

OPEN FORUM | Symbols of Patriotism

# Whose flag is it, anyway?



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE ZARICOR FLAG COLLECTION

**Circa 1818-1819:** This 21-star U.S. flag is in the "Grand Luminary" pattern.



**Circa 1800-1805:** A 13-star U.S. Merchant Ship's ensign shows a traditional pattern of stars.



**Circa 1800-1810:** This 16-star flag displays a variation of the "Grand Luminary" pattern.

By Ben Zaricor

**F**rom images of burning effigies abroad to the lining of Bono's jacket at U2's post-Sept. 11 Super Bowl performance, the American flag packs emotional wallop — a potent symbol viewed passionately across our political spectrum. Much of this passion appears to be rooted in highly personalized, possessive and often misguided perceptions of "ownership."

Many people feel so strongly about "Old Glory" that they are quick to draw lines in the sand and establish their own arbitrary dictates of what constitutes "respect," and what borders on "desecration" — a term itself suggesting something with religious, symbolic power. When someone, or some group, violates such artificial barriers, verbal and physical blows may soon follow as people rush to define and defend "their" flag.

And now, in the charged environment in the aftermath of Sept. 11 and the recent war in Iraq, we are in yet another phase of America's never-ending, often heated public debate about the flag and how it "should" be displayed and treated.

That's why actions — such as the one taken recently by the House of Representatives proposing an amendment to the Constitution that would prohibit the desecration of the American flag — go to the heart of our country's sense of liberty. I simply do not understand those who want to pass laws to limit our freedom of political expression.

Many Americans simply may not know that beginning in our Colonial period, individual Americans created and customized the flag, independent of any governmental oversight. There is, for example, a long tradition of people incorporating the flag into their clothing. Some people also have added personal elements to their flags, such as writing their names along its borders. The Sons of Liberty added a snake over the stripes — "Don't Tread On Me"; centuries later, others placed the "peace" symbol in the star field to deliver a specific message.

The American flag, and what it symbolizes to people around the world, mirrors our nation's history — from the struggle for independence to today's role as the global superpower. And because no single group "owns" the flag, or ever has, its design and the materials it is fashioned from illustrate the creativity, whimsy and idiosyncratic realities that are embedded in our singular culture.

Because of the powerful emotions bound up in flags, and the fascinating stories tied to them, I be-



**Variations on a theme:** The 13-star commercial merchant "Jack" eagle (above) is circa 1850-1870. The peace symbol flag (below) dates from the Vietnam War, circa 1968-1971.



came a serious collector when many of my friends would never dream of collecting such things. I subsequently discovered there is no place where you can go to see and learn the history of our country through original examples of the American flag.

That's why some of us are proposing to create a national flag center in San Francisco that would provide a permanent, year-round venue where people can view flag exhibits and learn details about specific flags or about one's own personal flag that has been in the family for generations.

We see the flag center meeting its democratic fulfillment as a place to learn the facts about the power inherent in the symbol of an idea and to participate in spirited, educational debates and other programs. I believe the flag center could offer an outstanding opportunity for symbolic fulfillment of our nation's "sea to shining sea" destiny.

Our flags tell a story of diverse ideas, cultures, personalities, races and religions — just as the stars on that blue canton of the flag made one nation. From many, one!

It is our flag — not the flag of our government. It is something we use in our everyday lives to help express our personality, and our political freedoms, as a people. When you look at these pieces of American history, you realize they were designed and made by people very much like us — and that our flag belongs to everyone.

*Ben Zaricor, with his wife Louise Veninga, are founders of Good Earth Teas of Santa Cruz. A number of flags from their collection are on view at the Presidio (see box).*

## See the collection

**What:** "The American Flag: Two Centuries of Concord and Conflict" — More than 150 American flags and artifacts from the Zaricor, Veninga and Hinrichs collections span American history. Among the newest items on display is one of only three flags recovered at ground zero in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attack on the World Trade Center in New York City. The 3-by-5-foot American flag was found in the rubble by a volunteer firefighter, David Bliss, who came to the Presidio last month with his family to view it among the other flags on exhibit.

**Where:** San Francisco Presidio Officers' Club, 50 Moraga Ave.

**When:** Wednesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Wednesday till 8 p.m.) Through July 31.

**Admission:** free