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## Conflicting emotions about flag nothing new

**Debate going on through much of U.S. history**

**By Adam Geller**

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Not long after Richard Evey began flying an American flag upside down outside his home, one infuriated neighbor called police. Another began making obscene gestures each time he drove past.

Evey, who lives not far from a Marine Corps air station in Havelock, N.C., relishes need-ling his fellow citizens with a message that the country is headed in the wrong direction.

"The flag is a symbol of the freedoms our country was formed for," says the man disdained for disrespecting it. "You see the thing flying and it's gorgeous, it's beautiful."

What is it that stirs Americans' intense, complicated, and sometimes conflicting emotions about our flag? The debate has been going on for much of our history — and as we commemorate our 90th Flag Day this week, it is likely to flare again.

The Senate is moving nearer to a vote on whether to amend the Constitution to ban burning the flag. No matter that flag burning is rare.

### **Sacred, yet utilitarian**

"We have this civil religion that has its own sacraments and icons, and clearly the flag has become one of them," said Jackson Lears, a professor of history at Rutgers University.

At the same time, however, the flag is treated as supremely utilitarian, adaptable for any purpose — as suitable for use on a bikini or an air freshener as on a politician's lapel.

We salute digital images of waving flags before ball games. The flag is a Jasper Johns painting, a Bruce Springsteen album cover, the motorcycle helmet worn by Peter Fonda in "Easy Rider."

"Americans really have a very peculiar relationship with their flag," said Markus Kemmelmeier, a social psychologist at the University of Nevada-Reno. Kemmelmeier, who is German-born and came to the United States a dozen years ago, has spent much of the time since studying the pervasiveness of the flag and the meanings people attach to it.

"I can't say I've figured it all out," he says. That may be because there is no one right answer to what the flag means, except that our relationship with it is far more complex than we often realize.

A shaft of afternoon sun spears the air-conditioned darkness, the stillness ebbing before the rising tide of a choir. "O say, can you see..." the voices ask.

And as eyes blink in the newfound light, a murmur spreads through the small theater at Baltimore's Fort McHenry.

A third-grader, camera dangling from his neck, stands ramrod straight and presses fingers to the brim of his baseball cap in salute. Hands rise to hearts, and lips form words written about this very place.

A curtain that moments ago covered a wall has drawn back and there, undulating across the sky, is the reason they have come.

"It's more than a piece of fabric," visitor Eric Bacher of Bel Air, Md., says later, squinting up at the 42-by-30-foot replica. "It's hearts and souls and history and hopes and dreams."

### **An afterthought 200 years ago**

Given the intensity many feel about the flag, it's hard to imagine that for Americans of 200 years ago, it was little more than an afterthought.

Early in our history, the flag flew over forts and federal buildings but was not widely used. The U.S. Army did not carry it into battle for 50 years.

"Until the Civil War, the flag was really not all that popular," says Robert Goldstein, author of several books on the flag's history and the debate over its desecration. "People did not fly it in front of private homes. Schools did not fly it. ... It really was not that important."

Even in 1814, when Francis Scott Key wrote the words to "The Star-Spangled Banner" after watching the British fleet shell Fort McHenry, that did not really change. His poem proved popular but was not adopted as the national anthem until 1931.

The War Between the States changed things decisively, as Northerners enthusiastically embraced the flag as the symbol of fragile national unity.

"Until now, we never thought about the flag being more than a nice design of red and white stripes," a woman named Nancy Cunningham wrote in her diary at the time, quoted by Goldstein.

### **Wilson proclaimed Flag Day**

Only after the war, however, did Americans demand protection for the flag. The threat then was not burning, but advertising. The flag was used to promote magic elixirs and alcoholic beverages, printed on wrappers for cheese and cigars. The first proposed anti-desecration measure came in 1878.

In recent protests by entrants demanding the right to live and work legally in the United States, protesters carried the U.S. flag alongside those of the countries of their birth.

Similarly, German-speaking immigrants displayed the flag to show loyalty during the run-up to U.S. involvement in World War I. Americans' patriotic fervor culminated in 1916, with President Woodrow Wilson's proclamation of the first national Flag Day.

World War II added to Old Glory's role as symbol of American strength and goodness — a status enhanced by the news photo and later the memorial showing Marines raising the flag at Iwo Jima.

It took Vietnam to put the flag again at the center of a culture war. Months after war protesters burned a flag in New York's Central Park in 1967, Congress passed the first federal flag anti-desecration law.

Though that law, and state laws like it, were struck down by the Supreme Court in 1989, debate over how we see the flag has simmered ever since.

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