

Flag Folding Facts - Flag Folding Ceremony

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The custom of folding the United States Flag into the shape of a triangle bestows unique honor and respect upon the Flag. National Flag Foundation, the Naval Library, the Institute of Heraldry and several other sources have searched for documentation on flag folding, but detailed information regarding its origin remains unknown. NFF and Dr. Harold Langley, former curator at the Smithsonian Institution, theorize that the practice probably developed during World War I when patriotism was high and the United States Flag was universally embraced as a national symbol.

In 1923, as a consequence of this sustained patriotic fervor and the increased use of the Flag, a conference of veterans' organizations and patriotic associations convened in Washington, DC. in 1923 to create a code of etiquette for the flag. Their intent was to establish traditions ensuring respectful treatment of the Flag by all Americans, including the many immigrants entering the country at that time.

Subsequent commentaries associated with flag etiquette began to contain references to the code and to the symbolic folding of the Flag. One such commentary, published in 1930, was written by James A. Moss in his definitive book, *The Flag of the United States, its History and Symbolism*.

Moss wrote: "In the Army when, each day, the Flag is lowered at the last note of retreat, the greatest care is taken that no part shall touch the ground. The Flag is carefully folded into the shape of a tri-cornered hat, reminiscent of the hats worn by the soldiers who fought the War of the Revolution and won American independence. In the folding the red and white stripes are finally wrapped into the blue, as the light of day vanishes into the darkness of the night." (p.105)

In a letter written in 1988 to Jerald A. Merrick, Head of Reference at the Decatur Public Library, George F. Cahill, former President of National Flag Foundation, offers further clarification:

"I ascribe the fold as a salute to the tri-color itself, - the three colors, the tri-sided hat of the colonial soldiers and the colonists in general. I further use other things of three related to the nation and to heraldry inclusive of: the three branches of the national government; the three primary documents of our land - the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights; and the West Point motto (duty, honor, country). When meeting with scouts, one can relate the fold to the three points of the scout oath and to the tri-points of the fleur de lis.¹"

The precise details for folding the flag are as follows:

1. Fold the Flag in half lengthwise.
2. Repeat, fold in half lengthwise again, being careful that the blue field is on the outside.
3. As one person holds the Flag by the blue field, another makes a triangular fold in the opposite end and continues to make triangular folds until the entire Flag is in a triangle.
4. Tuck the loose edge of the Flag into the pocket formed by the folds so that only the blue field and white stars are visible.

There is one well-known ceremony for flag folding, often attributed to the Air Force Academy, in which each of the twelve folds of the flag is assigned a symbolic meaning. A copy of this ceremony may be obtained by calling or emailing National Flag Foundation.

NATIONAL FLAG FOUNDATION'S FLAG FOLDING CEREMONY

National Flag Foundation presents its own special flag folding ceremony, incorporating several of the virtues attributed to the colors of the Flag as specified in 1782 by Charles Thomson, then Secretary of Congress. National Flag Foundation recommends that this ceremony be read prior to the actual folding of the flag.

The first fold stands for liberty. In America, we are free to own property, to elect our government representatives, to attend the church of our choice, to openly disagree, to travel freely without restriction, to

pursue an education and the "American Dream". The white stripes of the Flag symbolize our liberty.

The second fold represents unity. Abraham Lincoln stated that a house divided against itself cannot stand. National unity in the face of natural disasters and external threats, such as those posed on September 11, 2001, has preserved our constitutional republic.

The third fold stands for justice. In America we believe that every person stands equal before the law and is deserving of just and fair treatment. The laborer and the lawyer are both entitled to justice in America. The blue of the Flag embodies justice.

The fourth fold symbolizes perseverance. To persevere means to endure, to remain steadfast despite severe hardship and obstacles. The Continental Army suffered repeated setbacks before claiming any significant victory. Yet throughout the brutal winter of 1777 at Valley Forge, they persevered.

The fifth fold represents hardiness. Hardiness is the ability to withstand difficulty while remaining resolute despite adversity. The aggressors in World War II underestimated American hardiness. They thought that Americans were soft, incapable and unwilling to endure hardship. Our soldiers and sailors such as those who fought at Normandy and in Korea proved them wrong.

The sixth fold stands for valor. Valor means courage, the act of defending what is right even in the face of opposition. Nathan Hale, the Revolutionary War patriot, was convicted of spying by the British in 1776. Before he was hanged, Hale displayed great valor with his words, "I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country." The red color in the flag represents valor, symbolic of the blood shed by all the American heroes who sacrificed for our freedom.

The seventh fold symbolizes purity. A pure nation is free from taint, from what weakens, pollutes or renders it ineffective. Our Founding Fathers illuminated freedom's path for us when they created the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. The pure intent of these documents enabled the United States of America to become the greatest of all nations, a land of liberty which beckons to all who are seeking asylum from persecution and oppression.

The eighth fold represents innocence. Innocence implies that one is unacquainted with evil and is thus free from sin. George Washington once stated, "The love of my country will be the ruling influence of my conduct." Americans pay tribute to him and to all those who give devoted service to uphold freedom's ideals without selfish or evil motivations.

The ninth fold signifies sacrifice. To sacrifice is to give up something valued for an ideal, belief or goal. America exists today because of the sacrifices of countless Americans. Many have made the ultimate sacrifice of their lives in battles waged during the Revolution, the World Wars, in Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, Afghanistan and other locations around the world. We pay tribute to them and to the firefighters, policemen, soup kitchen volunteers, members of our armed forces and numerous others who continue to sacrifice for freedom.

The tenth fold stands for honor. One who possesses honor possesses a keen sense of ethical conduct. To honor a person or ideal is to display respect for them. We give thanks for all who have acted with honor in the founding and growth of America. We pray that each citizen and all those who represent us in government will conduct themselves in a manner that will continue to bring honor to our nation and to our Flag.

The eleventh fold symbolizes independence. Independence is the state of being free, of being able to make unrestricted choices within the law as free individuals and as a free nation. Ever since our nation's birth, Americans have fiercely defended their independence against all oppressors. Patrick Henry articulated the sentiments of his fellow Americans past, present and future when he uttered those famous words, "Give me liberty, or give me death." America stands as an icon of freedom and independence for the oppressed of the world. May it always remain so.

The twelfth fold represents truth. Truth is the body of real events and facts. It is preserved through adherence to reality and the avoidance of falsehoods. America was built upon God-given truths articulated in the Declaration of Independence "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Adherence to these truths has made America a great nation. We pledge to continue this noble legacy of truth so that in America, every man woman and child may forever be free.