Introduction  Totem

The Stars and Stripes is the totem of the nation, the sacred emblem of a shared national faith or civic religion. The flag is omnipresent in public and private places, in institutional as well as communal and domestic settings, in entertainment and commercial venues and products. The flag is surrounded by taboos: it has to be treated in accordance with precise rules of protocol, and whoever does not respect them can provoke horror and scandal. And yet it is so powerful as to protect, in the name of the principles that it represents, even those who deface or burn it. The flag stirs up strong personal and political emotions: cohesion, belonging, pride, individual and collective identity, anger and revenge against enemies or traitors, anger against the government itself. And it expects strong responses: the loyalty of the citizens’ bodies, the devotion of their minds, the love of their hearts. The flag is the revered object of periodical rituals, of actual prayers such as the morning school salute and the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. In extraordinary circumstances, the ubiquity of the flag and the emotions it inspires explode to extraordinary dimensions. It happened after the September 11, 2001, attacks, the event that first sparked my interest in writing this book. And yet its very extraordinariness only serves to exalt ordinary practices—ordinary practices that are so much a part of the landscape that they may go unnoticed by the natives but that to many foreigners seem conspicuous and excessive, lacking in irony and self-irony; to me they seem embarrassing for their lack of reserve. Native and foreign observers often agree about the very special status of the national flag in the consciousness of the American people, about a unique, exceptional American “flag fetishism,” unlike that of any other people. Of all countries, according to British social psychologist Michael Billig, “the United States is arguably today the home of what Renan called ‘the cult of the flag.’”¹
The Stars and Stripes, though, is not unique in its status as a totem, in arousing intense cults and fetishisms. Other flags have similar claims, around the world. In the heat of the 2006 so-called Mohammed cartoons controversy, another dramatic event that sustained my curiosity in flag history and culture, Danish flags joined American flags at widespread flag-burning demonstrations across the Muslim world. And Danes reacted with shock and sorrow: because, they said, the national colors, affectionately called Dannebrog, or “Danish cloth,” are dear to their hearts, a banner of joy, solidarity, community, and family celebration—a people’s banner as well as the state’s. Actually, all the flags of the Scandinavian countries, like that of Great Britain, for that matter, are beloved, domesticated, commercialized, and sacralized objects. They are routinely hoisted on public buildings, homes, churches, and department stores and posted on goods, both sacred and profane—such as the classical Union Jack underwear. Many believe that there are no countries in the world with so many flagpoles as in Scandinavia. The sacralization of these flags seems more readily understandable than that of the Stars and Stripes. After all, their designs (a variety of crosses) and their mythical origins (they are narrated as ancient gifts from the pope or heaven or God herself) are firmly rooted in the Christian faith. Many national flags, indeed, display outright religious symbols: the Japanese Shinto Sun Goddess and the Indian Chakra or Buddhist spinning wheel, the Muslim countries’ color green and Israel’s tallith, or prayer shawl. In these cases, defacement is literally “desecration,” often forbidden and sometimes punished. The Stars and Stripes, the French Tricolour and the Red flag, and their offspring all over the world are among the few flags born secular because engendered by revolutions, either already accomplished or promised. They did not remain secular for long, though. When they became established state flags, they were quickly absorbed into national, civil religions and political theologies and supplied with adequate myths of origins. It is surprising how little is known of how, when, and by whom they were actually invented. Mysterious births add to their mystique.
Since the Stars and Stripes’ mysterious birth in the late 1770s, in Betsy Ross’s womb, its totemic cult (as I show in part 1 of this book) grew slowly over a century and a half; and some of its rites of worship are quite recent indeed. The cult has been developed and is administered from above, by a set of ministers and priests chosen for this purpose. They are, as can easily be imagined, the leading figures of the political and military state institutions, and what they display and honor is the official flag. Nevertheless, the representatives of the institutions are not the only ones to do so, and often, historically, they were not the first to have done so. The flag is also the icon of popular nationalisms that are nourished by heartfelt adherence, deep convictions, sentimental fervor, and melodramatic sentimentality. Many demonstrations linked to the flag were, in effect, born autonomously, outside the sphere of state officialdom, and only later absorbed, regulated, and codified by the latter. That public institutions did not play an active role in initiating patriotic rituals appears to many observers a peculiarly American phenomenon, the confirmation of an old transatlantic conviction: the supremacy, in the United States, of civil society over a state that, compared to other modern states, is weak and distant. I am not so sure. It seems to me that, on the one hand, in Europe as in the transatlantic world and perhaps in the Far East, rituals and cults of this type emerged, in the crucial years between the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, due, undoubtedly, to a complex web of state initiatives but also to groups, associations, and movements from below, and that, on the other hand, state agencies did not refrain from doing their part in the United States. The important thing is to look in the right direction, at the right moment. In the United States, around 1900, power resided above all in the capitals of the individual states of the Union, not in the federal capital. And many of those states fairly quickly adopted the flag festivities. After 1900, things changed, and the federal government also intervened. And it did so with ever-greater incisiveness as it gradually acquired a new authority, which it had not had in the previous century and which began to be perceived and exercised, both in practical terms and symbolically, as truly national.
The Stars and Stripes is a multifaceted totem. It is a flag both of freedom and of empire (as I suggest in parts 2 and 3). But what freedom and empire mean, and what constitutes their reciprocal relationship, is the object and the very essence of American history and of the controversies that have molded it. This, too, is not an exceptional situation. The United States was born from a revolution that, like other modern revolutions (from the French Revolution to the Bolshevik one, including the third transatlantic revolution, the second revolution in the Americas, the first Black revolution—that of Haiti), saw itself as a traumatic generative event, as a new beginning not only in national history but also in world history. All revolutions have aspired to this universality, and they have not been too fastidious about the means they adopted to achieve it, to re-create the world in their own image and likeness. They did it with the soft power of ideas, ideals, and influence, with the hard power of armies and power politics, often with imperial and colonial policies, authoritarian, Napoleonic, Stalinist. The Spirit of ’76 was the announcement of a project of freedom, of freedom and sovereignty for the new United States, of individual freedoms for the former colonists, but also of freedom for the whole of humankind. Of course, nobody put it better than Tom Paine: “We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now.” And again: “The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind.” The American ideals of freedom, like those of other revolutions, had a strong transforming and, therefore, precisely because of this (and from the beginning), expansionist impetus—an impetus that, it seems to me, has not spent itself either in time or space, even if it has changed its appearance and meaning. When Thomas Jefferson spoke of an “empire for liberty,” he envisioned an extended continental republic in North America. But as early as 1871, Walt Whitman envisaged a radical democracy projected beyond the continent, across the oceans, toward world supremacy:

The Pacific will be ours, and the Atlantic mainly ours. There will be daily electric communication with every part of the globe. What an age! what
a land! Where, elsewhere, one so great? The individuality of one nation must then, as always, lead the world. Can there be any doubt who the leader ought to be?¹⁰

The totem of freedom is also multifaceted. The idea of an American empire has, historically, been linked to the perpetuation of freedom in the country, to its extension abroad, and consequently and in stark contrast to this concept, to nationalist policies of standardization, dominance, and supremacy. The idea of freedom, on the other hand, has continually been the object of a multiplicity of concurrent interpretations. In the name of freedom, a whole series of conflicting trends have been justified: marked discrimination on the grounds of race, wealth, and gender, as well as dramatic struggles for emancipation; the demands of the free market and those of social security; patriotic consensus and the repression of dissidents, as well as the right to espouse dissidence. In the name of freedom, criticism has been directed at imperial policies and, sometimes, at the idea of empire itself.¹¹ The flag born during the American Revolution has accompanied all the many subsequent developments of that revolution. It has been, like the French Tricolour, a banner of white freedom and Black slavery that could morph into a banner of Black freedom or rebellion. It has even become the emblem of groups of Americans who believe, in exactly the same way as the most heretical followers of the Red banner, that “their” flag expresses some original ideals different from those realized under the official flag—ideals that have been betrayed and of which they, instead, are the authentic custodians. These groups demand that the Stars and Stripes should represent the United States not as it is but as it should, and still has to, become. Hence, they oppose the established totem, sometimes through shocking demonstrations of contempt, but they do so to appropriate it and restore its purity. The flag is a vital and living symbol, which has solid roots in society. Precisely on account of this status, it does not have just one meaning. On the contrary, its meanings can be and, in effect, are diverse, even conflicting. They have been the terrain of social and political clashes and, consequently, of judicial disputes; and
they still are (as I discuss in part 4). Precisely because of this characteristic, the symbol is so powerful.

The Stars and Stripes, whatever it represents, is a bloodthirsty totem. Like all totems, it legitimizes the killing of the enemy, but it also demands and receives the blood of its followers and ultimately symbolizes it. It is the incarnation of the secret pact that unites the members of the group in a relationship of intimate solidarity, a secret pact based on the blood that has been shed and on the accepted death of some members of the group, on the ritualized remembrance of this sacrifice aimed at the survival of the group itself and of its values, on the continuity and communion between the living and the dead. This idea of the flag holds true inasmuch as the flag is a national banner, for the wars and imperial aspirations to which it has lent its colors; and also in this regard, as is obvious, the United States is in no way an exception compared to other countries. As in other countries, the sacralization of the national emblem, its transformation from an instrument for designating territory into an object of veneration, is tied to warfare. It emerged with the massacres of the Civil War and the cult of their remembrance at the end of the nineteenth century, when sacrifice and the nation-state and its symbols became inextricably interwined; and it was heightened by the First and Second World Wars. It was at the beginning of the Civil War, in April 1861, in New York City, that there was the first great popular demonstration (of emotion, mourning, grief, and anger) centered around a flag fetish: the flag of Fort Sumter, which had escaped the Southern cannon shots. It was during the Civil War that the mystical reverence for the patriot-martyr developed: the soldier who, in battle, inspired by the flag, performs heroic and foolhardy acts while going knowingly toward death—and who achieves posthumous fame in poems, songs, pictures. It was then that Walt Whitman sang of the flag:

O you up there! O pennant! where you undulate like a snake
  hissing so curious,
Out of reach, an idea only, yet furiously fought for, risking
  bloody death, loved by me,
Blood and sanctification
The assassination of Abraham Lincoln, 1865. From left to right: Henry Rathbone, Clara Harris, Mary Todd Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln, and John Wilkes Booth. Currier & Ives, 1865. Lithograph. (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress)

Blood and sanctification
Martin Luther King, 1968. “Somebody Paid the Price for Your Right: Register/Vote,” poster, A. Philip Randolph Educational Fund, ca. 1968. (Gary Yanker Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress)
So loved—O you banner leading the day with stars brought from the night!

Valueless, object of eyes, over all and demanding
all—(absolute owner of all)—O banner and pennant!
I too leave the rest—great as it is, it is nothing—houses,
machines are nothing—I see them not,
I see but you, O warlike pennant! O banner so broad, with stripes, sing you only,
Flapping up there in the wind.  

But it is not only the totem of armies that evokes the mesh of love and death. It is also the devotees of the liberty flag, in the United States as elsewhere, who have not refrained from exalting their hero-martyrs and their blood-drenched banners. Blood sacrifice at the border, under the national colors, may well be the holiest ritual of the nation-state; but blood sacrifice in the maquis or in the street, under the colors of freedom, is the holiest ritual of the freedom fighter. On the morrow of the Revolution, Jefferson recalled, with a slightly gory nonchalance, that “the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots & tyrants. It is it’s natural manure.” And that was not a mannered recollection, because it served to criticize the policy of the postrevolutionary ruling class in the face of Daniel Shays’s insurrection, namely, the new popular insurrections against yesterday’s insurgents, who had by now become the establishment. On the eve of the Civil War, John Brown repeated his favorite biblical quotation, “without shedding of blood there is no remission of sin,” and he shed the blood of others and ultimately his own, even before the great carnage had begun. After the Civil War, Frederick Douglass recalled “the heroic deeds and virtues of the brave men who volunteered, fought and fell in the cause of Union and freedom.” And that was not a mannered recollection, because Douglass intended to rescue the memory of the war and of its valid reasons (the struggle against racial slavery) from the quagmire of the ongoing national reconciliation. In the name of pacification, he said, “we must not be asked to say that the South
was right in the rebellion, or to say the North was wrong.” And again: “We must not be asked to put no difference between those who fought for the Union and those who fought against it, or between loyalty and treason.” With a giant leap in time, to the end of the 1900s, a poster that invites citizens (Black citizens in particular) to register and vote carries a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the assertion, “Somebody paid the price for your right.” The martyred King is embraced by the Stars and Stripes as is Lincoln, in so many nineteenth-century prints, in the supreme moment of his martyrdom.

Finally, the Stars and Stripes is a totem thirsty tout court, thirsty for alcohol, or at least it was, for a long time, in the past (and I do not know if this is an American peculiarity or exception, but I doubt it). The flag has presided over popular festivities in which, in its name, the good citizens of the republic indulged in copious drinking sessions. Mark Twain refers to this scenario, in his narration of an episode he witnessed in the West, during the Civil War. The story, recounted in an irreverent tone, is the account of a miraculous apparition of the flag and of an unrealized Bacchic celebration. In a small city in Nevada, a summer storm breaks, the overhanging mountain is enveloped by dense black clouds, attracting the attention of the people. While they are all looking upward, an extraordinary thing happens. On the summit, a golden flame seems to light up, small but very bright against the dark and stormy background.

It was the flag!—though no one suspected it at first, it seemed so like a supernatural visitor of some kind—a mysterious messenger of good tidings, some were fain to believe. It was the nation’s emblem transfigured by the departing rays of a sun that was entirely palled from view. . . . The superstition grew apace that this was a mystic courier come with great news from the war—the poetry of the idea excusing and commending it—and on it spread, from heart to heart, from lip to lip and from street to street, till there was a general impulse to have out the military and welcome the bright waif with a salvo of artillery!
In fact, there really is some news: it is the day that witnesses two great Union victories of 1863, Vicksburg and Gettysburg; but no one knows it yet. If only we had known, concludes Mark Twain,

the glorified flag . . . would have been saluted and re-saluted, that memorable evening, as long as there was a charge of powder to thunder with; the city would have been illuminated, and every man that had any respect for himself would have got drunk,—as it was the custom of the country on all occasions of public moment. Even at this distant day I cannot think of this needlessly marred supreme opportunity without regret. What a time we might have had!

The American, French, and Red flags represent three revolutionary promises that, although developed in different directions, thoroughly interacted. The socialist Red flag has been an antagonist to the liberal and democratic French and American ones. When it became a state emblem, in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, its antagonism was played out in the fields of international relations and state power politics. But before that, when it was growing into a transnational symbol of social protest, such antagonism cut across the national societies of France and the United States, with seemingly different historical results. It was in France that the confrontation took its earliest, most dramatic form. In 1848, and again in 1871, the Red banner challenged the republican bleu-blanc-rouge in the streets of Paris, in highly symbolic clashes between the colors of the 1789 bourgeois revolution and those of an anticipated proletarian revolution. In a famous painting, the poet and moderate republican Alphonse de Lamartine is shown in front of the Hôtel de Ville on February 25, 1848, while rejecting with a grand gesture the Red flag in favor of the Tricouleur. The rejection did work for the time being, but it did not prevent the drapeau rouge from remaining the rallying point of worker unrest, class struggle, and Socialist party politics for the rest of the nineteenth century and most of the next. In the United States, on the other hand, the symbolic confrontation knew less dramatic events but had the most radical outcome. Since the beginning of industrialization and the explosion of the Social
Question, the Red flag was marginalized, and industrial workers asserted their rights, mainly, by flying the Stars and Stripes and by joining non-socialist, multiclass parties. It was indeed a difference not just between France and the United States but, rather, it seemed, between the United States and the rest of the Western world—a truly American peculiarity. In the course of the twentieth century, generations of startled observers pondered over the quintessential exceptionalist question, Werner Sombart’s “Why is there no Socialism in the United States?” and its implied generalization, “Is America substantially different?” Looking back from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, when Socialism as a radical working-class movement has all but disappeared in the West, one may come to a somewhat divergent conclusion: perhaps the early demise of the Red flag as the powerful symbol of a social cleavage in the nation was an American peculiarity only in timing, not in substance.\textsuperscript{20}