

Scot M. Guenter: Culture Wars, Divided Nation – Battles for Semiotic Control of the American Flag in the Twenty-first Century

Abstract: *Following the tragedy of September 11, 2001, citizens of the United States pulled together in an outpouring of national grief and solidarity, and the American flag, the most powerful and enduring symbol in our civil religion, played a key role in offering a specific focal point to emphasize a sense of shared experience, vision, and solidarity for the future.*

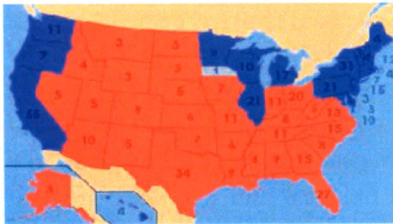
However, not long after that incredible response of patriotic rituals and demonstrations, the semiotic struggle for political control of identification with the flag began anew. The nation returned to seeing itself divided between competing conservative (as in Red State) and liberal (as in Blue State) ideologies, and those two opposing ideologies became increasingly dissimilar and raucous. This study exhorts vexillologists to examine how the powerful symbol of the flag was used in news media coverage, marketing, popular entertainment, and political campaigns on both sides of this cultural divide, because effective semiotic control of this symbol in propaganda outreach could well be one of the determinant factors in winning enough public support to swing elections and gain political control.

The United States is the most powerful nation on the planet. Its internal decisions and its foreign policy can both have incredible impact on people throughout the rest of the world. Within the civil religion of the United States, the American flag is the most powerful and influential symbol. Therefore, a very practical and necessary area for vexillologists to study should be the shifting ways the American flag is perceived and used in the ongoing struggles for power and influence in American society and culture. If we can learn to better understand and evaluate the complex and vibrant influences of this flag as a symbol, analyzing the ways it is represented in media, and reinforced in ceremony and ritual, we might better appreciate how it affects what people buy, whom they believe, and how they vote. As a historian, I am curious how the influence of the flag has affected the growth, development, and actions of my nation in the past. As a voting member



of my society in the 21st century, as we move into the primary campaigns for the presidential election of 2008, I am very concerned about where the United States is headed in the future. Learning how and why different groups use the flag the way they do, and how the public responds to these uses, gives me greater insight not only into the shifting meanings and uses of the flag itself - sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic - but also into how that flag usage connects to strong political, economic, religious, ethnic, and cultural forces, all involved in the struggle for power and control in the United States.

The election of 2000 was one of the most bitterly and closely fought presidential elections in the history of the country, and it was one of the rare elections when a significant philosophical and ideological split truly separated the Republicans and the Democrats. Leading up to that election, and as a result of the involved, unusual way it was ultimately decided, the country was the most ideologically split that it had been



since the cultural clashes of the late 1960s. Although the split was spread throughout the general population in all 50 states, thanks to the influence of the national news electoral count boards, we entered the era of seeing ourselves as Red States vs. Blue States ^[1]. In such times of division, stress and angst rise, identity is threatened, and it follows that both opposing parties will want to convince the public that their approach is the true and proper response to uphold the vision and destiny of America (N.B.: That America has a manifest destiny as a special nation, chosen for this role by a Supreme Being, is one of the basic tenets of its civil religion) ^[2]. Thus, both sides would desire to show the symbol of the American flag aligned with their particular position. That one side would win out in such a struggle is not unusual, particularly when power is so contested.





However, the events of September 11, 2001, changed all that for awhile. Faced with such an unprecedented terrorist attack on both a major American city and the Pentagon, and a failed attempt to fly a plane into the White House - three targets chosen for what they signified in the power structure of the United States - the citizens of the country responded with what was assuredly the most significant ritualistic embracing of the American flag in my lifetime, and I have been around for half a century now. The outpouring of American flag displays, evocations, and sanctifications following September 11 is well documented elsewhere ^[3], and had reverberations and corollaries around the planet, as a nation mourned its losses, demonstrated its resolve, and symbolically averred its unity and ongoing belief in the tenets of American civil religion.



But culture is a living, vibrant system; stasis cannot remain for long. Inevitably, as the War in Afghanistan was followed by the more controversial war in Iraq, over time the shared and intensified fixation on the American flag as a symbol of our national unity began to dissipate. This is not to say the flag no longer carried that particular evocation for millions of Americans, but as the influential media connected the image of the flag with reports on the military fighting, and subsequent military or ceremonial activities related to the fighting in Afghanistan and then Iraq, for many Americans the image of the flag would evoke a thought of us at war before it evoked a sense of one people united, and as the war in Iraq continued, this connection of



the image of the flag with the current U.S. military actions in Iraq strengthened, while the polar oppositions of the Red State/Blue State ideologies unsurprisingly revived.

As vexillologists we need to be paying more attention to such fluctuations in how the flag is being interpreted, in who is displaying it or not, and how it is being represented or conveyed in the media. The conservative position, which also was the position of George W. Bush, the sitting president who led us into the War on Iraq, clearly took the lead in the battle between the liberal and conservative factions for semiotic control of the American flag. It was all well and good for John Kerry to make a speech at the 2004 Democratic Convention about the American flag representing the right of Americans to hold a wide range of opinions and to work out how they are governed through the constitutional process, but that abstract connection could not compete with the more visceral connections George Bush, Karl Rowe, the Republican Party, and Fox News regularly made between the American flag and their justifications for fighting the War in Iraq, whether those justifications were to protect us from imminent terrorist threats, as went the earlier litanies, or to advance the spread of democracy, as the argument evolved over time. In either case, direct and effective referencing back to tenets of American civil religion, and successful appropriation of the American flag as a visual marker for the ideology, were successfully achieved.

A key element in effectively connecting the visual image of the flag with conservative ideology, thereby suggesting by implication that the one truly “American” position was held by the current administration,



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was the successful outreach of Fox News. Fox News was the first TV channel to integrate American flag graphics into their visuals [4]. Over time they have solidified their position as the most influential component of the well crafted Republican propaganda operation, supported by extensive and complementary outreach through AM talk radio [5]. FOX News has a recurring and heavy handed referencing of civil religious symbols and beliefs, and their emphatic use of American flags, either whole or parsed as visual bunting, is part of their larger strategy to constantly present themselves to their target audience as the one source you can rely upon for, in their words, “fair and balanced” reporting in a media they suggest is by and large far too liberal, biased, and unreliable [6]. This appeal to reactionary anxiety, engendered by concern for identity in a rapidly changing world, has been an effective strategy for conservatives since the rise of Modernism at the beginning of the 20th century.



After the War in Iraq broke out in April 2003, flag sales went up, as did the sales of flag-motif apparel, which as fashion and textiles historian Laura K. Kidd has noted, had gone through a shift in the last thirty-five years from being disdained to being welcomed by conservatives [7]. Still, there were some on the left (in the reductionist language of our time, Blue State types), who were not ready to concede semiotic control of the flag to the Red Staters without some challenge. Noted public broadcasting television commentator Bill Moyers made a point of wearing a flag lapel pin on his February 28, 2003, show, to suggest the flag belongs to all Americans, even while chastising the right wing phenomenon he



described of embracing the flag as a fetish while they prepared to make war in Iraq, and more crucially, as they asserted that to dissent against the administration at such a time was automatically un-American. He wondered aloud why Bush and Cheney felt the need to wear flag lapel pins to the last State of the Union address, and complained of the trend for all administration members to wear flags, adding “When I see flags sprouting on official lapels, I think of the time in China when I saw Mao’s little red book on every official’s desk, omnipresent and unread” [8].

Also, Kerry’s 2004 speech was not the only Democratic attempt at the convention to try to wrestle back symbolic control of the flag icon from the entrenched Republicans. The Republicans had returned to a strategy that had helped George Bush Sr. in his successful campaign against Dukakis back in 1988: show that they are the party that protects the flag most effectively in legal fights over desecration in the U.S. while using a media and slur allegation campaign to suggest their



candidate is more macho, more virile, and better suited to leading our military against threats of terror [9]. Struggling against this powerful combination, retired General Wesley Clark, the Democratic primary candidate who had a strong military connection to the cult of the flag going for him, as well as

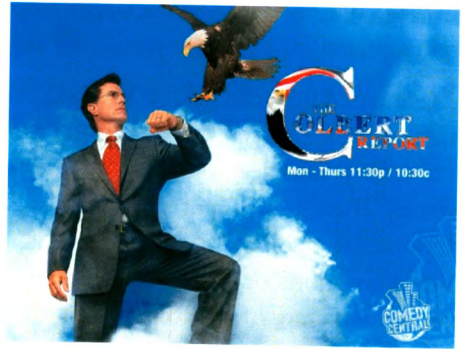
some high profile media exposure as a CNN expert military consultant, also made a dynamic attempt to connect his party to the U.S. flag. Speaking before a group of Democratic veterans at the Convention, in a variation of a speech he had employed several times in his own primary campaign, he brought them to their feet, cheering, when he said, “That flag is our flag. We served under that flag. We got up and stood reveille formation, we stood taps, we fought under that flag. We’ve seen men die for that flag, and we’ve seen men buried under that flag. No Dick Cheney or John Ashcroft or Tom DeLay is going to take that flag away from us” [10]. Unfortunately for the Democrats, Clark’s

message did not seem to stick with enough of the electorate, and Bush won re-election.

If renowned generals on the Blue side could not win the flag back from the Red side, or even manage in the tug-of-war to get it to convincingly return to a middle ground of evocative primary association with both parties, then a different approach was called for: not taking on the Republican ideology on its own terms, but rather pointing out flaws in the assumptions or claims asserted by FOX News and other successful media marketers of the Republican affiliation with the flag. In a society like that of the current United States, so focused on entertainment and the cult of celebrity, this could be done through parody. As the War in Iraq continued, and public support continued to weaken, people became more willing to consider parodies that used American flags as props to suggest that perhaps those currently in semiotic control of the flag in our society were not themselves above criticism or questioning. It should be noted that such a process not only challenges the authority of those in power, but it also lessens the current overall visceral, emotional effectiveness the flag has in influencing society, for it encourages those who encounter flag wavers to always keep in mind the lesson Samuel Johnson imparted centuries ago, "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel!"^[11]

One of the few places in the American media where viewers could find constant, well informed, and witty critiques of the Bush government's motivations, practices, and blunders throughout Bush's presidency was on Comedy Central's hit comedy news show hosted by Jon Stewart, *The Daily Show*. After *South Park* it was the highest rated program on the network, and the darling of both critics and the viewing public at the 2004 Emmy Awards^[12]. Based on this success, the network agreed to a spin-off of the program starring Stephen Colbert, one of Stewart's sidekicks, who would do a parody send-up of FOX News's belligerent and caustic commentator, Bill O'Reilly, who at that time was himself in the middle of a media frenzy based on a sexual harassment lawsuit that included tawdry telephone tapes as evidence^[13]. This parody of *The O'Reilly Factor* debuted October 17, 2005, at a time when President Bush's popularity ratings were continuing to drop. Quickly developing

a large cult following and winning its own praise from the critics, *The Colbert Report* lets Colbert play a right-wing television commentator persona, also called Stephen Colbert, who is egotistical, self-congratulatory, and unconcerned with facts. He



argues in a bullying manner, can be very nasty to his opponents, does a lot of promoting of his own products and books, and cultivates a following of devoted fans, the Colbert Nation, who respond to his directives and appeals. A brilliant parody of O'Reilly, he is not only extremely religious, but a super-patriot [14]. This is the point of interest of Colbert for vexillologists: to disempower the Republican semiotic control of the flag, he does not burn it or ban it, he has his television persona embrace it and wrap himself in it with such orgiastic fervor, always so convinced he is righteously in the Right, that his asinine behavior cannot help but make viewers reflect on how and why real right-wingers use the flag the way they do.



Colbert is, in his own words, a “flagaphile.” He is so proud of it he sometimes opens his program flashing this word [15]. He constantly uses red, white, and blue graphics, mimicking FOX News’s use of patriotic visuals. His eagle swoops across your screen as if you are in a violent video game. He regularly encourages devotion to the flag, but is not above using it in tacky ways to promote himself. Here, for instance is Stephen Colbert promoting a bathtub, lounging at home, or just selling

his show. For Flag Day 2006, Colbert gave everyone in the audience a flag to take home, and showed off his “Self-Waving Musical American Flag” which automatically waves on your desktop while playing patriotic music ^[16].

On his Wiki, devoted to “truthiness,” under the listing “American Flag” Colbert has this warning against a red background: “ATTENTION! This page is for Real Americans™ ONLY. If you are not a Real American™ pack your bags and report to GITMO.” Below displays of and tributes to the flag he adds this gem of knowledge: “The colors red, white, and blue were chosen for the flag by Jesus Himself because they never run” ^[17]. In May 2007, commenting on a CNN News report on a controversial 30 foot by 60 foot American flag at a Las Vegas Hummer dealership, Colbert blamed what he saw as lack of respect for large American flags on a Democratically controlled Congress, then sent a pushy, loud man, inside a large American flag, out onto the sidewalk of New York to verbally harass people, intimidate them out of the way, reminding them of his (the flag’s) authority, superior power, and right to appropriate any space desired. It is a brilliant little piece in raising questions, in a humorous way, about why certain groups feel they can claim moral superiority just by virtue of holding - or being - a flag ^[18].

Colbert’s defusing of the semiotic control the Right holds over the American flag is probably the best known and most effectively sustained use of parody to counter the excessive right-wing semiotic connection to the American flag through much of the Bush presidency. However, other examples of this growing trend exist. Episode 15, “Hard Ball” of the NBC sit-com *30 Rock*, which aired on Washington’s Birthday, 2007, was a commentary on the dangers of misinterpreted political slogans, names, and ultimately, symbols. In the episode, Jenna, a blond bimbo television actress, first raises a media storm when she tells a reporter she doesn’t support the troops (thinking the topic was theater troupes). Sent on *MSNBC*’s political talk show *Hard Ball*, in an attempt to defuse public outcry, when asked for some commentary, she says the president should get rid of Barack Obama, and since it’s time for a change she’ll be voting for Osama. The writer for her show, played by actual writer Tina Fey, in the tradition of George M. Cohan

then creates a big flag-waving musical extravaganza patriotic number for Jenna, as a sure way to win back audience approval. Unfortunately, during the performance's finale the giant pinwheels set afire fail to turn, revealing four large burned out swastikas amid all the American flags, stunning the audience into shocked silence [19].

Another parody attack on the right-wing's patriotic self-representations can be found in the cabaret show "I Wanna Be a Republican," which toured college campuses in 2006 and came out as a DVD in June 2007. In this show the Kinsey Sicks, four drag queens from San Francisco, present themselves as Republican matrons hosting a G.O.P. fundraiser, and the audience are all fellow Republicans, or would be Republicans, invited to the event. While constantly attacking Republican practices, motivations, and self-righteous claims to moral superiority through clever and well harmonized songs, the drag queens are careful never to dishonor the flag itself in any way, though there is one lusty tango dance in which a flag bandana is used rather dramatically [20].



As the 2008 election campaign continues and intensifies, we should be watching for both traditional and non-traditional ways the American flag is presented or associated with the various candidates. I maintain that the dissemination and popularity of parodies which effectively lampoon the Republican ideology as sole or primary referent for the symbol of the American flag have recently helped weaken the strong connection of the Republican Party with the American flag in the minds of the public, and the

practical fact that we now have a Congress controlled by Democrats helps as well. At the same time, the use of parody weakens the overall power of the cult of the flag, for it questions on some levels the emotional connection to any symbol without rational questioning. It cultivates a recognition on the part of the citizen that the intended

meaning of a person using the symbol might be very different from the meaning interpreted by the person reading the symbol, particularly when it is such a powerful, civil religious symbol as the flag of the United States.



Based on his television success, Stephen Colbert has a book scheduled for publication this October, entitled *I Am America (And So Can You!)*. He admonishes the public to “[r]ead the book. Be me. Hold my truths to be self-evident”^[21]. It will be interesting to see how the American flag, bunting, and patriotic symbols will be utilized in this guide to a better life. By the way, a recent Pew Center study of Americans, correlating their knowledge of current political events with their sources of information provided this fascinating bit of evidence: across a list of sixteen different ways to retrieve news in contemporary America, regular viewers of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* ranked highest on a scale of correct knowledge of current political events and facts, while regular viewers of FOX News Channel ranked at the very bottom of the scale, only above those who get all their political information solely from the network morning shows^[22]. While viewers of both shows see plenty of American flags and hear patriotic appeals to their emotions, this tells us viewers of *The Colbert Report* are also thinking, questioning, and successfully retaining information about the world around them. How long Colbert will maintain his current cult status is unknown, but his parody of a super-patriot appears to be the most interesting and influential recent challenge to current Republican semiotic control of the flag. And with the Supreme Court ruling on June 25, 2007, by a vote of 5-4 opening the way for big corporate money to flood the media with special interest advertisements as the campaigns get more vicious in the coming election^[23], we should be preparing to examine the role of the American flag as a semiotic symbol in the promotional frenzy ahead, as competing candidates vie for primary identification

with the American flag in the eyes of the voting public, and the great power that goes with that.



Endnotes:

1. Tom Zeller, "One State, Two State, Red State, Blue State," New York Times 8 February 2004, USElectionAtlas.org 25 June 2007 <http://www.uselectionatlas.org/INFORMATION/ARTICLES/redblue.php>
2. I take my definition for Civil Religion from Ellis M. West: "A civil religion is a set of beliefs and attitudes that explain the meaning and purpose of any given political society in terms of its relationship to a transcendent, spiritual reality that are held by the people of that society, and that are expressed in public rituals, myths, and symbols." This may be found in "A Proposed Neutral Definition of Civil Religion," Journal of Church and State 22 (Winter, 1980): 39. For a classic introduction to the concept of Civil Religion, see Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," at http://hrr.hartsem.edu/Bellah/articles_5.htm#_ednref2. For a more recent application of the concept in culture studies, see Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004).
3. See, for example, Mark Lcepson, *Flag: An American Biography* (New York: St. Martin's, 2005): 253-260.
4. *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism*. DVD. Produced and directed by Robert Greenwald. 2004.
5. See Al Gore, *The Assault on Reason* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007) in toto, but particularly 66-69.
6. Timothy Noah, "FOX News Admits Bias!" Slate 31 May 2005, accessed 24 June 2007, <http://slate.com/id/2119864/>
7. Laura Kidd, "Wave It or Wear It? The United States Flag as a Fashion Icon," to be published in *Raven* 14 (2007).
8. Bill Moyers, "On Patriotism and the Flag," 28 February 2003. NOW website. 25 June 2007, <http://www.pbs.org/nw/commentary/moyers19.html>. For a more "common person" reflection on the same perspective, see Chelsea Ross, "Re-Capture the Flag," *Campus Progress* (University of Wisconsin-Madison), 25 November 2005, Campus Progress.org, 25 June 2007, <http://www.campusprogress.org/features/665/re-capture-the-flag>
9. See *Flag Bulletin* 128 (Sept.-Oct. 1988), an entire special issue devoted to fight for semiotic control of the flag of the United States in the 1988 presidential election. Guest Editor Scot M. Guenter, articles by Patrick Buchanan, Michael Kingsley, Whitney Smith, and Scot M. Guenter.
10. Tim Grieve, "That Flag Is Our Flag," *Salon*, 26 July 2004, Salon.com, 25 June 2007, <http://archive.salon.com/news/feature/2004/07/26/veterans/index.html>
11. *The New Dictionary of Thoughts*, 1955, 454.
12. "List of Awards Won by *The Daily Show*," *Wikipedia*, 11 June 2007, accessed 25 June 2007, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_awards_won_by_The_Daily_Show_#_Outstanding_Directing_for_a_Variety_2C_Music_or_Comedy_Program
13. "O'Reilly Watch" in "The Fix," *Salon*, 23 October 2004, Salon.com 25 June 2007, <http://dir.salon.com/story/ent/col/fix/2004/10/21/thurs/index.html>
14. "The Colbert Report," *Wikipedia* 22 June 2007, accessed 25 June 2007, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colbert_report
15. It's no coincidence he did this for the show that first aired Flag Day, 14 June 2007. Colbert prides himself on creating neologisms. For his premiere show he created the word

- “truthiness,” which he defines as “what you want the facts to be, as opposed to what the facts are. What feels like the right answer as opposed to what reality will support.” This word has caught on, received recognition, usage, and even praise in the *New York Times*, and was selected as Merriam-Webster’s Word of the Year in 2006.
16. See *The Colbert Report*, episode 106, first aired 14 June 2006. See also “The Wave: Musical Self Waving American Flag” BaronBob.com, 25 June 2007, <http://www.baronbob.com/musicalwavingflag.htm>
 17. “American Flag.” *Wikiality, The Truthiness Encyclopedia*, 10 June 2007, accessed 25 June 2007, http://www.wikiality.com/American_flag
 18. “Big Loud Flag” from *The Colbert Report*, aired 24 May 2007, posted 25 May 2007 IFilm.com. Accessed 25 June 2007, <http://www.ifilm.com/video/2858445/show/17677>
 19. When a co-worker is surprised at the effective arrangement of the patriotic display, writer Tina Fey says “Just because I think gay dudes should adopt kids and we should all drive hybrid cars doesn’t mean I don’t love America.” Then she breaks the fourth wall and winks directly at the camera, suggesting that many of us share a belief that you can love your country and still disagree with its president. The original episode had been free on the web for a period, but the network has taken it down. For all the scenes discussed here, see a compilation posted on YouTube, 29 April 2007, accessed 25 June 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QCfpHsI-WM>
 20. The Kinsey Sicks. *I Wanna Be A Republican*. DVD. Eyethink Pictures. 2007.
 21. “83 Stephen Colbert: Truthiness Teller” in “The EW 100,” *Entertainment Weekly* 26 June – 6 July 2007, 99.
 22. “Public Knowledge of Current Affairs Little Changed by News and Information Revolutions: What Americans Know 1969-2007.” Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. Summary Report. 15 April 2007. *People-Press.org*, 25 June 2007. <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=319>
 23. David Strout, “Justices Loosen Restrictions on Campaign Ads,” *New York Times* 25 June 2007 http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/25/washington/25cnd-scotus.html?_r=1&hp=&adxnnl=1&oref=slogin&adxnnlx=1182795869-Ucm/jCdbvysdCTENay7MSVg

About the author



Scot M Guenter received 1986 his PhD in American Studies at the University of Maryland. He is a Professor of American Studies and Coordinator of American Studies at the San Jose State University. His book “The American Flag, 1777 – 1924” published in 1990, led to consulting work at the Smithsonian Institution. He founded 1994 the journal “Raven” and served as a Senior Fulbright Fellow at the National University of Singapore in 1998. He also taught at the universities of Mainz (Germany) and Guam. In 2003 in Stockholm (Sweden) he was named Laureate of the FIAV, only the fifth laureate in the 36-years history of FIAV. He is the past president of NAVA and the immediate past president of the California American Studies Association.

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