THE COMMISSION'S REPORT ON THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES ON FLAG DESIGN

1st October 2014

THE COMMISSION

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Introduction

This report attempts to lay out for the public benefit some basic guidelines to help those developing new flags for their communities and organizations, or suggesting refinements to existing ones. Flags perform a very powerful function and this best practice advice is intended to help with optimizing the ability of flags to fulfill this function.

The principles contained within it are only guidelines, as for each "don't do this" there is almost certainly a flag which does just that and yet works. An obvious example would be item 3.1 "fewer colors," yet who would deny that both the flag of South Africa and the Gay Pride Flag work well, despite having six colors each.

An important part of a flag is its aesthetic appeal, but as the the 18th century Scottish philosopher, David Hume, wrote, "Beauty in things exists merely in the mind which contemplates them." Different cultures will prefer different aesthetics, so a general set of principles, such as this report, cannot hope to cover what will and will not work aesthetically. What it can do is advise on design elements that tend to work well, and warn of those that do not work.

So do what you feel works for your flag - as Franklin K. Lane, U.S. Secretary of the Interior 1913-20, said, "For you are the makers of the Flag, and it is well that you glory in the making."

Vexillographic Best Practice

1. Terminology

1.1. *Obverse*: in western tradition, this is the side of the flag that you see when the flagpole is on the left - we normally think of it as the flag's front.

1.2. *Reverse*: this is the opposite side of the flag from the obverse, the side you see when the flagpole is on the right - we normally think of it as the flag's back.

1.3. *Ratio*: the ratio of the height of a flag to its length - the USA national flag is 10:19, the UK national flag is 3:5. *Proportion* is another term used to compare height to length.

1.4. *Hoist*: this is the half of the flag nearest the flagpole.

1.5. *Fly*: this is the half of the flag furthest from the flagpole; the *fly edge* is the edge furthest from the flagpole, and the part of a flag most likely to wear away.

1.6. *Canton*: this is the top-half of the hoist, so the top-left corner when illustrated in western style, with the flagpole on the left - it is the most significant part of the flag.

1.7. *Device*: this is anything that appears on the flag, from a simple geometric shape, such as a cross or star, to an animal or plant. Also known as a *charge*.

1.8. *Division*: this is when the flag is divided into different colored areas, such as three stripes, or diagonally.

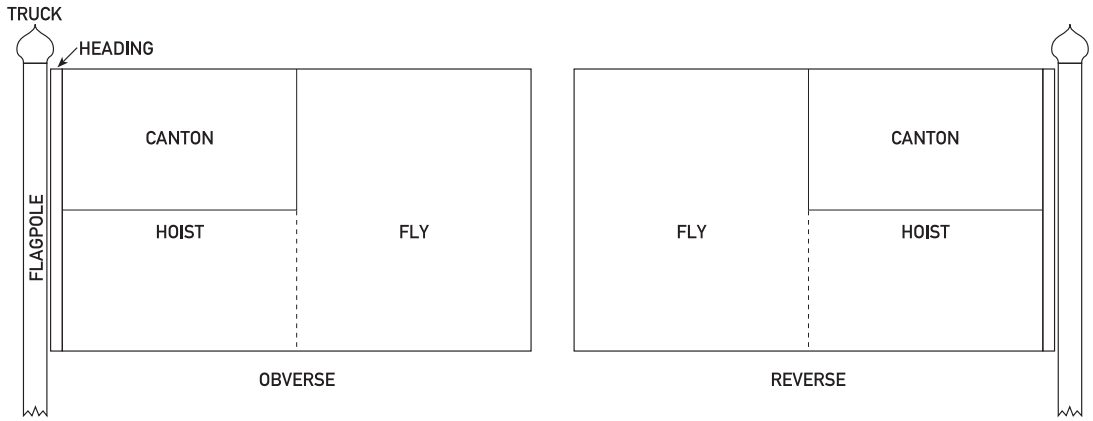

Fig 1. Parts of a Flag

2. Basics

2.1. When designing a flag remember that it will fly in the wind and is not just a rectangular design on paper - so think what the flag will look like when flying in a brisk breeze and when hanging down on a still day.

2.2. Simplicity is important in creating a design that is easy to recognize and simple to reproduce. Try re-drawing the design freehand to see whether an imperfect drawing of the flag can still be easily identified. Also try imagining it at a small size, such as a lapel pin, or when viewed from a distance, when small details will not be obvious.

2.3. A flag needs to be distinctive to stop it being mistaken for another. Compare it to neighboring and similar flags to check that they are not easily confused.

2.4. If you want a flag to remain popular for a long time, it should look as "timeless" as possible, to make it immune to changing fashions. Avoid using features in the design that will cause the flag to become dated or obsolete, e.g., a reference to farming could be timeless but depicting a particular style of tractor will date very quickly. Imagine the flag in a historic setting and in a very modern setting to check whether it would work in both.

3. Color

3.1. Using fewer colors will keep the design simple and bold.

3.2. Contrast is important - use light colors on dark, and vice-versa. So a white cross on red is good contrast, but a blue cross on red would be a poor contrast. This is a very useful guideline, especially for choosing the color of devices and their background. If the use of non-contrasting colors is unavoidable, make use of outline colors (fimbriation) where, for instance, a dark cross on a dark background is outlined with a light one – an example of this is the flag of the Åland Islands, part of Finland.

3.3. Modern printing techniques have made many more shades available - if there is a specific color that is connected to an area or organization then that should be considered. It may be useful to match colors to those already used in other national or regional flags. If you wish your flag to be made by traditional applique techniques (i.e., sewn together from different pieces of fabric), then bear in mind that the range of colors available in flag fabric is much more limited.

3.4. The edges of a flag need to be defined so that it stands out from its environment. For example the blue Scandinavian cross on Finland's national flag allows the edges of the flag to be seen even if the sky is full of white clouds.

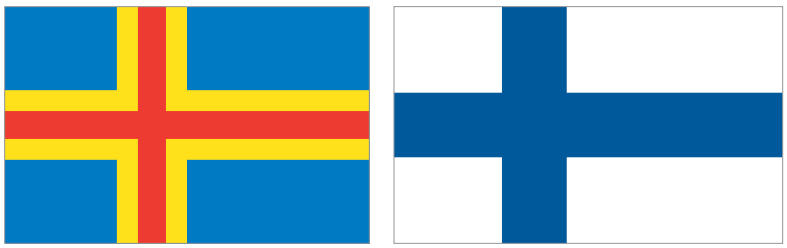

Fig 2. The Flag of the Åland Islands (Left) and the Finnish National Flag (Right)

4. Structure

4.1. The way a flag flies means the hoist is more visible when waving in the wind and hanging at rest, than the fly. The most prominent parts of a flag are in the center or in the canton. Devices that are placed in the fly of a flag are often obscured when the flag is hanging limply, so this is best avoided.

4.2. As flags are normally wider than they are tall (i.e., "landscape"), a design that is taller than it is wide (i.e., "portrait") will tend to look squashed and leave a lot of empty space on each side - so the design will need careful balancing.

4.3. Avoid having a different design on the reverse of the flag as this will undermine recognition and make the flag much more expensive to manufacture.

5. Devices

5.1. A single device should be placed to ensure that it will be seen with the flag in flight or at rest, preferably in the most prominent position.

5.2. Where more than one device is placed on a flag, different background colors can be used to “anchor” the device within the overall flag design.

5.3. Devices should be graphical representations rather than realistic pictorial depictions (e.g., a simplified tree rather than a realistic drawing of a particular tree) so that people unfamiliar with the specific entity represented can still understand what is being referred to (e.g., the castle on Edinburgh's city flag is not remotely an accurate representation of Edinburgh Castle).

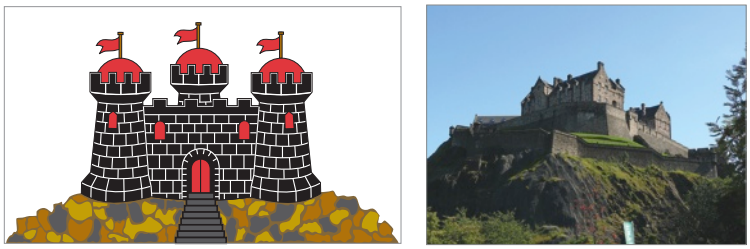

Fig 3. The Castle on the Flag of the City of Edinburgh (Left) and a Photograph of Edinburgh Castle (Right)

5.4. Use of writing on a flag defeats its purpose - one might simply write the name of a country or location on a white sheet and wave it around. In any case it is very difficult to read any writing on a flag when it is flying in the wind, or hanging down, and it appears backwards on the reverse of the flag (unless the flag is made double-sided, greatly increasing the cost and complexity of manufacturing the flag). The challenge is to create a flag that can symbolize an entity and be immediately recognizable without recourse to inscriptions or legends. Parade Banners and Military Colors have a different function and are usually displayed more rigidly and closer up to the observer, allowing for writing to be used.

5.5. Traditionally, the flagpole of a flag is considered the leading edge, so on vehicles the flag is painted with the flagpole at the front, as if the flag is streaming behind it in the wind of the vehicle’s passage. This has led to devices which themselves have a direction being shown moving towards the flagpole. So most animals on flags face to the left on the obverse. In heraldry an animal facing to the right can indicate cowardice, as in running away.

5.6. Seals, coats-of-arms, and logos are usually too complex to use as a device on a flag; after all many are designed expressly to be viewed up-close and are difficult to reproduce. It is better to use an element from these devices as a reference to the whole.

6. Symbolism

6.1. The symbols on a flag should be both distinct and representative. Including an emblem that is specific to the locality it represents makes the flag both meaningful and unique.

6.2. A flag should represent the totality of any particular community rather than individual parts of it. Using a device or emblem associated with one specific location within a broader region renders the flag ineffective as a regional representation; but beware of the complexity that can be created by having a device for each part of a community.

6.3. A flag should emphasize its own identity over that of any higher level grouping, otherwise the distinctiveness of each design is lost, as for example in the flags of the former Soviet republics.

6.4. Only include symbolic references to other entities if there is a clear, direct relevance.

6.5. Avoid representing any particular feature in multiple ways; opt instead to make one definitive reference.