

Flag Retirement Ceremony

Introduction: When a flag is worn beyond repair, it should be retired in a dignified manner. The most accepted manner is to cut the blue field of stars from the red and white stripes, thereby rendering it no longer a flag. The resulting two pieces of cloth are then burned in one or two separate fires that are used for nothing else except the retirement ceremony. The pieces of cloth should be thoroughly burned so that nothing is left that is recognizable as a flag. The ashes should be scattered or buried.

The following is a sample of a simple flag retirement ceremony that has been used by Boy Scout Troop 849 in Manhattan Beach, CA. This ceremony works best when many people are present. The basis for this ceremony came from Camp Whitsett during the summer of 1994. The original authors are unknown.

This ceremony is written for multiple speakers/Scouts in order to maximize involvement. Color Guard #2 should be comprised of senior Scouts, if possible. Feel free to reallocate parts, omit sections, add, or modify parts.

[Prepare for the ceremony by building one or two fires and lighting them ahead of time. The end of an evening campfire is a natural time to retire a flag.]

Announcer. Good evening. Tonight we are going to retire a old, worn flag. Out of respect, we ask that you retire to your campsites in silence at the end of the ceremony. *[Pause.]* Please rise. Color guard advance.

Color Guard #1. *[Enter carrying a good flag and hold it in front of the audience.]*

Announcer. A flag is an honored symbol of a nation's unity, it's hopes, achievements, glory, and high resolve. The flag of the United States of America is such a symbol . . . of freedoms bravely fought for and hardily won . . . of protection under the Constitution of the rights and privileges of all Americans . . . of promises of fulfillment of all of their hopes and principles and ideals. It is also a symbol of the duty of all of its citizens to serve in the time of need, to speak out for what each considers right, and to help correct, under the law, that which is honestly believed to be wrong.

Color Guard #1. *[Post the flag if possible or remain holding it.]*

Announcer. Please be seated.

Reader #1. *[Explain interesting portions of the flag code -or- read the following brief history.]*

[Optional] In the United States, cities, counties, states, military units, businesses, churches, scout organizations, labor groups, political parties, private yachtsmen, and many others have distinctive flags.

[Optional] During the discovery and settlement of what is now the United States, the flags of various European nations were flown over the land, as symbols of possession. Later, in the Colonial and Revolutionary War periods, flags representing famous persons, places, and events were flown in the American Colonies.

Surprisingly, the origins of the national flag, the Stars and Stripes, are somewhat obscure. Americans at one time warmed to the popular story about the young seamstress Betsy Ross, who supposedly sewed the first flag for George Washington. Although, according to historical records, she did indeed make flags, no evidence indicates that she was involved in making or designing the first Stars and Stripes. Consequently, the validity of the traditional story is doubtful.

The basic flag of the United States is one of the world's oldest national flags. Only the basic flags of 6 other nations¹ are older. It was officially adopted on June 14, 1777, when the Continental Congress resolved that "the Flag of the united states be 13 stripes alternate red and white, that the Union be 13 stars white in a blue field representing a new constellation." The 13 white stars in a field of blue represented the 13 colonies that had declared their independence in 1776. Stars were uncommon in flags in that era, although the American example has since made them popular. The colors red, white, and blue were clearly derived from British sources as many English flags had red and white stripes.

[Optional] After Vermont and Kentucky joined the Union about 20 years later, 2 stars and 2 stripes were added to the flag. Such a 15-star, 15-stripe flag inspired Francis Scott Key to write "The Star-Spangled

¹ Austria, Denmark, Great Britain, The Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland

Banner."

When the flag turned forty years old, there were 20 states in the Union, and it became apparent that adding one stripe for each new state would destroy the shape of the flag. As a result, Congress in 1818 restored the original design of 13 stripes and provided that each state was to be represented by one star.

[*Optional*] Until 1912 no official pattern existed for the arrangement of the stars. Flags of the 19th century varied greatly in their star patterns, in the number of points on the stars, in the shades of red and blue, in the width-to-length ratio of the flag, and in other details. Design and color were first standardized in 1912 by President William H. Taft. He made the first official provision for the arrangement of the stars. He ordered that there be six even rows of eight stars each.

Altogether the Stars and Stripes has been through 27 versions, the most recent was introduced on July 4, 1960, after Hawaii was admitted to statehood and became our 50th state.²

Announcer. [*Pause.*] Tonight we are going to retire an old flag which has become worn beyond repair. The correct way to do this is to cut the flag into two pieces of cloth, separating the blue field of stars from the red and white stripes. [*If the flag is very large, add* Due to the size of this flag, the red and white stripes will then be cut into three pieces.] The pieces of cloth that were once a flag will then be burned until they have been completely turned into ashes. This is not a flag burning, but rather a flag retirement; a solemn ceremony to honor a worn symbol of the United States of America. [*Pause.*] Please rise.

Color Guard #1. [*If the good flag could not be posted, then exit with it now.*]

Color Guard #2. [*Bring in the old flag, carefully unfold it and display it to the audience.*]

Announcer #1. [*Give a brief history of this flag if known.*] A reading of "I Am Old Glory" by an unknown author.

Reader #2. For over 200 years I have been the banner of hope and freedom for generation after generation of Americans. Born amid the first flames of America's fight for freedom, I am the symbol of a country that has grown from a little group of 13 colonies to a united nation of 50 sovereign states. Planted firmly on a high pinnacle of American faith, my gently fluttering folds have proved an inspiration to untold millions. Men have followed me into battle with unwavering courage. They have looked upon me as a symbol of national unity. They have prayed that they and their fellow citizens might continue to enjoy the life, liberty and pursuit of happiness which have been granted to every American as the heritage of free men. So long as men love liberty more than life itself, so long as they treasure the priceless privileges bought with the blood of our forefathers, so long as the principles of truth, justice and charity for all remain deeply rooted in human hearts, I shall continue to be the enduring banner of the United States of America.³

Announcer. [*Pause.*] We are now going to recite the Pledge of Allegiance to this flag one last time. Please remove your hats, hand over your heart or scout salute if you are in uniform. Ready, begin. [*Recite the pledge.*] To. Please remain standing. [*Pause.*] Color guard proceed.

Color Guard #2. [*Carefully cut the blue field of stars from the stripes. Cut the stripes into three sections if the flag is very large (5'x8' or larger).*]

Announcer. One final salute.

Color Guard #2. [*Place the pieces of cloth on the fire(s) and then salute. While the cloth is burning, a bugle could sound off playing 'Taps'.*]

Announcer. [*Wait until it is apparent that the cloth has been completely reduced to ashes.*] To. This concludes our flag retirement ceremony. Thank you for your attention. You are dismissed.

[*Let the fires burn until after the audience has left. They may then be extinguished. Remove any unburned pieces of wood. Scatter the ashes in an appropriate place, either near the retirement ceremony area or transport them to a more appropriate place. The ashes may also be buried.*]

² portions from the Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia and Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia

³ from "I Am Old Glory"