects of the British Crown, both currently Commonwealth Realms, both defined by a gradual, peaceful, practically complete separation from the Mother Country – I'm referring, of course, to Canada and Australia. In the next Figure you can see Canadian Provincial flags.

FIGURE 9 – Canada's Provincial Flags

Not a single word. Not a syllable. Mute statements of respect for classic heraldry and careful flag design.

And here now – the Australian States.

FIGURE 10 – Australian State Flags

Again, not a syllable in sight. Compared to American State flags, both Figures, I believe, capture the dramatic difference between rejecting classic symbology, as Americans largely did, and integrating its lessons into flag designs. In other words, they capture the difference between revolutionary break from tradition *versus* peaceful transition within tradition – a difference reflected in subnational flags.

And so, after rejecting symbols associated with monarchy and aristocracy, the newly independent republican States were left to follow ... what exactly?

I believe they followed a path which has hallmarked the Republic ever since: They improvised. Freedom to improvise has been one of the defining cultural traits of my American experience. I alternately rhapsodize and despair about it. But on reflection, improvisation is one of the few courses open to those who abandon the riverbed of history and launch into the unknown. Gradual traditions serve well during normal times, crises call for improvisation.

So during their first great crisis in 1776 the American States improvised the symbolism & imagery of their seals, inventing what the heraldist D'Arcy Boulton called *sigilloid emblems* and *quasi-armorial achievements*. During their second great crisis, the Civil War of 1861-1865, the States improvised regimental flags, a great many reaching for imagery developed much earlier for seals and arms. If we then fast-forward to modern State flags, we notice how often they are direct descendants of regimental flags carried during the Civil War and subsequent crises.

To review the storyline so far: I'm claiming that the primary sources of vexillogorrhea on U.S. State flags are seals and arms; and that these were developed early in a State's history and then became symbols of choice for military flags during the Civil War. When many States first decided to develop civil flags in the period 1890-1930, they reached for symbols developed earlier. Regimental flags were often logical starting points. So a sizable mass of words traveled fairly unchanged from State seals in the Revolutionary period to regimental flags during the Civil

FIGURE 11 – Minnesota's Stand



War and subsequent conflicts, to civil State flags in the 20th century.

In my personal experience, the instinct to transfer seals onto flags – *in toto*, without any change – is by now solidly rooted in the subconscious of our political idiocracy at both local and State levels. For example, within roughly three-and-a-half seconds of my suggesting a flag for New Milford in 1994, the Mayor answered, *Let's put the New Milford seal on it*. And once seals are present on a flag, trying to remove them is arguably a lost cause. In Minnesota, Lee Herold and friends have struggled for the past 30-plus years to convince their State legislators to improve that unfortunate flag, as shown in the next Figure. So far old habits have, well, sealed the fate of Minnesota's flag.

All of which leaves us with one last question about American States: Why did so many of them decide – alone among the world's first-order subnationals – to transfer their wordy seals and arms onto flags *en masse*, with hardly any change, without simplifying, without any apparent concern about their effectiveness in this new role? I offer you these thoughts:

- Transferring well-established seals and arms in their entirety onto regimental flags was probably the most convenient, the most expeditious solution during a Civil War crisis. No time for flag contests or town meetings.
- Alright, then let's ask a different question. Why did so many States in the period 1890-1930 adopt civil flags based on regimental ones?

I suspect the inertia of local tradition played a major part – it's unwise governance to upset 130 years of republican symbolism. Michael Faul calls this “the tyranny of inertia.”

Our country's restless, improvisational, pragmatic mood, the impulse to 'let's-get-this-thing-done', were other cultural components, I suspect.

And I suspect plain old ignorance. The majority of people involved in these decisions were probably as ignorant of classic heraldic norms as they were of proper flag design.

Inertia, improvisation, pragmatism, ignorance – I suggest to you four (headless) horsemen who drove American State flag development.

Finally, I invite you to join me in an imaginary game. Suppose today's flag-design knowhow had been available 1861; do you think it would have made a difference in the choice of State regimental flags? Or suppose today's knowhow had been available a generation later, around 1900 – do you think it would have made any difference in the development of the first civil State flags in America? No one can know for certain, but I bet it would as a minimum have sparked a few interesting encounters.

FIGURE 12 – Pennsylvania & Contrast



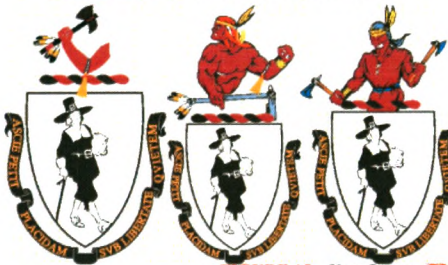
In Pennsylvania - Very nice concept. Black horses on dark blue. Brown eagle on blue. Are you worried about any color-contrast problems?

FIGURE 13 – Massachusetts & Liberty



In Massachusetts - Very nice motto concept: "Peace only under Liberty." Whose liberty? Liberty under the sword? Would you consider a few Indian proposals for your arms?

FIGURE 14 – Indians Comments



In New Jersey - Very nice concept. Plow over plow over plow. You took color-contrast tips from Pennsylvania? Also, two's

FIGURE 15 – New Jersey
New Jersey
New Jersey
New Jersey

FIGURE 16 – New Jersey?

company,
three's a crowd.
How about just
one?

In California -
Very nice
concept.
California



Republic. Let's see, Vermont was an independent Republic for fourteen years. Texas for nine years. California for a little over three ... weeks -

on land illegally seized from Mexico. Should we remind everyone of all that?

FIGURE 18 – Wyoming Brand



In Wyoming -
Very nice
concept. A
buffalo with
skin disease. Ah, that's a seal? So sorry.
Perhaps we should stick to branding cattle
and letting buffalo roam free.

FIGURE 17 – The 3-week Republic



Oh yes, let me dream on. Dream of vexillology finding a strong voice in the practical world of flags. Dream of more Bernard Le Brun's, more Tony Burton's and Ron Strachan's, more Gunnar Staack's, more Andy Whitakker's, more Jim Babcock's and Jim Ferrigan's and Lee Herold's and Ted Kaye's, more Aldo Ziggio's, more Klaes Sierksma's, more Philippe and Sophie Rault's – more knowledgeable, passionate, practical, activist flag scholars and students.

Or, as a shortcut, perhaps we should just find a way of cloning ... Whitney Smith.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.



About the author



Dr. **Peter Orenski**, born in 1940, has been interested in flags due to his company, TME Co., Inc. (www.TMEALF.com). He realized the need for precise flag specifications in order to produce a family excellent products. His special interests continue to be the flags and symbols of American Indians, which he believes help to bridge old and modern America.

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