

# The United States Flag Code

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The United States Flag Code establishes advisory rules for display and care of the flag of the United States. It is Section 1 of Title 4 of the United States Code (4 U.S.C. § 1 et seq). This is a U.S. federal law, but there is no penalty for failure to comply with it and it is not widely enforced — indeed, punitive enforcement would conflict with the First Amendment right to freedom of speech, as the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled when the subject has come up in the past. (A Flag Desecration Amendment has been proposed from time to time and, if ever passed into law, would override Supreme Court rulings on this matter.)

This etiquette is as applied within U.S. jurisdiction. In other countries and places, local etiquette applies.

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### Standards of respect

- The flag should never be dipped to any person or thing, unless it is the ensign responding to a salute from a ship of a foreign nation. This tradition comes from the 1908 Summer Olympics in London, where countries were asked to dip their

flag to King Edward VII: the American team flag bearer, Ralph Rose, refused, teammate Martin Sheridan famously proclaiming that "this flag dips to no earthly king." [1] This tradition was codified as early as the 1911 U.S. Army drill regulations. [2]

- The flag should never be displayed with the union (the starred blue canton) down, except as a signal of dire distress in instances of extreme danger to life or property. [3]
- The flag should not be used as "wearing apparel, bedding, or drapery", [1] or for covering a speaker's desk, draping a platform, or for any decoration in general (exception for coffins). Bunting of blue, white and red stripes is available for these purposes. The blue stripe of the bunting should be on the top.
- The flag should never be drawn back or bunched up in any way.
- The flag should never be used as a covering for a ceiling.
- The flag should never be used for any advertising purpose. It should not be embroidered, printed, or otherwise impressed on such articles as cushions, handkerchiefs, napkins, boxes, or anything intended to be discarded after temporary use. Advertising signs should not be attached to the staff or halyard.
- The flag should not be used as part of a costume or athletic uniform, except that a flag patch may be used on the uniform of military personnel, firefighters, police officers, and members of patriotic organizations.

Note that on US Military combat uniforms, where the flag is put on the sleeve of the uniform, the flag patch is displayed with the stars facing forward, in the direction the wearer is facing. This is done to give the impression of the flag flowing in the wind while being carried forward across the battlefield. This is known as the "Reverse Field Flag." Note that many athletic teams appear to have ignored this rule, notably, the 2008 US Olympic Team, Major League Baseball placed the flag on the back of all uniforms following the 9/11 attacks, and the US team in the 2006 World Baseball Classic wore a flag patch on their left sleeve. For Independence Day and 9/11 2008, with the exception of the Toronto Blue Jays, all MLB teams will wear navy-blue versions of their hats, with an American flag imposed inside their own logo.

- Flag lapel pins may also be worn (they are considered replicas) and are worn near the heart.
- The flag should never have placed on it, or attached to it, any mark, insignia, letter, word, number, figure, or drawing of any kind.
- The flag should never be used as a receptacle for receiving, holding, carrying, or delivering anything.
- The flag should never be stepped on.
- The flag should not be draped over the hood, top, sides, or back of a vehicle, railroad train, or boat.
- When the flag is lowered, no part of it should touch the ground or any other object; it should be received by waiting hands and arms. To store the flag it should be folded neatly and ceremoniously.
- The flag should be cleaned and mended when necessary.
- If the flag is being used at a public or private estate, it should not be hung (unless at half mast) during rain or violent weather.
- When a flag is so tattered that it can no longer serve as a symbol of the United States, it should be destroyed in a dignified manner, preferably by burning. The American Legion, Boy Scouts of America [4], Girl Scouts of the USA [5] and other organizations regularly conduct dignified flag-burning ceremonies, often on Flag Day, June 14.
- The flag should never touch anything beneath it. Contrary to an urban legend, the flag code does not state that a flag that touches the ground should be burned. Instead, the flag should be moved so it is not touching the ground. [6]
- The flag should always be permitted to fall freely (This was not the case during the Apollo 11 moon landing when the US flag was reinforced by a horizontal bar at the top to allow full display even in absence of an atmosphere and the resulting lack of wind activity.)

## Displaying the flag outdoors

- When the flag is displayed from a staff projecting from a window, balcony, or a building, the union should be at the peak of the staff unless the flag is at half-staff. When it is displayed from the same flagpole with another flag, the flag of the United States must always be at the top except that the church pennant may be flown above the flag during church services for Navy personnel when conducted by a Naval chaplain on a ship at sea.
- When the flag is displayed over a street, it should be hung vertically, with the union to the north or east. If the street runs north-south, the stars should face east. For streets running east-west, the stars should face north. If the flag is suspended over a sidewalk, the flag's union should be farthest from the building and the stars facing away from it.
- When flown with flags of states, communities or societies on separate flag poles which are of the same height and in a straight line, the flag of the United States is always placed in the position of honor—to its own right. The other flags may be the same size but none may be larger.
- No other flag should be placed above it. The flag of the United States is always the first flag raised and the last to be lowered.
- When flown with the national banner of other countries, each flag must be displayed from a separate pole of the same height. Each flag should be the same size. They should be raised and lowered simultaneously. The flag of one nation may not be displayed above that of another nation in time of peace.[7]
- The flag should be raised briskly and lowered slowly and ceremoniously.
- Ordinarily it should be displayed only between sunrise and sunset, although the Flag Code permits night time display "when a patriotic effect is desired." Similarly, the flag should be displayed only when the weather is fair, except when an all weather flag is displayed. (By presidential proclamation and law, the flag is displayed continuously at certain honored locations like the United States Marine Corps Memorial in Arlington and Lexington Green.)
- It should be illuminated if displayed at night.
- The flag of the United States of America is saluted as it is hoisted and lowered. The salute is held until the flag is unsnapped from the halyard or through the last note of music, whichever is the longest.

## Displaying the flag indoors

- When on display, the flag is accorded the place of honor, always positioned to its own right. Place it to the right of the speaker or staging area or sanctuary. Other flags should be to the left.
- The flag of the United States of America should be at the center and at the highest point of the group when a number of flags of states, localities, or societies are grouped for display.
- When one flag is used with the flag of the United States of America and the staffs are crossed, the flag of the United States is placed on its own right with its staff in front of the other flag.
- When displaying the flag against a wall, vertically or horizontally, the flag's union (stars) should be at the top, to the flag's own right, and to the observer's left.

## Parading and saluting the flag

- When carried in a procession, the flag should be to the right of the marchers.
- When other flags are carried, the flag of the United States may be centered in front of the others or carried to their right. When the flag passes in a procession, or when it is hoisted or lowered, all should face the flag and salute.
- To salute, all persons come to attention.
- Those in uniform give the appropriate formal salute.
- Members of the Armed Forces and veterans who are present but not in uniform may render the military salute.
- Citizens not in uniform salute by placing their right hand over the heart and men with head cover should remove it and hold it to left shoulder, hand over the heart.
- Members of uniformed organizations in formation salute upon command of the person in charge.

#### Pledge of Allegiance and national anthem

- The Pledge of Allegiance all present except those in uniform should stand at attention facing the flag with the right hand over the heart;
- When the national anthem is played or sung;

(a) Designation.— The composition consisting of the words and music known as the Star-Spangled Banner is the national anthem. (b) Conduct During Playing.— During a rendition of the national anthem— (1) when the flag is displayed— (A) all present except those in uniform should stand at attention. (B) men not in uniform should remove their headdress with their right hand and hold the headdress at the left shoulder, (C) individuals in uniform should give the military salute at the first note of the anthem and maintain that position until the last note; and (2) when the flag is not displayed, all present should face toward the music and act in the same manner they would if the flag were displayed.

#### The flag in mourning

The flag, as draped over President John F. Kennedy's coffin at his state funeral.

- To place the flag at half-staff (or half-mast, on ships), hoist it to the peak for an instant and lower it to a position half way between the top and bottom of the staff.
- The flag is to be raised again to the peak for a moment before it is lowered.
- On Memorial Day, the flag is displayed at half-staff until noon and at full staff from noon to sunset.
- The flag is to be flown at half-staff in mourning for the death of designated, principal government leaders.
- The flag is to be flown at half-staff for thirty days in mourning for the death of the current or former President of the United States.
- The U.S. flag is otherwise flown at half-staff (or half-mast, on ships) when directed by the President of the United

States or a state governor.

- When used to cover a casket or coffin, the flag should be placed with the union at the head and over the left shoulder. It should not be lowered into the grave.

- The U.S. Flag is to be flown half staff on Patriot Day (Sept. 11)

## History

Prior to Flag Day, June 14, 1923, neither the federal government nor the states had official guidelines governing the display of the United States's flag.

On June 14, 1923, the National Flag Code was constructed by representatives of the Army, Navy, and other groups.

On December 22, 1942, the Code became Public Law 77-826; chapter 806. Little had changed in the code since the Flag Day 1924 Conference. The most notable change was the removal of the Bellamy salute due to its similarities to the Hitler salute.

## Notes and references

^ "London Olympics 1908 & 1948", BBC, Internet Archive (2005-06-24). Retrieved on 27 April 2008.

^ "Infantry Drill Regulations. United States Army. Corrected to Dec. 31, 1917." pg 185, section 768.

^ "4 U.S.C. § 8 (a)". United States Government Printing Office. Retrieved on 2008-04-27.

^ Flag disposal info, Reference to Boy Scouts, retrieved 2008-07-20.

^ Flag disposal info, Reference to Girl Scouts, retrieved 2008-07-20.

^ Mikkelson, Barbara and David P. Flag Disposal. Retrieved 2007-06-24.

^ The flag of the United Nations is flown in a position of superior prominence or honor at the headquarters of the United Nations. The Flag Code specifically notes this custom and states that the Code should not be construed to render this custom illegal.

## External links

- US Government Printing Office: U.S. Code, Title 4

- Flag Rules and Regulations with examples and an FAQ

- TATTERED: Investigation of an American Icon is a documentary photo essay, investigating the principle identity, misuse, commodification and desecration of the American flag in the context of the U.S. Flag Code.

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