

Controversial Indian Symbols on U.S. State Flags

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Olmecs. Mayas. Aztecs. Incas. 500-plus nations of the American continent. **Indigenous Australians.** Scandinavia's **Sami** people. The **Ainu** of Japan. All swept aside and marginalized. "Almost every community in Canada, the United States and Mexico was once an Indian community ... part of hundreds of unique Indian nations that blanketed the entire continent." ¹

All were marginalized and swept aside during the centuries following First Contact – the arrival of Columbus in the Americas in 1492. It was a first contact with violent, lasting consequences for Native populations throughout the world.

Yet reminders of Indian presence can still be found on some flags of U.S. states. This paper will ask how appropriate are these "reminders of Indian presence" in the 21st century.

Not all Native symbols on our state flags are controversial. For example, Oklahoma – home to the second-largest Native American population of any state – displays on a field of blue a warrior's shield made of buffalo hide. Under its lower edge hang seven eagle feathers; superimposed on its center, a ceremonial peace pipe crossed with an olive branch symbolizes peace and unity between the cultures of the Indian and European-American settlers. [Figure 1]

FIGURE 1



The same could be said of the idyllic image of an Indian woman in full regalia dominating the seal of Florida's flag. [Figure 2]

And the imagery of the Kansas flag [Figure 3] would give pause only to someone unfamiliar with the great buffalo hunts of Great Plains Indians.

In contrast, over the past two decades increasing controversy has surrounded the representation of Indians or Indian symbolism on the flags of **Minnesota**, **New Mexico**, and **Massachusetts**.

MINNESOTA

In Minnesota there are 11 Tribes, seven Anishinaabe (Chippewa, Ojibwe) reservations and four Dakota (Sioux) communities.² Their presence on the Minnesota flag [Figure 4] is a fairly accurate reflection of the state's settlement history: Indians fleeing westward from the farmers who displaced them. The graphic quality of the fleeing Indian has been improved slightly over the years, but fast-fleeing the white conquest of his lands the Indian remains. Lee Herold, native Minnesota resident, offered some historical thoughts about the state seal. ¹²

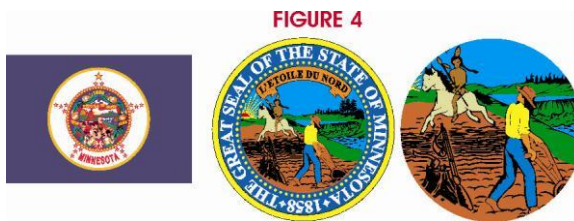


FIGURE 4

NEW MEXICO

New Mexico's flag [Figure 5] has been the subject of quite a different controversy.



FIGURE 6

The sun symbol derives from an image sacred to the Zia Pueblo

[Figure 6], who never explicitly agreed to allow the State to use it. The Zia didn't have a chance to agree because no one asked them. Flag designer Harry Mera

– winner of the 1925 design contest sponsored by the Daughters of the American Revolution – reportedly saw the sun symbol on a Zia ceremonial pot in the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe, the capital

FIGURE 5



of New Mexico. **Problem:** That pot apparently was stolen from the Pueblo reservation. As *The New York Times* reported a few years ago,³ “Mr. Pino, a Zia who has lived all his life at the pueblo and served as assistant war chief and war chief before becoming the tribal administrator, has traced the story of how the symbol became the center of the state flag. That pot, Mr. Pino said, had been stolen: only ceremonial pottery was allowed to bear the Zia, and no ceremonial pottery was ever to leave the pueblo. And only the pueblo's elders can give permission for use of the symbol.” There is no record of Zia Elders ever giving permission for the ceremonial pot, which inspired flag-designer Mera, to leave the Zia reservation.

Why weren't the Zia asked for permission to use their sacred sun symbol in 1925? For one thing, my country, along with several others, has a poor record of asking Indians for permission to do anything. It's a safe bet that no one ever asked an Ojibwe to help design the flag of Minnesota, or a Zia to lend a hand with New Mexico's banner or, as we shall see next, an Algonquin Indian to comment on the flag of Massachusetts. Why didn't the Zia object back in 1925? In 1925 the Zia had barely become U.S. citizens.⁴ They had little power, even less money, and probably zero representation at state or federal level.



Adding insult to injury, over the years the good people of New Mexico decided to use the Zia name and symbol – without any kind of permission – on a variety of objects, from automobile license plates to ... portable toilets. That's right, portable toilets. ^{5, 6} [Figure 7]

One interesting thought as we leave New Mexico's flag: Notice how freely modern inhabitants of the state appropriated symbols belonging to the land's original owners: *Representation without Consultation. Representation without Compensation*, to boot. Some may argue that New Mexico honored the Zia by placing their symbol of the flag. If so, it was an honor the Zia neither requested nor agreed to. We'll witness more of that before long.

FIGURE 7



FIGURE 8



MASSACHUSETTS

As far as we know Massachusetts hasn't yet adorned its portable toilets with Indian symbols, though the state did find an interesting way to represent such symbols – without consultation or compensation, naturally – on its turnpike and multi-lane highway signs. [Figure 8] This particular Pilgrim's hat pierced by an arrow could be seen on road signs well into the 1990s when it was no longer deemed “politically correct” and

was replaced with an arrow-free hat. [Figure 9]

Curious minds want to know: Why the replacement? Was it an uncomfortable reminder of 17th century conflicts between white settlers and Indians that resulted in the near-eradication of Natives from the state? Why would the reminder be uncomfortable for the white community? After all, settlers won the argument: Indians were eventually swept aside and marginalized, their lands acquired by new and, in many cases, illegitimate owners. Perhaps the state's reasoning for “correcting” the highway symbol was that it drew attention to a contentious past that made some residents uncomfortable? Night visions of Indian raids that could bring back uncomfortable memories? The word “**uncomfortable**” does seem to repeat itself, doesn't it?

And so an idea occurred to me in 2003: If a little arrow could make some people **uncomfortable** after some 350 years, how comfortable is the **Indian community** with Massachusetts' other symbols – its arms and flag? [Figure 10]

How well do these symbols accord with 21st - century sensibilities among Indians and non-Indians? Among Massachusetts residents and those of other states? Among flag enthusiasts in other countries? The results of the survey I conducted in 2003-2004 are shown in their entirety on my company's website.⁷

Figures 11 and 12 record the questions I asked Indians and non-Indians during the survey. **Figure 11** shows the Massachusetts arms, stripped of scroll, logo and white star, and asks respondents how **uncomfortable** they were with the image on a scale of 1-10, where 10 was defined as "very uncomfortable." No other specifics were given: No indication where the image appears; no mention of Massachusetts. Just a gold-yellow Indian on a blue shield and a sworded arm poised over his head, about to strike.

please return this survey form to →

Polgar Orenski
181 Red Air Drive, New Milford, CT 06776, U.S.A.
Tel: (860) 354-0686 Fax: (860) 354-2786
TMRALP@aol.com www.TMRALP.com

Survey question 1: HOW DO YOU RATE YOUR REACTION (on a scale of 0-10) TO THE SYMBOLISM SHOWN BELOW

YOUR RATING: (0-10) _____

Scale: 0 = totally indifferent 10 = very uncomfortable

Your Tribe: _____

Non-Indian? Please check box

Please give reasons for your rating: _____

(Please use reverse side if more room is needed)

FIGURE 11

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Survey question 2: THE DESIGN BELOW IS THE CENTER IMAGE IN THE FLAG OF MASSACHUSETTS. THE LATIN MOTTO MEANS "By the Sword We Seek Peace, but Peace Only Under Liberty." PLEASE RATE YOUR REACTION AGAIN.

YOUR RATING: (0-10) _____

Scale: 0 = totally indifferent 10 = very uncomfortable

Your Tribe: _____

Non-Indian? Please check box

Please give reasons for your rating: _____

(Please use reverse side if more room is needed)

FIGURE 12

Figure 12 shows the full arms, identifies them with Massachusetts, and translates the Latin motto into English: "By the sword we seek peace, but peace only under liberty." Again, viewers are asked how **uncomfortable** they were with this image on the same scale of 1-10 as previously.

Before briefly discussing survey findings, I owe a confession: As you've probably noticed already, I had a difficult time being impartial on this topic, and I suspect that my past involvement with Indian tribes and their flags influenced the form and presentation of the survey. I aimed for neutrality, but I fear I largely failed.

Here then is a summary of how people responded to the survey:



FIGURE 10



- Among **Indians**, unfavorable comments outweighed favorable ones by 63:17, or **79% unfavorable**.
- Among **non-Indians**, unfavorable comments surpassed favorable ones by 61:26, or **70% unfavorable**.

- Among **non-Indian Massachusetts residents**, a drastic **reversal**: **favorable** comments drowned out unfavorable ones by 14:2, or **88% favorable**.
- Among **non-U.S. residents**, unfavorable comments bested favorable ones by 22:1, or **96% unfavorable**.

These results will not come as a surprise to State Representative Byron Rushing of the Massachusetts legislature, who has led an effort to change the state's seal for some two decades. In October 2007, he stated that “the seal is anti-Indian, including placement of the sword over the Indian's head, the inappropriate slogan and the inaccurate attire.” **8**

Nor would the findings surprise John Peters, Jr., a Mashpee Indian and executive director of the Massachusetts Commission on Indian Affairs, who also advocated the seal change, saying “it's time history was accurately reflected. Yes, the sword over the Indian's head is part of history, and that (settlers) subdued the Native Americans and took their land, but it is demeaning.” **8**

However, there were opposing views. For example, “Representative Jeffrey Perry argued that there is no need to change the seal if it has been accepted by citizens and the government for more than a century. ‘In the name of political correctness, we have a tendency to rewrite history,’ he said. Perry suggested the symbol of the sword over the Indian's head might not just be in opposition to the Native American, but it could also depict a strong commonwealth that is able to defend itself.” **8**

The debate in Massachusetts accurately reflects the two main reactions to the Massachusetts arms uncovered during my survey. By an overwhelming majority, residents of Massachusetts were against any change, speaking in typical *topovexillolatric* **9** terms such as:

I live in Massachusetts and I love our seal and flag ...

The motto ... perfectly captures the essential importance of an armed citizenry to the maintenance of liberty ...

I live in Massachusetts and have grown up with this symbol. **10**



On the other side of the argument were large majorities of Indians and non-Indians from the United States and several other countries who judged the symbols violent, demeaning to Indians, war-like and racist. One respondent called it “Filled with early-U.S. genocidal fetishes.” ¹¹ And one Indian wrote, *If it were changed to a Indian arm holding a hatchet over a Pilgrim, I wonder how non-Indians would feel about that?* Which inspired the last image of this presentation [Figure 13]. Note that the motto now reads: *Under the **axe** we seek peace, but peace only under liberty.* A thought-provoking point...

FIGURE 13

In conclusion, I hope this brief study provided an interesting insight into some of the controversies surrounding Native symbols on American state flags.

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END NOTES

1. Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., *500 Nations*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1994, p. 8.
 2. Indian Tribes of Minnesota: www.indianaffairs.state.mn.us/tribes.html
 3. Phil Patton, *The New York Times*, January 13, 2000, "Trademark Battle Over Pueblo Sign," <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A00E5D7173AF930A25752C0A9669C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=all>
 4. The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 granted full U.S. citizenship to America's Indians. (The Fourteenth Amendment guarantees citizenship to persons born in the U.S., but only if "subject to the jurisdiction thereof"; this latter clause excludes certain indigenous people.) The Act was signed into law by President Calvin Coolidge on June 2, 1924.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_Citizenship_Act_of_1924
 5. www.indiantrademark.net/t02Articles/Exploitation/zia.html
 6. www.cnn.com/US/9909/14/new.mexico.flag
 7. www.tmealf.com/MFS/mfs.htm
 8. Annie Sherman, Boston bureau of *The Berkshire Eagle*, *State seal is under fire*, October 7, 2005, Section: Headlines, Article ID: 3094801
 9. *Topovexillolatriy* is a neologism defining the worship (idolatry) of whatever flag (vexillum) already exists in an inhabited place, such as a city, village, district or state (topo < *topos* = Greek for „place, any portion of space marked off from surrounding space“, see <http://www.studylight.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=5117>)
- As Peter Klumpenhower commented in March 2009, *It seems as if the vast majority of people residing within an area (especially an American state) will always strongly oppose any changes to their area's flag, while other people are much more open to it. This has happened with Oklahoma, Oregon, and Utah, and many nations around the world such as Iraq and the United Kingdom. One could readily add Georgia, Minnesota and Mississippi to Klumpenhower's list.*
10. www.tmealf.com/MFS/mfs_mass_residents.htm
 11. See www.tmealf.com/MFS/mfs_indians.htm (Indian responses) www.tmealf.com/MFS/mfs_non-indians.htm (U.S. non-Indians) www.tmealf.com/MFS/mfs_international.htm (International)

12. **Lee Herold**, a native Minnesotan and co-promoter of a simplified state flag, wrote in an e-mail of April 2009:

The seal was designed at the request of, and consultation with, the territorial governor, Alexander Ramsey, by the territorial representative to Congress, Henry Sibley, the same Sibley who was the first state governor, and in 1862 lead the forces against the Dakota revolt and wanted to hang 300 Indians, of which most were pardoned by Pres. Lincoln (I think 32 were hanged). He intentionally was conveying that the whites were coming in to stay, to farm & plow the ground, and the Indian running away west into the sunset with spear down. I suspect he wanted people considering moving to the wild west territory to see that it was safe for new settlers, though that's just conjecture. Perhaps he really did dislike Indians. Once the settlers got here they found the real danger was mosquitoes, not Indians. They have still not been driven into the sunset.