

American Perspectives on Heraldry and Vexillology

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All sciences characteristically adhere to fundamental standards of scholarship which set the scientific community apart from other areas of society. Every scientist is presumed to be objective, thorough, scholarly, and willing to alter his or her point of view—even in fundamental questions—should the facts under investigation require. Religion, in contrast, requires faith in the truth of certain beliefs; a political ideology likewise relies on the commitment to advance a particular cause in a spirit of partisanship; in the realm of esthetics, individuals may well have fundamental differences of opinion which cannot be adjudged scientifically as right or wrong.

Since 1929, International Congresses of Genealogical and Heraldic *Sciences* have been held. But has heraldry indeed adhered to the fundamental principles of science? It appears that important areas have been consistently neglected by heraldic scholarship. Analyzing why this may be so can only be hinted at, based on years of dealing with the points in question and without the rigorous documentation that a complete analysis requires. This essay must therefore be considered a preliminary statement for a work in progress—on the development of heraldry in the United States; the specific circumstances which have led to its divergence from traditional European heraldic norms; the relationship between heraldry and flags in the United States; as well as the role which the study of both heraldry and vexillology have played in analyzing these characteristics.

Coats of arms and flags are parts of a wider realm of graphic symbolism which characterizes the social and political organization of human societies around the world. Other forms of graphic symbols include seals, logos, medals, decorations, uniforms, and regalia. The focus here is exclusively on the use of seals and arms by states and other organized political entities (i.e., civic heraldry) and on flags. Important as family and individual arms have been historically, in the United States state symbolism always had primacy until the late 19th century when it was out-ranked (but not displaced) by commercial symbols such as trademarks and logos. Even today personal heraldry is a very small part of social symbolism in the United States, so only a focus on state symbolism provides a realistic view to scholars seeking to elucidate general principles of importance for American heraldry.

Most who have studied official symbols of the United States—the seals, coats of arms, and flags of the federal government and the governments of the American states, territories, counties, and municipalities—concede that these do not generally conform to traditional heraldic norms of design and, furthermore, that they exhibit

mediocre to execrable taste in their composition and execution. These symbols are, for example, characterized by naturalistic rather than stylized figures;

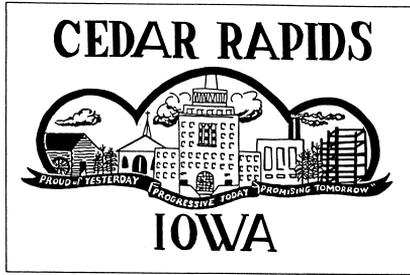


Fig. 1: Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Civic Flag Since 1962

they rely heavily on words, numbers, and other inscriptions; their colors are often impossible to describe in heraldic terms; the figures as represented are too frequently puerile renditions;

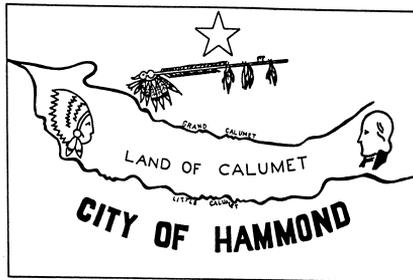


Fig. 2: Hammond, Indiana, Civic Flag Since 1971

and the compositions violate heraldic rules of distinctiveness, simplicity, and uniqueness.



Fig. 3: Milwaukee Civic Flag Since 1954

Without seeking to justify these symbols, let their history be analyzed and their logic perhaps become better understood.

The social context of every country determines the way in which its symbolism develops. Special circumstances in the United States—despite the common heritage

it shares with Europe and, above all, with Great Britain—have influenced the nature of American heraldry, just as American religion, literature, and other aspects of life differ from European models. Specifically, in explaining the unique nature of American heraldry we must consider the social classes composing its citizenry, the circumstances of their emigration, the prevailing political systems before and after the American Revolution, the ideology informing American nationality, and the nature of trans-Atlantic heraldic influences.

Society in colonial America (1620–1775) overwhelmingly comprised individuals descended from segments of the European population which had nothing to do with heraldry in their daily lives. While George Washington and a few other Americans may have had coats of arms, they formed even more of a minority than their armigerous counterparts in Europe. Perhaps more importantly, their heraldic bearings did not engender the prestige and community support which the armigerous in Europe found in their societies in general and in government in particular. Moreover, because many common people had emigrated to the United States fleeing persecution for their religious or political views (and even the poorest had shown great initiative in uprooting themselves and their families from traditional patterns of life), there existed in America a spirit of independence and, often, of iconoclasm generally lacking among comparable social classes in Europe. Thus public and private use of personal heraldry in the United States in the last quarter of the 18th century was very modest and there was relatively little social or political advantage to such use which might have encouraged heraldry's growth. Nevertheless, the decisive circumstances by which heraldry was "dethroned" came during the American Revolution, i.e., its war of independence.

Americans in the 1770s who utilized personal heraldry were, for the most part, Loyalists—the third of the total population opposing separation from Britain. At the end of the Revolution, many Loyalists left the country for Canada, the Bahamas, or Britain; those who remained tended to avoid flaunting prerogatives which were even less prestigious than they had been before the Revolution. Many Americans felt a revulsion against the monarchical system, manifested in tearing down British coats of arms, statues, and similar monuments which—if left untouched—might eventually have given a sense of dignity to a heraldry which most Americans saw as pretentious or foolish. Quite simply, heraldry had a bad reputation in the private sector in the United States following independence. It was not so reviled as it would be in France following the French Revolution, but only because it had never really permeated American society before the Revolution.

In the state sector, heraldry also suffered. Overwhelmingly, pre-Revolutionary seals and coats of arms had been created in England for use by officials whose allegiance and responsibility were to England and not to America. There were exceptions: the governments of Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts-Bay were local and the symbols they adopted likewise were autochthonous. For the most part, however, the chartered companies, royal governors, and proprietors who exercised authority in the colonies of British North America relied on seals and arms which bore little or no relationship to the lives of ordinary people in the territories which those symbols represented. In many cases the personal arms of royal governors rather than the royal arms were used on documents.

During and after the Revolution, the 13 new American states abandoned every vestige of the old symbols of public authority. (The arms of the Lords Baltimore used

in Maryland were only resurrected more than a century later; moreover, Maryland is the only U.S. state which has again taken up symbols from the era of English rule.) This contrasts strongly with the widespread use of old European symbols in other former colonies which are now independent states in the New World, Africa, the Pacific, or Asia—or with the resurrection of *Ancien Régime* symbols in modern France and Russia.

When Virginia, which has exhibited more aristocratic inclinations than most of the original states, looked to the 17th-century arms of the Virginia Company in the 1960s and 1980s as a possible source for new state symbols, the public attitude to this initiative was very negative. The Carolinas, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey all have pre-Revolutionary coats of arms which might be appropriate for use today and yet their use never seems to have been suggested. Only rarely is traditional heraldry considered in the creation of seals, arms, or flags for American counties, cities, or towns—even in the old Eastern seaboard states.

However unacceptable the old heraldry was to the men and women who from 1775 onward were creating new systems of government in a new country, the perceived necessity for public symbols led to the immediate adoption of alternatives. If a proclamation had been embellished by engraved royal arms in the past,



Fig. 4: *British Royal Arms*
(from a document, circa
1720)

it needed a comparable graphic symbol under the new regime; if a wax seal previously authenticated documents, it would do so in the future. In theory, of course, all symbols of that kind could have been abolished: indeed, ceremonial forms such as ranks of nobility and military orders and decorations, which were part of a general European tradition in which Britain fully partook, were unceremoniously rejected by Americans. Titles of nobility have never since been recognized in the United States nor have orders of knighthood; even military decorations only very slowly began to regain favor a century after the Revolution. In theory, therefore, the seals and coats of arms which America had inherited from Britain could likewise have been abandoned. If the Puritan spirit of the Massachusetts-Bay Colony had prevailed, perhaps words alone, in written or oral form, would have substituted wherever the situation called for an honorific or authenticator.

In any event, the fledgling republic perceived the need for symbols and only rejected the specific models, not the usage. As with many other revolutionary gov-

ernments, it made a conscious attempt to relate the visual content of seals and arms to the life of everyday citizens rather than to abstract historical notions or the traditional design elements of heraldry—mantling, pavilion, crown, crest, scepter, orb, lions, etc. Once that revolutionary mode of graphic expression was established, by definition it became the norm for all American heraldry. While both France and Russia underwent counter-revolutions and eventually partially restored their old symbols, no such revulsion against revolutionary excesses ever arose in the United States. Consequently, American civic symbols have never returned to traditional European heraldic concepts of design or authority. In any event, public heraldry of the late 18th century in Europe set few standards of excellence that Americans might appropriately have turned to in order to correct their own shortcomings. If anything, the closer American 18th-century seals and arms were to traditional heraldry, the worse were the designs which resulted. It is rather American isolation from more recent heraldic standards in Europe which has kept the United States from attaining a better esthetic canon.

The same process can be seen in other parts of the world. In Latin America, which liberated itself from Spanish and Portuguese dominion in the early 19th century, modern civic heraldry is an outgrowth of the poorly designed Iberian models from the colonial era. Likewise in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific there are many countries and territories whose contemporary civic heraldry is a reflection of 20th-century British norms, for better or worse. In a few cases, of course, there have been positive modern external influences. For example, the late Louis Mühlemann of Switzerland created designs for provincial arms in Gabon reflecting the striking simplicity of concept and rendition which characterizes Swiss heraldry, but this is very much the exception. Moreover, arms created by foreign experts inevitably raise the question of appropriateness, particularly when simply artistic taste rather than fundamental design principles is applied to a specific coat of arms.



Fig. 5: Arms of the City of Iloilo, Philippines (circa 1946)

Two other factors cannot be ignored in analyzing the origins and growth of the distinctive style of civic symbolism of America. Unlike 18th-century Europe, the young independent America was democratic and federal. While restrictions on democracy certainly existed—for example property, gender, and racial qualifications for voting, and unrepresentative state legislatures—nevertheless the average adult male in any of the 13 original states in the late 18th century was more free to participate in public decisions, including those affecting official symbolism, than was his counterpart in almost any European country. Access to the vote, constitutional and legal guarantees of civil liberties, widespread education, and economic self-reliance in the United States resulted in the strong exercise of what might have been only theoretical rights.

That fundamental American principle of popular involvement in the choice, even the designing, of official symbols has prevailed to the present day. It expresses itself strongly in the feeling Americans have that authentic symbols can only be developed by, approved by, and utilized by those who are actually native to the area represent-

ed. Outsiders are generally not welcome in the process. Even heraldic and vexillo-graphic experts—one is tempted to say *especially* experts—are looked upon with suspicion. Fundamentally, the unspoken American ethos seems to deny the concept of expertise in matters of official symbolism. Designing a symbol, in the American view, is purely a matter of taste which is personal, local, and to be determined by vote. Democracy is seen not as the enemy of good heraldry but as its best guarantor.

Federalism is also a powerful force in American life, one not easily understood by those who live in countries where centralism has been the rule for centuries or where autonomous regions are looked on with suspicion. The life of public policy and administration in the United States differs radically from what prevails in most of the world in the wide license given not only to states but to their subdivisions—counties, cities, and towns—in many important matters. There is no national police force in the United States, for example, and in most states municipal police have a role that in many countries would be a function of the central government. Wide latitude for differences from one state or community to the next also exists in education at all levels, health care, tax policy, and public safety standards. Whatever the demerits of federalism in discouraging a uniform system of administration and law across the entire nation, its impact on popular attitudes creates a strong prejudice favoring civil liberties and individual initiative.

This dramatically affects public symbolism. There is no central office in the United States responsible for designing, approving, or even registering coats of arms, seals, and flags; likewise none of the 50 states has such an office. A serious proposal to create such a “Bureau of Heraldry” has apparently never seriously been made, nor would such a proposal likely find popular support. Some private initiatives have been undertaken, but almost exclusively on a profit-making basis. Their lack of success—in a country where everything is for sale and where every opportunity to exploit products, ideas, and people for profit has been attempted—is extraordinary. Nevertheless in the 50 American states and six territories, the majority of the more than 3,000 counties and 100,000 cities and towns have seals for use in public business. Moreover, they have thousands of flags and hundreds of coats of arms—nearly all developed without any direct reference to other symbols, even those of neighboring communities.

Some of these manage to manifest beauty and effectiveness despite the negligible heraldic knowledge of their designers. Most of these symbols, however, lack the fundamental respect for heraldic principles shown by even the smallest communities in every European country. On the other hand, supervision by a government authority of symbol designs and their registration is never an absolute guarantee that only the best concepts and executions will be manifested in state arms, seals, and flags. Indeed, the proliferation of civic heraldry outside the United States in the decades since the end of World War II has taxed the ability of heraldists to find unique and imaginative designs. Moreover, certain canons of taste exist in each country such that even the best coats of arms and flags frequently exhibit a repetitiveness deriving from a strong family resemblance to each other. While diversity is no substitute for excellence of design, both simultaneously are not incompatible.

The great 19th-century westward migration in the United States created many relatively small communities which were physically isolated from established centers of government. This had even happened in the older states: two or three decades after the first European settlements in Massachusetts, for example, there were independent and self-sufficient cities and towns existing hundreds of kilometers from the main population centers of the coast. Such communities had legislative bodies (town meetings) which made all the laws and ran local affairs in the same way that the states themselves did, albeit on a smaller scale. They needed seals for documents such as property deeds. The choice of design naturally led community leaders to consider the milieu of the municipality since by their ethnic roots, their local economy, their religious convictions, and general mode of life they were often barely distinguishable from a thousand other communities along the eastern coast of North America. Local history was not a viable source of symbolism: when—ignoring the Indian population—the town itself was only five or twenty years old, there could be no “history” for use on its seal. The same issue arose increasingly as the population expanded westward. Creators of new communities had the common experience of being emigrants from Europe, yet that was a past which most new Americans had no interest in recalling or perpetuating. Their lives were oriented toward the circumstances they faced in their daily lives and the future.

Lacking famous battles, old castles, distinguished families, foreign invasions, and the many other sources for symbols so frequently found in Europe, these small communities—even the larger states into which they coalesced—took up images derived from their everyday existence.

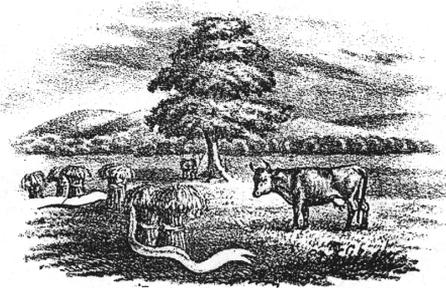


Fig. 6: *Arms of the State of Vermont*
(1845 rendition)

The tree, the wheat sheaf, the mountain, the ox, the plow, the ship, the river, the rifle—these were their natural choices, over and over again. In addition, America was a highly literate society. Protestants were expected to read the Bible and at least a rudimentary education was nearly universal. It was natural, therefore, that words should appear in their seals—sometimes classical quotations, sometimes a biblical passage, but often only a statement of the most mundane kind such as the name of the community (or its eponym) and its founding date.

Heraldic books and people familiar with heraldry were totally lacking. In the overwhelming majority of cases the only inspiration for graphic symbolism for new towns, counties, and states were the printed images of the seals



Fig. 7: *Seal of the City of Melrose, Massachusetts*

used by the earliest states, many of which expressed the anti-heraldic attitudes of the Revolutionary War era. Americans instinctively felt that those symbols belonged to them: they were not the prerogative of a powerful noble class or of a distant impersonal government. Hence the seals of the states were frequently adapted artistically for use as letterheads, on newspapers, to decorate recruitment posters for local militia groups, even in commercial advertising. The point was quickly reached where their familiar pastoral scenes bore little or no resemblance to the coats of arms into which they had been (or might have been) converted.

Indeed, a striking characteristic of American public symbolism is that the modest knowledge of traditional heraldry which had once existed in the United States was largely lost with the passage of years and the population's expansion across the continent. With a few exceptions, basically by the end of the first 50 years of American independence all pretense had been abandoned of maintaining the fundamental artistic canons of European heraldic art. The shield had at best been reduced to a rococo border for a pictorial representation or to a beaded ring which fit in the circular compass of a seal. Supporters had become figures which dominated the emblem, when present at all. The crest had disappeared,



Fig. 8: Arms of the State of Tennessee (1845 Rendition)

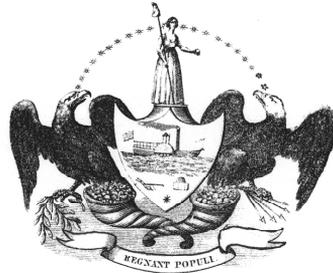


Fig. 9: Arms of the State of Arkansas (1845 Rendition)

as had the torse, mantling, crown, badge, and order of knighthood. Quite simply, the designs were no longer coats of arms

in appearance even though they filled that function on documents, monuments, flags, military uniforms, public buildings, and elsewhere.

The official symbols of the American states in the 19th century were more widely used than the corresponding state and royal arms in Europe, even though they suffered in comparison with regard to purity of heraldic form. Moreover, 19th-century state heraldry in Europe was scarcely an appealing alternative for Americans as an artistic model. As any book or chart of "arms of the nations" from that era will

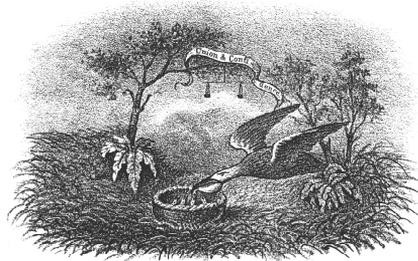


Fig. 10: Arms of the State of Louisiana (1845 Rendition)

show, the simplicity and purity of the earliest heraldry had long been abandoned. Even the smallest European states felt it necessary to load their armorial achievements with

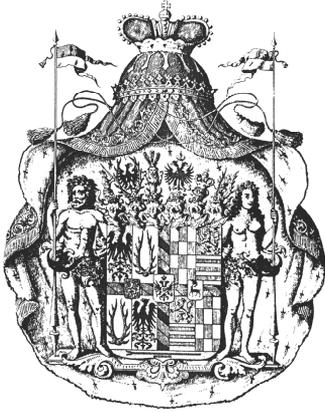


Fig. 11: Arms of Schwarzburg-Sondershausen and Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt

baroque trappings and myriad quarterings. In contrast, the national coat of arms of the United States was an exemplar of simplicity, although it inspired few American examples.

An important but often overlooked source of artistic inspiration for the public symbols of the new country lies in the “emblems” which flourished in 17th- and 18th-century Europe. These *impreses* showed allegorical scenes—often classical figures accompanied by mottoes or inscriptions intended to have a moral or inspirational value. Not only animals and human figures, but scenes from nature and neo-classical architecture abounded. Anyone familiar with the cavalry standards of the Thirty Years’ War, the English Civil War, and other contemporary

conflicts will recognize similar pictorial themes in the flags of the American Revolution. That tradition as an inspiration for military colors died off in Europe before the counterpart American trend did in the mid-19th century, but the influence of these images has never totally been extinguished in non-military American symbolism.

To represent an allegorical scene in naturalistic detail and to reinforce it by inscriptions became the standard form of public symbolism in the United States, displacing the early heraldic ideal of a single charge on a simple shield—the seal of Iowa is a perfect example of this trend. The simple elegance of the Massachusetts coat of arms of 1780 belies the significance of the new artistic approach, as reflected in the 1775–1780 seal of Massachusetts-Bay. Of the original 13 states, in only four (Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Rhode Island) did the symbols fully meet the traditional heraldic ideal. Of the remaining 46 states and six territories, with a total of 18 arms and 42 seals, only five seals (those of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Washington, and the restored Maryland seal) and only five coats of arms (those of the District of Columbia, Texas, Mississippi, North Dakota, and Maryland) follow the heraldic tradition fully, although some others approximate the traditional heraldic form (the arms of New York, Utah, Colorado, and Missouri).



Fig. 12: Seal of the Colony of Massachusetts-Bay (1775-1780)

American states are free to change their seals and arms at will and over the years many have modified existing ones or adopted completely new ones. Nevertheless only North Dakota has turned to traditional heraldry and its coat of arms has very little recognition or use. The absence of good design in the states and territories cannot be attributed to their lack of population, educational achievement, economic resources, or interest in history. California, for example, has over 30 million people,

142 colleges and universities, and an annual production of goods and services valued at \$850 billion, yet its level of public graphic symbolism may arguably be compared with what is found in El Salvador or Papua New Guinea.

The American design model used for seals and arms has carried over into American flags. While no statistical analysis has ever been undertaken, it seems likely that the largest category among all American flags is what might be called the “field-and-emblem” pattern, the emblems including logos, seals, designs based on *impreses*, and some genuine coats of arms. Military colors from the Revolution to the present as used by the federal armed forces, by state militia, local and irregular troops, and by the Confederacy have all relied heavily on this pattern. In it the background is a single solid color bearing a fairly complex central emblem and, occasionally, a distinctive canton. Especially during the Civil War of 1861–1865, when the state militias of the North became the foundation of the armies of the Union, this pattern was indelibly impressed on the American national consciousness as proper for all flags not based on the Stars and Stripes. The familiarity of those designs and the involvement of Civil War veterans in the adoption process for state and local flags over the next 60 years strongly encouraged the transformation of that pattern from one employed only for the unique color of a military force to usage for any general-purpose flags made in quantity. Limited knowledge of alternative flag designs prevented the creators of new flags from questioning the appropriateness of the field-and-emblem pattern. (Whether new flags might otherwise have followed traditional heraldic models if such had been available—or if heraldry itself had been better known—is a moot question.)

The complexity of those seals and arms and the multiplicity of their colors made them expensive and difficult to manufacture, as well as almost impossible to distinguish when the flags of many states or cities were flying together. Nevertheless, people have tremendous loyalty to these designs. Of the 24 states which have altered their flags in the 20th century, New Mexico was the only one to reject this vexillo-graphic tradition and adopt a flag acceptable to traditional heraldry. Indeed, the other state flags which have been changed have all been replaced by worse designs. Moreover, emphasis on this type continues in contemporary America. Flag manufacturers routinely illustrate the field-and-emblem type of flag in their catalogs as a guide for organizations (schools, clubs, color guards, etc.) and for cities and counties creating designs. Overwhelmingly, agencies of the Federal government and their vexilliferous officers have such flags. Company flags and advertising banners in the commercial world, whether or not professionally designed as part of a “corporate identity program”, typically acquire a flag as an afterthought when a logo has been created. These logos, because they already contain several colors, are usually placed against a white background—although dark blue is sometimes used instead, as for government flags.

Despite the overwhelming popularity of this basic design, a vigorous alternative tradition nevertheless exists, dating back to the earliest days of European settlement in North America. The original models were English naval flags—the Red Ensign, the Union Jack, and various signal flags—and, to a lesser extent, the colors carried by infantry. These non-heraldic flags tended to make use of two or three contrasting colors with distinctive design elements such as stripes, crosses, and simple badges. The earliest such flag created in America on English models dates from 1634, but the real

flowering of these flags began just before the Revolutionary War as Americans actively sought distinctive symbols. The British red, white, and blue continued to serve as the primary colors but green, yellow, and buff—even orange—were used. Popular symbols included the eagle, crescent, pine tree, anchor, star, beaver, sheaf of rice, liberty cap, snake, sun, clouds, wreath, and sword. Inscriptions were usually brief one-to-four-word phrases written large for visibility.

This new vexillographic style produced several flags still in use: the Stars and Stripes, the Pine Tree Flag, the *Don't Tread on Me* Flag, the Palmetto Flag, and the Coast Guard flag. While there was an original or standard form for most of these, popular designs quickly became the subject of great variation. For example, the Stars and Stripes has existed in at least 200 versions used by the nation as a whole, by individual states, by military units, as a signal flag or personal rank flag—even by individuals determined to break their allegiance to the United States by overthrowing the government or forming a new nation. No other pattern has been so popular a model, but geometric figures—triangles, borders, circles, diagonal stripes, and even distinctive flag shapes—have also been put into use both officially and unofficially. The Confederate Battle Flag, one of the most striking and widely used flags in the United States today, is not only an important example of the trend but itself constitutes one of the basic design patterns frequently adapted to entirely new flags. These types—what might be called the “geometric flag”, the “Stars and Stripes variant”, and the “Battle Flag variant”—have also not infrequently been combined with the field-and-emblem model. Thus the striking diagonally-divided field of a civic flag may have a seal in the center even though from the standpoint of distinctiveness, cost effectiveness, and classic heraldic simplicity that seal is redundant.

While some heraldic writers have been ingenious in describing many modern flags according to the traditional language of the blazon, that alone does not determine whether a given design conforms to traditional canons of good heraldry. In fact only a small percentage of the flags used in the United States, past and present, can legitimately be qualified as proper heraldry. The percentage of seals which could pass muster as heraldic is still less and even coats of arms in American state and civic heraldry often fail to meet or approximate heraldic standards. Yet American civic heraldry is based primarily on seals, secondarily on flags, and only rarely on coats of arms. This fact raises a serious question—one which brings us back to the starting point of this analysis, namely the scientific nature of heraldic studies.

If the official and unofficial symbolism of a given country—and the United States is not unique in its symbols in this regard—incorporates very little which corresponds to the traditional laws of heraldry in terms of design, yet functionally performs in ways which are the same as or parallel to the usage of correct coats of arms as found in most European countries, what is the proper attitude for the scholarly investigator? Or, framed differently, does such non-heraldic symbolism deserve the equal attention of those who analyze heraldry? The question is particularly important in part because heraldry, until recently, has had a near monopoly in the realm of all studies relating to official symbols. The amount of research and publication about orders of knighthood, ceremonial regalia, military insignia, and seals has been modest in contrast to the volume of heraldic work produced. Research about flags was until recently also limited and practical guides (for those who needed to know the designs of the flags displayed at sea) constituted much of what was produced.

Heraldry has been the dominant theme in studies relating to official symbolism, yet heraldic scholars frequently have taken the position, overtly or covertly, that any symbols not conforming to traditional standards of heraldic correctness should be dismissed as unworthy of serious attention. That attitude continues even today and broad areas of official symbolism—including most logos and non-armigerous seals and many flags—are generally ignored in heraldic publications. Moreover, the rejection of such symbols is not simply benign neglect: editorials, letters to the editor, lectures, private conversations, and other forms of communication make clear that there is an active hostility on the part of many heraldists to designs and usages that do not conform to the laws of heraldry.

This attitude is perhaps understandable in a country like Britain where the sovereign is traditionally “the font of all honor” and where control of symbols—who may claim what title, what corporation or individual may or may not display a certain flag, what graphic symbol encroaches on another by its similarity of design, etc.—relates directly to maintenance of the existing political and social system. Yet regardless of the self-interest which a government institution might have in preserving and promoting the heraldic status quo, the heraldic scholar presumably has an obligation to universality and objectivity in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. To ignore or denounce symbols which do not conform to good heraldic taste is inadequate and, ultimately, unacceptable as a way of dealing with symbols that clearly have widespread currency.

Not only has the civil heraldry of the United States been treated in this fashion by American and non-American scholars and writers, but other symbols as well—such as the emblems of political parties and religions, or the official but non-Western style arms used by many Third World and Communist countries. It is also remarkable that heraldic scholars have long looked at flags as a subdivision of their own study, yet overwhelmingly books on heraldry either do not mention flags at all or present the subject in a few pages with an underlying assumption that flags are only manifestations of coats of arms in cloth form. It is surprising that so little attention has been given even to the study of *heraldic* flags by scholars of heraldry. For example, less than 5% of all the lectures delivered in the seven published proceedings of the International Congresses of Genealogical and Heraldic Sciences held between 1929 and 1968 relate to flags.

While there is no lack of examples of “bad heraldry” in the public symbolism of the United States, from the standpoint of the longevity of these symbols in American society, their number and the frequency of use, their permeation of popular and commercial culture, their official standing, and the concrete roles they play that parallel the “good heraldry” found in other countries, these symbols deserve serious and exhaustive examination as an important social phenomenon. For all their bad heraldry, they reflect that strong and ancient human impulse of choosing colors and emblems to represent individual and collective beliefs and activities.

If heraldry is truly to be a science, therefore, the challenge is for it to recognize the importance of such symbols, in the United States and elsewhere, which do not conform to traditional concepts of heraldry and to apply objective, rigorous standards of scholarship in analyzing them. It is not necessary to promote or even to approve of the forms and practices and presumptions implicit in these non-heraldic symbol systems in attempting to analyze and document them, any more than a scholar of slav-

ery or the Inquisition or the Holocaust need be an apologist for them.

In this regard it seems that certain differences exist between heraldry and vexillology. As conceived and developed since its formal beginnings 30 years ago, vexillology is dedicated to the scientific study of flags of all kinds, all eras, and all societies. Of course, many vexillologists hold strong points of view about the appropriateness of design and use of certain flags, yet the vexillologist seeking to understand the role of flags in human society gives the same basic attention to an advertising pennant as to a royal standard. Those few who seek to promote a particular flag or flag usage under the guise of the science of vexillology always do so improperly and without support from the world community of vexillologists.

Good and bad flag design is recognized as properly being in the realm of *vexillography*, where questions of taste and preference rather than objectivity and rigorous analysis prevail. Whereas vexillology makes a clear distinction between the theses developed by scholars on the one hand and the subject matter of their study (namely flags) on the other, heraldry in contrast is often implicitly or explicitly defined by the specific designs and practices developed in Europe some 800 years ago and summarized by the traditional “laws of heraldry”. Expressed somewhat differently, vexillologists in principle always stand apart from the flags they study, in order to derive scientific principles from knowledge of what is manifested in actual usage, rather than to evaluate such usage by applying *a priori* principles. The flag-waver holds a given flag sacred and does everything in his power to exalt that flag, but the vexillologist is not beholden to any flags nor to any immutable laws about what constitutes their proper use and design. In contrast, it would seem that heraldry has not completely separated itself from the agenda which was originally developed to preserve the exclusivity of arms granted, confirmed, or altered and the privileges of those responsible for those actions.

Seeking to preserve good heraldry as an art form is a noble goal, but its pursuit should never be at the expense of the advancement of heraldry as a science. To like or dislike American civic symbolism or some other form of “bad heraldry” should not be the goal for heraldry as a science, as it is for heraldry as an art. Like vexillology and other aspirant social sciences dealing with graphic forms in the social milieu of humankind, heraldry as a science must treat all symbols seriously by giving them rigorous, objective scrutiny.

Sources of Illustrations:

Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7 are from the archives of the Flag Research Center.

Figs. 6, 8, 9, 10 are from J. Franklin Reigart, *The United States Album Embellished with the Arms of Each State...* (Lancaster City, PA 1844-1845).

Fig. 11 is from the *J. Siebmacher's grosses Wappenbuch*, Vol. I, Section 1 (Nuremberg, 1856), p.1. 99.

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