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The American flag and the body: How the flag and the body create an American meaning

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“The most universally recognizable symbol of American government” is the American flag (Hopkins, 1991, p. 817). The American flag is vital to our nation and to its citizens, particularly as the flag remains a major symbol during the country’s times of peace and war. This paper explores the connections between the American flag and the corporeal body. A historical review of the creation of the American flag ignites the discussion of how Americans use their physical bodies to offer meanings of the American flag. From the presented taxonomy of meanings, an interpretation of the effect of the flag on the body and the effect of the body on the flag is offered. The American flag gives meaning to the American body as a collective whole, whereas the American body’s utilization of the flag allows for individual interpretation and negotiation of the meanings assigned by the flag.

A thoughtful mind when it sees a nation’s flag, sees not the flag, but the nation itself. And whatever may be its symbols, its insignia, he reads chiefly in the flag, the government, the principles, the truths, the history that belongs to the nation that sets it forth. The American flag has been a symbol of Liberty and men rejoiced in it.

~ Henry Ward Beecher

“The most universally recognizable symbol of American government” is the American flag (Hopkins, 1991, p. 817). On June 14, 1777 the flag with thirteen stripes alternating red and white and thirteen stars in a blue field was adopted as America’s new flag. It has since undergone 26 changes and most likely will incur more along the way with a total of up to six more stars being considered. The American flag has become not only an important part of our country’s history but an integral component to being an American citizen.

The rhetoric of the American flag has been significant over history. It has typically upheld the values of unity, freedom, liberty, and hope for American citizens. The flag began as a representation of the freedom and rights in the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights as well as to the individual liberty set forth in the Declaration of Independence and has grown into the greater values we know it to represent today. People proudly display the American flag to exhibit feelings of patriotism, nationalism, and unity.

While for many the American flag represents the ideals of America and what it has to offer, for others it represents an entirely different meaning, such as dominance or narcissism. Individuals use the American flag visually to help convey ideas of how and what the flag means. These particular uses of the American flag can be exemplified in the body. Woodrow Wilson once stated, “The flag is the embodiment, not of sentiment, but of history”; the use of *embodiment* invites us to examine relations between the flag and the body. The word *embodiment* or corporeity can be defined as the experience of having and using a body. Thus, the American flag as it embodies history calls for an examination of the flag and the body.

Marvin (2006) defines body as the “biological *res extensa*” (p. 67). The corporeal body is not simply a tangible object in which humans inhabit but a canvas to explore and create meaning. The body enhances the communicative power through its presence, even though the body is valued less than text in society (Marvin, 2006). Thus, the link between the flag and the physical body deserves exploration; the body allows for an expression of meaning that might only be interpretable and understandable through the examination of the relation of an object, such as the flag, to the physical body itself. Not only is it important to understand how bodies and flags are being utilized, it is also critical to comprehend why and what meaning these uses expose. Understanding this connection allows for a better grasp of the meaning of the American flag to the body and the body to the American flag. Through a historical examination of the flag and body, this paper will offer a taxonomy of meanings as well as an interpretation of the flag’s role with regard to the body and the body’s role with regard to the flag.

The American Flag

The flag of the United States of America is universally representative of the principles of the justice, liberty, and democracy enjoyed by the people of the United States; and People all over the world recognise the flag of the United States as symbolic of the United States. (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008)

The American flag continues to be a symbol for its citizens, “but its popularity and prevalence rise and fall like the stock market depending on the national mood” (Trombley, 2002, p. 66). Although the American flag offers a context through which we can understand and assign the flag meaning, the way Americans use their bodies to uphold the flag is telling of the support (or lack of support) they have for the flag and what it represents.

The American Flag’s Body

The creation of the American flag’s body was intentional. The flag was established as an official flag for the new nation in 1777 under the first Flag

Act passed by the Continental Congress. This act “Resolved, that the flag of the United States be made of thirteen stripes, alternates red and white; that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new Constellation” (The Flag of the United States of America, 2005). The Continental Congress did not declare why they chose the colors red, white, and blue, though historians believe these colors were derived because they were England’s colors (Leepson, 2005). These colors were also assigned to the new Nation’s seal and at that time they were given meaning.

The colors of the pales (vertical stripes) are those used in the flag of the United States of America; White signifies purity and innocence, Red, hardiness and valour, and Blue the color of the Chief (the broad band above the stripes) signifies vigilance, perseverance, and justice. (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007)

The flag’s body is critical to the American people. Reagan declared in 1986 delivering his Year of the Flag speech, “The colors of our flag signify the qualities of the human spirit we Americans cherish: red for courage and readiness to sacrifice, white for pure intentions and high ideals, and blue for vigilance and justice” (Leepson, 2005, 36). The colors of the flag’s body play an important role in the representing characteristics of the American body.

Also important to the flag’s body are the stars and stripes. The House of Representatives published a book in 1977 declaring “The star is a symbol of the heavens and the divine goal to which man has aspired from time immemorial; the stripe is symbolic of the rays of light emanating from the sun” (The Flag of the United States of America, 2005). According to legend, however, George Washington interpreted the elements of the flag this way: “the stars were taken from the sky, the red from the British colors, and the white stripes signified the secession from the home country” (Independence Hall Association, 2008). While the original flag design with stars and stripes did not change, modifications have been made for not only new stars, but the orientation of these stars in the blue band.

The American flag’s body represents an important step in our nation’s history. This flag is a declaration of the United States of America’s independence, and the struggles Americans went through to achieve this independence. The Flag Code, the national code for procedures on how to utilize the flag, (Sec. 1) declares that the United States flag will remain thirteen horizontal stripes, alternate red and white, with stars in a blue field (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008). The flag’s body is important because each component (shapes, colors, sizes, and dimensions) of the flag assigns meaning to the American body. If the flag’s body were to change, it may no longer be recognizable by the country’s citizens and may no longer hold the meaning that it proudly displays.

The American Flag as an American Body

Flags flutter, even in a completely steady breeze. In an analogous way, fish undulate their bodies in order to swim against a steady current. Fish body equates to the flag body in that they both flutter and create a smooth-like, undulating motion with their bodies. (Muller, 2003, para. 1)

Muller's comparison of the fish body to the flag body demonstrates the capability of the flag's body to represent more than history or values. While the point here is not to say the flag represents fish, it takes to heart the idea that the American flag can represent something other than a value or an ideal; the American flag can truly embody the body.

Marvin (1991) defines *flagbody* as a term that represents the connotative meaning of the flag, the sacrificial citizen body. The *flagbody* expresses the symbolic equivalence of the body and the flag, not only is not the text, but is a special kind of body sanctified by sacrifice.... The flag is everywhere associated with the initiation of men for war and in war, from the solemn presence of the flag at the recruiting center induction ceremony prior to departure to the draping of the flag over the caskets of war dead, and the presentation of the flag as a memory object to family members, those attached by body ties of blood to the deceased. (p. 120)

The American flag represents the physical body of the sacrificial soldier.

Others have agreed with this representation of the flag as body. Francis Rafferty declared that if you watch when a Gold Star mother receives this flag, she cradles it like a baby, as if she is again holding her child (Marvin, 1991). The flag represents the body through a symbolic exchange value of the flag for the man. Eugene Smith declared that to act against the flag is to act against a virtual body (Marvin, 1991). Additionally, Justice Holmes, when defending the desecration of the flag, proposed that life is "nourished by symbols thereby suggesting a moral literal connection between the symbolic flag and physical life" (Marvin, 1991, p. 131).

The concept of *flagbody* was brought to life in light of the discussion on flag desecration. Some have used their body to demonstrate and display how the flag represents the physical body. Veterans and others wear shirts that read "Try and burn this one!" or "Hey Asshole, Burn THIS flag" challenging potential flag-burners to burn the body the flag was not only identified with, but attached to physically. Interesting to this position is that a sacrificial body can be a living body; the bodies wearing this flag may have been sacrificial in war, but potentially in other areas of life as well. Bodies can also be physically wrapped in the flag, as will be discussed more later, but this signifies the flag as body. Another attempt to exhibit the flag as body is when the flag is saluted. The body that salutes the flag does so when the flag is in motion,

representing that the moving flag signifies the living flag, suggestive of a living being (Marvin, 1991).

Many examples exist where one can visually understand the American flag as body. When a soldier dies not only is the family provided with an American flag, but the soldier may be carried from the field covered with a flag and then have the casket draped with a flag. These customs are claimed to be “the flag embracing the deceased who in life has served the flag” (Independence Hall Association, 2008). Originally, these traditions were televised for the American public to understand and relate to the hardships and sacrifices that are endured during war. “For the first time, however, since war in the television era, the sight [sic] of flag-covered caskets arriving to the salute of military colleagues and the tears of mourning relatives are [sic] no longer part of the national narrative” (Younge, 2003, p. 2). This is important because the public seeing casualties from war will associate these deaths with what they deem to be a significant cause or not. This creates the sacrificial body and support or lack thereof for a cause. The American flag is believed to embody the sacrificial soldier, and customs express this idea.

A second instance occurred after September 11, 2001, when six thousand flags were blasted into space with American astronauts on the space shuttle Endeavor. These flags were meant to represent the victims of the attack on the World Trade Center. All of the flags were returned to earth “bearing with them the persistent dead weight of America’s obdurate responsibility to physically account for each and every victim” (Willis, 2002, p. 380). This idea that the flag can be substituted for the body, synecdoche, is seen also at the Colonial Flag Foundation. Here healing fields, as they are called, fly an American flag for every individual victim of September 11 (Colonial Flag Foundation, 2008). Additionally, 25,000 people in Tucson, Arizona “gathered to display their patriotism by creating a human flag” (Kingsolver, 2001). These examples offer three distinct events where the flag embodied an American body.

A more unique, decidedly heteronormative, example of the flag representing the body is the Washington Monument. This monument has been considered by some a phallic symbol with the circle of American flags surrounding it to be construed as a symbolic expression of union with the female body, presumably to create a nation. Some even believe the flags are representative of Betsy Ross and the monument George Washington. Although this idea of the flag as body is slightly different from the previous ones, considered in light of the Gold Star mother cradling the flag of her dead son through whose sacrifice the nation is protected or maintained or born again, it brings us full circle. Similarly, thinking back to George Washington leading his troops to battle, flags were used as a means to identify leaders and troops; “all such early flags were indeed flags of battle, closely identified with a particular leader and his followers” (Mastai & Mastai, 1973, p. 19).

The flag as body might not be the initial concept individuals consider or think of when they look at an American flag, but this idea is in the heart of

most Americans. J. Carlos Escudero, a police officer for ASU, said he takes the time to consider the sacrifices made by police officers, military persons, and lives lost during September 11 every time the flag is lowered at half-mast (Smith, 2008). Even if we don't see the American flag as an American body daily, the traditional values the flag upholds were brought to us through a sacrificial body. The flag represents a living country and is itself considered a living thing (Independence Hall Association, 2008); this is the sacrificial body of the American flag.

The Body That Supports the Flag

The body can support the flag in two primary capacities. The first is the type of body that is supporting the flag. The second is the variety of ways in which the body can support the flag. These two areas will be explored in greater detail as they offer a unique perspective on the American body and the American flag.

Which bodies support the flag? The body can support the flag in many ways, one being body type. In ancient Greece during the Olympics, the body that was able to carry the flag was chosen based on size, looks, and character; it was the body that was striving to win medals. This tradition endured for the United States as the stronger body and character were selected to carry the flag during the opening ceremony in the Olympics (Dyreson, 2008). Typically, this meant that the stronger, male athletes were the ones carrying the flag. The first female, gymnast Janie Lee Romary, was finally allowed to carry the flag during the 1968 opening ceremony (Dyreson, 2008). Although initial support of the flag was granted to those who portrayed strength and dominance, carrying the flag in the Olympics has translated into all types of bodies supporting the flag at sporting events. Standing and placing a hand on the body's heart, removing a cap, and singing along with or remaining silent while the National Anthem plays before all sporting events has become a tradition of corporeal support for the flag.

After September 11, the flag was displayed by many Americans for numerous reasons. Particular bodies showing support for the flag became an integral part of American society. A predominantly white response to the display of flags was discovered. Arab merchants, however, were also more inclined to raise the flag to demonstrate their patriotism and ward off attacks by those who believed them to be terrorists (Willis, 2002). Similarly, business owners donned flags to show they were not immigrant-owned, and if they were immigrant-owned to demonstrate they were American (Heller, 2005). Older, less educated, higher income individuals felt more threatened by terrorist attacks and more likely to display the flag (Skitka, 1995). This near universal display exemplifies the body type that supports the flag.

Hispanic protestors have also used their bodies to support the flag by waving it at immigration protests. They use the flag to demonstrate their

willingness and desire to reside in the United States or become United States citizens and/or abide by the values of the U.S. (Pineda & Sowards, 2007). The idea that a body can support a nation by displaying the country's flag is extremely telling of the importance of the American flag to American society.

Clark and Hoynes (2003) conducted an exceptional way of examining which bodies support the American flag. These authors classified every photo of citizens with American flags in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report* and found that out of 84 total photos single subject photos were 64% white. In group photos, 62% were white, 8% racialized (as other than white), and 11% featured a mixed race group. This study also examined the body type that supports the flag in photos. Photos with white subjects were found to have high modality photographic quality, while photos with racialized subjects were split with high and medium quality. This demonstrates that whites are portrayed typically as naturalistic with the flag. Photos of private citizens in public places were more common as opposed to elected government officials, public service figures, and private citizens in private spaces. Clark and Hoynes also found that depth in photos leads to a primary and secondary subject. For example, in the photo "Saluting the Flag at Whittier Primary School," black children were shown pledging allegiance to the flag at a great distance from the camera. This photo privileged the national symbol while de-emphasizing the individuals of the group. Moreover, these authors noted that photos of public service workers were racially unidentifiable with the photos typically obscured, leaving the audience to focus on the uniform. The uniforms are meant to signal a clear commitment to the American identity as white; "race is subsumed beneath the signifier of the uniform and the privileging of the national symbol" (p. 447).

Clark and Hoynes's (2003) findings typify that predominantly the American body is the white body. However, certain bodies must show their support for the flag in order to not be attacked, other bodies show support due to loyalty for the country, some support the flag out of fear, and others support the flag to demonstrate they are American. The body, in terms of race, gender, and ethnicity, supports the American flag for numerous reasons.

How bodies support the flag. While a specific body type may be in support of the flag, the way the body physically supports the flag can also be important. One way the body can do this is through raising the flag. The first flag was raised in 1775 on an American fighting vessel (Leepson, 2005, p. 51). This demonstration of the body raising the flag is common. Iwo Jima is a prime example. This monumental image has five marines and one navy corpsman raising the flag on Mount Suribachi to signify the battle. The bodies "strain in a unified action" to raise the flag and support the American ideals of liberty, equality, and democracy (Edwards & Winkler, 1997). Similarly, the image exists of three New York City firefighters raising the American flag in the ruins of the towers. The raising of the flag shortly after the attacks is a direct reference to Iwo Jima portraying the body as a means to support the

flag, American values, and the American voice. The actual flag lifted up by the firefighters continued to be elevated when it was sent to Afghanistan to be raised at the airport's flag pole. This display of the flag sought to demonstrate the American victory over the Taliban (Heller, 2005). Statues and photos are not the only monumental means of raising the flag; organizations and businesses also raise the flag on a regular basis. "Raising, lowering, and maintaining the flags is one of the 'unseen' jobs carried out on all of the Arizona State University's campuses" (Smith, 2008, p. 5).

Correspondingly, another method of using the body to support the flag is to "rally 'round the flag.'" One can physically use the body to support a larger idea (Baker & Oneal, 2001). The body may physically rally around a flag. For example, "See You at the Pole" is a national event where students gather around the flag the fourth Wednesday of September to pray for the "spiritual health of our country and its leaders" (See You At the Pole, 2008). National leaders have also used this concept to rally public support during times of major international crises. For example, the Iran Hostage Crisis was a time when the public was asked to rally around the flag and to resist "the devilish savages of Islam" (Scott, 2000, p. 178). American citizens are called to physically "rally" themselves as a united body to fight for something; they are asked to use their bodies to support the nation. As George F. Root in 1862 wrote in *The Battle Cry of Freedom*, "Yes, we'll rally round the flag, boys/Rally once again..." (Leepson, 2005, p. 105).

Using the body to wave the flag is a third way the body can support the flag. Sailors imprisoned in Britain during the revolution created homemade flags to wave. When good news was sent their way they waved their flags and cheered to unite one another as fellow Americans (Cogliano, 1998). Furthermore, the body that waves the flag is also commonly seen in popular culture. One example is when Madonna waved the flag to support voting (McFadden, 1990). Regardless of whether one is a celebrity or not, flag waving is a means to express citizenship, civic virtue, and democratic participation (Pineda & Sowards, 2007).

A final means of using the body to support the flag is to salute the flag. "The military salute is said to be descended from the custom of knights raising their visors to show their eyes, a vulnerable part of the body, thus negating the attack signal of visor down in preparation for charging" (Marvin, 1991, p. 136). This signifies that the salute is a special body relationship that aligns the body to the flag in a non-assault posture. The first flag salute in a school setting occurred in 1888 where hands were placed on the forehead and the heart (Leepson, 2005). The salute demonstrates the body acknowledging not only the existence but importance of the flag.

It is evident that the body can support the flag in many ways. The type of body supporting the flag can be illustrative of historical occurrences. In addition, the full body can be used to hoist or raise the flag, or parts of the body can wave or salute the flag. The variety of means of supporting the

flag demonstrates the dominance of the American flag in society, and its importance and visibility to American citizens.

The American Flag on the Body

Wearing the flag on the body has become a phenomenon in American society. Many Americans show their support for the country by wearing the flag. Flag trends began emerging in fashion early on. Signature designers and corporations such as Tommy Hilfiger, Polo Ralph Lauren, the Gap, and Old Navy began incorporating patriotic symbols in their fashion. Even European “haute couture designer Catherine Malandrino unveiled her flag-motif fall collection” (Heller, 2005, p. 150). September 11 extended this trend: “television talk show hosts, news anchors, reporters, and even characters on prime time serial dramas and comedies began wearing discrete [sic] American flag lapel pins, red, white, and blue brooches, or articles of clothing emblazoned with the flag’s trace” (Heller, 2005, p. 17). The following examples illustrate the dominance of the flag on the body.

Fashion designers have created many clothing items with an American flag pattern. It is common to see the American flag on shirts, shorts, capes, vests, and even socks; surprisingly (or not), the American flag is also donned on American beauties wearing flag bikinis. American flags are now seen on scarves, hats, bandanas, and ties. Flags were emblazoned across t-shirts worn by rock bands and sports teams (Willis, 2002). During election years, flag fashion, particularly on females, skyrockets to include tube tops, slippers, sheets, and even evening gowns (Marvin, 1991). No clothing item has escaped a flag pattern.

Besides clothing, the flag has been attached to numerous pins, patches, buttons, and brooches. Thayer and Alban (1972) even found that wearing an American flag button can symbolize support for not only the country but particular individual candidates during election time. This experiment conducted during the Vietnam War found that the confederate wearing the American flag button was associated with a more conservative outlook, in support for James Buckley and the Vietnam War politics, whereas an opposing button (the American flag with a peace sign in place of the stars) symbolized a liberal perspective, anti-Buckley, and against the Vietnam War. While these exact distinctions may not quite correlate to today’s society, similar ideas have presented themselves. One instance exemplified in current society was during the 2008 campaign for president. Barack Obama was criticized for not wearing a flag lapel pin (Martin, 2008). From Thayer and Alban’s study as well as the criticism Obama received, we can glean that wearing the American flag as a button, pin, or brooch means something; it is a sign of support. However, there are particular rules about how one should wear such an item indicating the significance of the flag on the body. Flags should be placed closest to the heart and if a patch is to be worn the field

of stars should be worn closest to the heart (Section 8j) (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008).

The Flag Code does not prohibit the placing of the American flag on the body in the form of a tattoo; however, it does advise against it. While this may be the case, many bodies now wear the American flag as a daily part of their lives. American flag tattoos increased after September 11 functioning “as a personal badge of identity and belonging... as both signs of sacrifice and important elements of identity in the new vernacular license we have granted ourselves since the attacks” (Hyman, 2007). The American flag can literally be inscribed upon the body.

Other less common ways to wear the American flag exist. Interestingly, in 1990 stars and stripes safe-sex condoms were distributed in a major marketing campaign. Again, the physical attachment of the American flag to the body demonstrates continued support for the United States. The condoms were distributed with the slogan “Never flown at half-mast” to connect the male body part to the celebration of regeneration (Marvin, 1991). American flag star-shaped pasties exist for women to wear to cover their nipples (Sonic’s creations, 2008). More uniquely, CooperVision in 2001 created American flag contact lenses (Leepson, 2005). This was a way to not only show support for the country, but for others to visibly see in a person’s eyes the love and attachment of the American flag to the body. Maybe even more shocking are the “Little Patriot” disposable diapers from Paragon Trade Brands to be worn by infants (Leepson, 2005). What does it say when a parent allows their child to defecate in the American flag? As is evident, American flag attire has been created to cover pretty much any part of the body.

These examples highlight the American flag as being worn by the body. Clearly, an American flag epidemic in fashion occurred. One facet that distinguishes this fashion from being desecration is that it is not an actual American flag being worn; it is merely a replica. Official American flags have been used by porn stars to cover themselves, by Madonna in her campaign to rock the vote, and by Kid Rock during Super Bowl 2004; however, the wearing of an official American flag is considered desecration (Section 8d). Sadly, “the nation that condemns flag desecration shows no qualms over making the flag into a fashion statement” (Willis, 2002, p. 383). Although the body supporting the flag through fashion is not flag desecration, it, therefore, becomes important that flag desecration is examined more thoroughly.

Flag Desecration by the Body

Flag desecration has become a key issue that the Supreme Court and individual citizens manage. Rights to freedom of speech contend that a person may speak freely; however, when that right is used to burn an American symbol problems arise. During the 1960s and 1970s, “flag desecration became a complex expression, manifesting in flag burnings protesting the Vietnam War and the wearing of flag patches as signifiers of counterculture” (Welch,

1999). Goldstein (1995) presented four basic categories of desecration during the Vietnam War: flag burnings (9 cases), wearing the flag (16 cases), superimposing symbols (15 cases), and miscellaneous charges (20 cases). Flag desecration was used as a tool to communicate a dislike for the United States and its actions driven by elected officials. It was a means to denounce state and national authority (Welch, 1999).

Flag desecration for some is considered an act against man itself (the flag as body). For example, Justice Rehnquist identified flag burning with “the profaning animal-body and its grunts and roars” (Marvin, 1991, p. 130). Similarly, Marvin (1991) describes flag desecration as “the symbolic equivalent of the desecration of the physical bodies of the citizens signified by the flag, and by extrapolation, the collective body of the citizenry so signified” (p. 135). By desecrating the flag the individuals conducting the action are acting against their fellow men that have fought or sacrificed for this country. Others, however, believe flag desecration is a right and a way to speak the mind. Those who contend that flag desecration should not be put into an amendment believe that this idea undermines the legitimacy of the First Amendment (Michelman, 1990). “In the flag skirmish, the Congress has chosen for the time being to place a higher value on the Bill of Rights, which signifies the cherished text, than on the flag...” (Marvin, 1991, p. 121).

Although Americans might not know the details of the Flag Code, many have an idea of how the flag should be treated. One example of this was when the American flag that was raised after September 11 was flown to Afghanistan to be elevated over the airport. While the flag was in Afghanistan, U.S. marines were preparing to knock down a twenty-foot high statue of Saddam Hussein (Wood, 2004). Aired internationally, a U.S. marine draped the American flag over Saddam’s face, and Americans gasped in horror (Heller, 2005). A second marine quickly removed the flag and replaced it with an Iraqi one. This act was not flag desecration, but many Americans were concerned about the action of the flag being used to cover Saddam’s face. This particular case does not violate the Flag Code, but people believed this act to be wrong.

Regardless of whether you the reader believe flag desecration to encompass many acts or very few, flag desecration will be discussed in the following unbiased way: when the body acts against the flag in a way that is in violation of the Flag Code.

One of the more dramatic flag burnings occurred in Los Angeles in July, 1990. Members of the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade spread an American flag on the sidewalk, trampled on it, and set fire to it. While the act of putting the flag on the ground and walking on it is itself against Flag Code, it was the action that followed that made this production a contested site. Those involved next produced a bloody pig’s head, stuck a tiny flag between its nostrils, set it afire, and threw it onto the already burning American flag. The body of the pig symbolically represented the flag and the collective United

States body – “the traditional Western animal of uncleanness and baseness of state” (Marvin, 1991, p. 131).

Fred Phelps has also caused an extreme amount of dissonance in regard to the American flag and the body. Phelps and members of the Westboro Baptist Church turn the nation’s flag upside-down on their website (Godhatesamerica.com) and at military funerals where they protest. These protests “become symbolic attacks on the United States as a nation” (Brouwer & Hess, 2007, p. 79). Phelps uses the upside-down flag to make an argument; however, it is in direct violation of the Flag Code. “The flag should never be displayed with the union down, except as a signal of dire distress in instances of extreme danger to life or property” (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008). Although Phelps purports to be playing by the rules claiming that the nation is in distress, the flag code requests that people find other means to express their political views than to turn the flag upside-down. Phelps and his band of Westboro Baptist Church members who attend killed service members’ funerals bring tattered flags as well, also a direct violation of the Flag Code. Additionally, their bodily act of stomping on and kicking around the American flag constitutes flag desecration (Alvarez, 2006).

Surprisingly, even our former President Bush has desecrated the flag. On September 11, 2006, he and Laura Bush stood on a carpet of the American flag at Ground Zero in Manhattan. This American flag is in direct violation of Section 8b of the Flag Code: “The flag should never touch anything beneath it, such as the ground...” (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008). Similarly, a 1995 protest about an art display on the American flag at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago contested this flag code as well. The artist laid the flag on the ground in his montage “What Is the Proper Way to Display the American Flag?” and required visitors to walk on the flag if they wanted to sign the guest book (Marlin, 1989).

In a more recent attempt to link flag desecration to a political candidate, John McCain claimed to have rescued 12,000 miniature flags thrown out by Barack Obama in Colorado Springs after his acceptance speech. McCain redistributed these orphan flags to audience members after they were found in trash bags near garbage bins. This attack on Obama came from McCain’s “country first” motto, and was debated by Democratic convention organizers who argued the flags were not going to be discarded, but instead were taken from the site as a cheap political stunt (“McCain camp rescues,” 2008). Republicans were not the only ones asserting this claim, as the subtitle of the article read “Democrats are not caring for their Stars and Stripes.” Clearly, the American flag is an important icon to our nation and political candidates.

There are numerous ways one can violate the Flag Code, and therefore, desecrate the flag. These examples are just a few as Americans may use the First Amendment to freely speak their mind and in turn link the American flag into that action. It is critical now to examine why the American flag is such an important symbol for the American body, because if it were not there most likely would not be a Flag Code or even such contestation about flag desecration.

Interpretations of the American Flag and the American Body

“The American flag,” declared President Herbert Hoover in his Flag Day 1932 message, “stands for all that has been accomplished by our people in the century and a half of this nation’s existence” (Leepson, 2005, p. 205). The meaning of the American flag for many represents the values of democracy, freedom, liberty, justice, and opportunity. For others, the flag upholds the service that men and women have given for this country. Still others believe the flag symbolizes all of these meanings. Regardless of which meaning(s) one believes, Americans easily recognize the American flag and offer accounts of its meaning with confidence. Despite the variety of these accounts,

it is widely believed that the flag has a generally agreed-upon meaning, and that most people know what it is.... The flag is a sign. Like all signs, it makes sense within a semiotic system of differences.... Its primary denotative significance as an emblem of the United States. (Marvin, 1991, p. 120)

Through the examination of the flag and the body it is evident that the American flag provides the American body with an original meaning; however, it is the American body with its utilization of the American flag that negotiates these meanings.

The Effect of the American Flag on the American Body

The American flag’s rich and ancient history provides the American body with critical context and meaning. As Francis Scott Key wrote years after witnessing the waving of the American flag at Fort McHenry:

I saw the flag of my country waving over a city – strength and pride of my native State – a city devoted to plunder and desolation by its assailants. I witnessed the preparation for the assaults. I saw the array of its enemies as they advanced to the attack. I heard the sound of battle; the noise of the conflict fell upon my listening ear, and told me that ‘the brave and the free’ had met the invaders. (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008, p. iii)

The victory for the new nation over Britain during the American Revolution brought forth true meaning to the American flag – patriotism. “The American flag, traditionally a symbol of liberty, has carried the message of freedom” (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008, p. 5). Men fought for the United States and its people to be free; the American flag embodies this meaning and when flown the flag exemplifies patriotism, love for country. “‘Old Glory’ plays a far larger part in the national traditions of the US than flags usually do” (Dyreson, 2008). Similarly, Clark and Hoynes (2003) state that the flag is an obvious symbol because it “can be viewed without the effort of conscious interpretation. It reductively references ‘America’” (p. 443). The history of our nation created the meaning of the

American flag and it is this meaning that the flag (through its body) provides to the American body.

The American flag's meaning has assigned each individual American body freedom and rights; it has provided the body with what it means to be an American citizen. The flag's body itself details and describes our nation's history and creates specific meaning. The flagbody also assigns the sacrificial body specific qualities. The body that has devoted parts or all its life to fighting for American ideals is rewarded every time an American flag is flown. These primary examples highlight how the American flag provides the American people with an emblem for the United States; one recognizable symbol that gives meaning to the American body as a collective whole.

The Effect of the American Body on the American flag

The American body's use of the flag displays how an individual feels about the flag and what the flag means to him or her. The above portions of this paper discuss many examples of the body supporting the American flag (e.g., raising, saluting, wearing, waving, and desecrating). Thus, the effect the American body has on the American flag is exemplified by its utilization. Americans use the flag to uphold or resist the hegemonic power of the flag, particularly the meaning of patriotism that the flag assigns the body. The flag allows citizens to appropriate meaning onto their bodies and communicate their interpretations to others.

The American flag originally stood for freedom and was flown to increase citizens' patriotism in the new nation. While for some citizens the American flag still represents freedom, one of the most intriguing elements of the flag is that the flag can be representative of many ideals, values, norms, and standards under the concept of patriotism.

The fact that this particular flag can generate certain specific meanings... makes it a supersymbol.... This flag shows itself as an empty signifier, capable of designating a host of referents without being perceived as contradictory. As empty signifier, this flag concentrates the power inherent in the commodity to become a fetish.... This flag speaks for a form of patriotism... As a physical object, it offers itself as relic – a replacement for a more properly materialist sense of history (Willis, 2002, p. 377).

The context of the flag's display endows it with meaning, particularly for individuals. Moreover, the use of the flag in conjunction with the body enlightens viewers to specific meanings.

For example, those who disagree with the way America and its government is functioning see the flag as representing patriotism even though patriotism is viewed negatively. One illustration of this is during the 1960s when protesters and counter-protesters waved the American flag in civil rights marches and anti-war rallies. The American flag while still representing patriotism also

became a potent symbol of cultural and generational conflict during this time. Similarly, Kingsolver (2001) argued the American flag represents patriotism, which threatens free speech and “stands for intimidation, censorship, violence, bigotry, sexism, homophobia, and shoving the Constitution through a paper shredder” (para. 8). Furthermore, she goes so far as to write that she would like to wave the flag for things she believes in including her dissenting views regarding the flag. Kingsolver’s point exemplifies how for some patriotism represents concepts and ideas with which they do not want to be associated. For individuals with similar views to Kingsolver, they might not use their body to display the flag, or even, as Kingsolver proposes, vote to retire the flag altogether for a new icon of patriotism.

Others believe that since September 11 patriotism is not just seen in visual symbols, such as the American flag, but is a state of mind. Wordsworth, a Board Member Emeritus of the National Restaurant Association, believes patriotism to include more positive elements like “mom,” “home,” and “apple pie” (restaurant.org, 2008). In part due to this broadening of the definition of patriotism, Wordsworth argues the American flag isn’t simply flying across the nation; it is showing up on menus and in décor and designs. Thus, people who have made patriotism a state of mind are likely to wear flag clothing, wave the flag, and create flag displays whenever and wherever they desire. This state of mind becomes a way of life in which the flag becomes a part of everyday living.

Yet others do not see the dichotomy of displaying or not displaying the flag as necessary to patriotism. For example, in response to Roland Martin’s discussion of Obama not wearing a flag lapel pin, two anonymous comments were posted: “This FLAIR debate is straight out of the movie *Office Space*. There is only one resolution to the matter, and it ends with a middle finger,” and “...give it a rest and try to find something worthwhile to write about. Obama’s wearing of the pin (or not) was NOT the issue...” (Martin, 2008). These posts illustrate how displaying the flag (or not) may not always matter; for some a lack of display does not mean a lack of patriotism or support for the country. Still important to note, however, is the fact the individual context through which Obama did not wear the flag pin exhibited to some a lack of patriotism. Thus, it is not simply in the body’s use of or wearing of the flag, but also in the absence of the flag where some believe it should be.

Additionally, flag desecration has brought forth new discussion on the meaning of the flag because at the heart of this debate is patriotism. Former President Bush pronounced that “the popularity of Old Glory represents consensus and national unity” whereas Bob Avakian, chairman of the RCP, depicted “patriotism as blind loyalty” (Welch, 1999, p. 176). The flag, though commonly representing patriotism and displaying an expression of citizenship, has also been used as a political tool by “strategically attacking the Stars and Stripes as a means of denouncing state authority” (Welch, 1999, p. 169). Those who desecrate the flag use their bodies to create voice and display their dissatisfaction with the country. For example, recall the Fred Phelps example

presented earlier. Although Phelps desecrates the flag, he does so to call attention to authorities because he believes a change in government should be made. Similarly, the example also previously mentioned regarding the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade was a blatant attack on government. This was a clear expression of dissent from those involved.

“Underlying much of the rhetoric on flag protection, there seems to be the notion that our unity as a nation somehow depends on the inviolability of the flag” (Jewett, 1995, p. 753). Those who defend the flag attempt to “rediscover the core American values, like respect for authority, and a rejection of the counterculture values of the 1960s and anti-Americanism” (Congressional Record, 1995). For example, Skitka (2005) found that both patriotism – “love of country and attachment to national values” – and nationalism – “uncritical acceptance of national, state, and political authorities combined with a belief in the superiority and dominant status of one’s nation” – are displayed when flags are waved (pp. 1996-1997). Additionally, after September 11 many Americans made their own American flags out of cloth and taped them to windows, cars, antennas, etc. to uphold the traditional value of patriotism. More recently, resentment against foreign flags has risen and immigrants have displayed the American flag to demonstrate their desire to be American citizens; the flag for these immigrants represent citizenship and patriotism (Pineda & Sowards, 2007).

These few examples along with many portions of the above text exemplify how individuals use their bodies to negotiate and communicate meanings of the flag within the scope of the flag’s assigned meaning of patriotism. Whether a person desecrates the flag, wears the flag, waves or raises the flag, or selects absence of a flag illustrates the meaning s/he is seeking to display. “Public identity is negotiated in an event-driven process of performance and response” (Hariman & Lucaites, p. 387); one that is epitomized by the visual artifact the American flag. Very few can deny the importance of the flag’s body as a symbol of patriotism. This meaning of patriotism, however, can be expressed, renegotiated, or attacked through an individual’s use of the body and the flag. The context in which individual bodies exhibit the flag is critical to understanding the meaning the body is assigning. The body’s effect, therefore, on the flag can be understood through its utilization which brings forth new meaning to the flag.

Conclusion

A national survey conducted in 2005 found that a majority of Americans were displaying the flag to remind fellow citizens of the patriotism of this country; “showing the flag represented patriotism and solidarity between citizens and the desire for citizens to defend core American values and a love of nation” (Skitka, 2005, p. 1998). Many people strongly believe in the flag and its ability to unite a country and serve as a symbolic representation of

our nation. The flag is an important icon and can have an influential effect on people. Powerful emotions are connected to our country's flag and its meaning; Senator Bob Dole's comment beautifully illustrates this: "PEOPLE [WHO] HATE THE FLAG... OUGHT TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY... IF THEY DON'T LIKE OUR FLAG, GO FIND ONE YOU DO LIKE" (Congressional Record, 1989, emphasis original).

The effect the flag has on the American body is critical as it allows for the opening and creation of new meanings, particularly as the flag remains a major symbol during the country's times of peace and war. "The flag is not a decoration, it is the symbol of a living nation" (Independence Hall Association, 2008). The flag provides the body with meaning and allows the American body to (re)negotiate meanings based on its utilization under the original context of patriotism. President Woodrow Wilson in his 1917 Flag Day speech encompassed this exactly;

This flag, which we honor and under which we serve, is the emblem of our unity, our power, our thought and purpose as a nation. It has no other character than that which we give it from generation to generation. The choices are ours. It floats in majestic silence above the hosts that execute those choices, whether in peace or in war. And yet, though silent, it speaks to us – speaks to us of the past, of the men and women who went before us, and of the records they wrote upon it. (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008, p. 6)

As Representative Toby Roth of Wisconsin claimed, "There are still some things sacred in America today, and one is our flag" (as cited in Jewett, 1995, p. 741). The American flag has been through a great deal with this country and it continues to hold meaning and unite citizens. The American flag invites citizens to engage, "reinforce, challenge, or restructure commonly held assumptions and values while guiding individual choices and collective actions" (Olson, Finnegan, Hope, 2008, p. 3). Through their use of the American flag, citizens communicate their own interpretations of its meaning and their feelings regarding patriotism. Regardless of these individual displays of the American flag, the "remarkable power of the flag to amplify passions, positively or negatively, cannot be denied" ("The power of symbols," 2006, p. 6B).

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