A SMALL WORLD—AND ITS FLAGS—
IN A MUCH BIGGER ONE

Anne-Marie Obajtek-Kirkwood

THE AMERICAN FLAG, PAST, AND PRESENT

Paraphrasing Gertrude Stein: “a flag is a flag is a flag,” or is it? As a rose is not just a flower, the U.S. flag is not just a piece of cloth with fifty white stars in a blue field and thirteen alternate red and white horizontal stripes. The dictionary definition of the object runs thus: “A piece of cloth or similar material, typically oblong or square, attachable by one edge to a pole or rope, and used as the symbol or emblem of a country or institution or as a decoration during public festivities: the American flag.” The American flag is a sign that ties the private to the national and collective in a number of ways: it represents the country and its values, it is flown to celebrate its past events and mark patriotic festivities. It occupies a special place in American history and hearts. As such it has been protected by flag desecration statutes, applied in 1897 by the states of Illinois, Pennsylvania, and South Dakota and in 1932 by all the states. As a result, we have a more historic and “legal” definition of the flag, dating from 1897: “Under the model flag desecration law, the term ‘flag’ was defined to include any flag, standard, ensign, or color, or any representation of such made of any substance whatsoever and of
any size that evidently purported to be said flag or a picture or representation thereof, upon which shall be shown the colors, stars and stripes in any number, or by which the person seeing the same without deliberation may believe the same to represent the flag of the United States.”

Nowadays, it is still strictly controlled by flag etiquette of which presidents in power are sometimes ignorant, or institutions like the U.S. Postal Service in its issuing of American flag stamps. USHistory.org, the site created and hosted by the Independence Hall Association in Philadelphia, mentions the Flag Code: “The laws relating to the flag of the United States of America are found in detail in the United States Code. Title 4, Chapter 1 pertains to the flag; Title 18, Chapter 33, Section 700 regards criminal penalties for flag desecration; Title 36, Chapter 3 pertains to patriotic customs and observances. These laws were supplemented by Executive Orders and Presidential Proclamations.”

USHistory.org also gives an updated definition of the flag: “The flag of the United States is any flag of the United States, or any part thereof, made of any substance of any size, accurate or not, that is recognized as a flag by the reasonable observer.” The site proceeds to illustrate this visually by providing examples of what can be considered as a flag, such as the logo of the Bank of America, or, a child’s watercolor painting of a rectangular surface with one pale blue star in a darker blue upper left corner surrounded by three horizontal white and red stripes. It also refers the reader to the Library of Congress and the more recent Flag Protection Act of 2005 introduced in Senate by Senators Benett and Clinton, which holds a similar definition of the flag: “In this section, the term ‘flag of the United States’ means any flag of the United States, or any part thereof, made of any substance, in any size, in a form that is commonly displayed as a flag and that would be taken to be a flag by the reasonable observer” (SEC. 3 Sec. 700 [a]).

**Symbolic and Other Meanings Attached to the American Flag**

Section 2 (a)(1) of the SEC also states the symbolic meaning of the flag: “the flag of the United States is a unique symbol of national unity and represents the values of liberty, justice, and equality that