

As of October 2021, the following notification was added to the bottom of NAVA's main GFBF download page: "For Ted Kaye's recollections of compiling and updating *Good Flag, Bad Flag*, see *Vexillum 10* (June 2020), pp. 19–20." Previously that document was not available to the general public, but the author of "When Vexillologists are Vexations" predicted that like everything else Kaye has said about his moronic pamphlet, it would be a self-serving humblebrag. Now that mid-2022 has been reached, the document is publicly-available, and readers can judge for themselves whether the prediction was correct.

In the spring of 2020, NAVA published an updated edition of Ted Kaye's compilation of guidelines for flag design, "Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag. A copy is being provided to each NAVA member, the title is being made freely available as an

electronic publication on the NAVA website, and print copies are available for sale through the NAVA Shop and on Amazon.com. We spoke recently with the compiler about the history of his publication and the reasons for its update.

"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag, Updated Edition Available Now

How did *Good Flag, Bad Flag* come about in the first place?

When I became *Raven* editor in 1996, the volume under way documented the flags of American Indian tribes.¹ As I edited that seminal work by Don Healy, I found myself regretting that so many tribal flag designs fell short of their potential, most likely being modeled on poorly-designed U.S. state flags. As more and more tribes were then adopting flags—spurred by native sovereignty laws, casino construction, and the upcoming Lewis & Clark bicentennial commemoration (for which I was serving as executive director in Oregon)²—I began to wonder about the relationship between vexillologists and those who design and adopt flags.

Then in 1999 the concept of a general-interest flag-design guidebook arose during the 18th International Congress of Vexillology (NAVA 33), held in Victoria, B.C. A panel discussion exploring "Vexilligraphy—Guides for Flag Design" (featuring flag merchants Doreen Braverman, Jim Ferrigan, and Peter Orenski) deplored the sad current state of flag design, as evidenced by the poor quality of the flags proposed by their customers. As the panel wrapped up, I rose to assert that we flag experts had no business criticizing the public's vexillographic attempts until we successfully shared the basic principles of flag design. I then impulsively volunteered to draft such a guidebook, promising it for the next ICV, in York, England, in two years' time.

What guided your editorial decisions in creating *GFBF*?

I compiled the text by consulting the writings of about 20 vexillographic thinkers—in the U.S. and Canada and around the world. Many had explored flag design in great detail, advancing important ideas in articles, pamphlets, and booklets. They didn't agree on everything, of course. But finding that they seemed to agree on five basic principles, I made those the core of the guidebook. It appeared, however, that most writers attempted to squeeze too much into their guidance—resulting in over-long, in-the-weeds, touch-every-base materials. Their work failed to market good flag design with a catchy title and short-and-sweet concepts.

And—perhaps most importantly—most focused on what TO do, usually ignoring what NOT to do. Because the North American public had very poor examples to guide it (bad flag design predominates in the United States at the city and state level—often "seals-on-bedsheets"), I thought it important to explicitly show and reject poor designs. That led to the idea of providing examples of designs which followed each principle and designs which did not.

What inspired the title?

Those two concepts—needing a catchy title and presenting "good" and "bad" examples—led to *Good Flag, Bad Flag*. That construct was already familiar to readers in such phrases as "good cop, bad cop" and "good dog, bad dog" (coincidentally the name of a favorite lunchtime haunt of mine in Portland—a hot dog take-out restaurant which proudly posted the first draft of



the *GFBF* cover on its bulletin board, along with photos of customers' dogs).

Tell us about the publication history of *GFBF*.

I'm the compiler, not the author, of *GFBF*—the authors are really the 20 writers on vexilligraphy

whose work I condensed and organized into a snappy format with a single editorial voice. I consulted directly with many of them after compiling the first draft.

I first created *GFBF* as a primitive 16-page booklet laid out in Microsoft Word. The NAVA board, led by President Dave Martucci, accepted the text and soon after NAVA webmaster Dick Gideon published it electronically on nava.org. After sharing it with NAVA members³ and receiving helpful feedback

(especially from Jim Croft, as well as Lee Herold, Clay Moss, Dev Cannon, and Peter Orenski), I made updates and revisions. A draft distributed at ICV 19 (York) in July, 2001, met with wide enthusiasm from attendees—the first being Kin Spain, FIAV secretary general and former NAVA president. Mike Hale, of Elmer's Flag & Banner, then pitched it to

members of the National Independent Flag Dealers Association, and made occasional printouts for customers. (Despite my preference for anonymity, my family insisted I put my name on it.) It remained available only in electronic form for five years.

In 2006, *GFBF* appeared in printed form with professional layout by Melissa Scott, a designer I'd found through a local art school. I funded the design and printing costs and contributed an ample supply to NAVA (over 1,500 copies). Since then NAVA has given one to each new member and made it available on Amazon.com and the NAVA shop. *GFBF* has been translated into Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Slovenian—through the generous work of fellow vexillologists (Gustavo Tracchia, Sophie Rault, Dieter Linder, Flavio Marchetto, Tiago Berg, and Aleks Hribovšek). All are available for download on the NAVA website at <https://nava.org/nava-digital-library-flag-design-resources>.

The size was intentional: 16 pages seemed the outer limit for what a flag-store customer could process or a flag-selection committee could digest, but met the lower limit for a book to receive favorable United States Postal Service Media Mail postage rates!

How was *GFBF* received when it was first published?

The little booklet soon saw action with the Georgia state flag redesign effort in 2003—Ed Jackson, serving as staff to the senate committee developing an alternative to the flag adopted in 2001, circulated *GFBF* to successfully guide members of the General Assembly in their deliberations.⁴ The results of NAVA's 2004 American City Flag Survey presented a powerful validation of the principles in *GFBF*, which predicted the survey results with 89% accuracy.⁵



After its print publication, Annin & Co. (flagmakers since 1847) added *GFBF* to its catalog and several commercial members of NAVA began sharing it with their customers. NAVA members began using it in their own flag redesign efforts—especially at the city and state levels.

What has happened with *GFBF* in the years since it was published?

The booklet—and the principles it advances—appears to have shaped the discussion of vexillography within the vexillological world and in the broader public.

The *GFBF* page on the NAVA website consistently receives more hits than any other page (after the home page). NAVA members named it one of the top three “most important flag books” in the 2018 NAVA member survey—after Whitney Smith’s *Flags Through the Ages and Around the World* and Alfred Znamierowski’s *World Encyclopedia of Flags*.⁶ Participants in the r/vexillology subreddit and the Designing Flags Facebook group often cite *GFBF*.

Perry Dane delivered an insightful commentary on *GFBF* at the 2007 NAVA meeting in Hartford (winning the Driver Award for best paper). It presented a strong argument for considering flag designs in context—the “political, emotional, symbolic, and historical sensitivities that shape our reaction to flags”—saying “the austerity and dogmatism of [*GFBF*]’s approach should give considerable pause”, while calling it “probably the only systematic effort at developing any sort of coherent, systematic, prescriptive principles for flag design”.⁷

John Hartvigsen also cited *GFBF* extensively in his paper presented at the 2015 NAVA meeting in Ottawa. It compared several flag-design guides, concluding, “In addition to clean design, vexillographers should also consider history, heritage, symbolism, emotion, branding, and usage when proposing new flags.”⁸

Podcaster and radio show host Roman Mars featured *GFBF* and its principles in his widely-viewed 2015 TED Talk “Why City Flags May Be the Worst-Designed Thing You Never Noticed” (with 6 millions hits to date!), bringing vexillography to the public to an unprecedented extent and sparking a wave of municipal flag redesign that continues to grow.⁹

Others have since produced more expansive flag design materials. For example, the “Joint Commission” of NAVA and the Flag Institute produced a *Report on the Guiding Principles on Flag Design* in 2014.¹⁰ Tony Burton, editor of The Flag Society of Australia’s *Crux Australis*, published his 128-page *Vexillistics: An Illustrated and Practical Guide to Flag Design* in 2015.¹¹ French designer Martin Joubert published an 86-page “expansion” of *GFBF* in 2019, called *Modern Flag Design*.¹²

Most flag-design efforts in the U.S. now quote *GFBF*; it has accomplished its purpose of bringing vexillographic principles to the general public.

Why did the publication need to be updated?

A fundamental challenge to *GFBF* was that the term “bad flag” offended some who mistook a judgment about design with a valuation of the flag itself. While the title *Good Flag, Bad Flag* and the captions under the flag images used the shorthand of “good” and “bad” to mean “follows the principle in question” and “doesn’t follow the principle in question”, that shorthand raised some emotions when incorrectly perceived as denigrating a flag rather than just assessing its design on a single dimension.

Compounding that challenge, the public and the media often construed the basic principles articulated in *GFBF* as inviolable rules, castigating flags and designs that “broke” them, and leading to a perception of NAVA itself as a “judge” of flags.

With the print inventory of *GFBF* running low, I chose to address those issues and include other minor revisions before reprinting. I believed, however, that expanding beyond design into the larger factors cited by others would make the booklet too long and dilute its effectiveness. Its brevity and focus is its strength.

What’s different about the updated edition?

In place of “good” and “bad” as captions for examples, I substitute “yes” and “no”. Paraphrasing John Hartvigsen (with gratitude), the “Use Meaningful Symbolism” text now includes: “In choosing symbols, consider their history, cultural heritage, emotional value, branding, and usage—assure they resonate with the people or institutions represented.” The flags of California and South Africa provide additional examples of exceptions. A disclaimer clarifies that the publication reflects my opinion, not NAVA’s. A note on the back (reflecting the insightful thoughts of *Raven* editor Scott Mainwaring) addresses the place of *GFBF* in the broader scope of flag design.

Other revisions include updates (the years Libya used a solid green flag), corrections (fixing my confusion of salamander/dragon, seal/shield, crescent moon/crescent), and minor wording changes. The quote from the flag committee of the Confederate States of America is now attributed to its chairman, William Porcher Miles.¹³ At the suggestion of Steve Knowlton, *Vexillum* editor and Publications Committee chair, quotation marks in the title around “Good” and “Bad” temper the stark judgment some see in the booklet. And in the “Test Yourself” section I couldn’t resist adding the new flag of Pocatello, Idaho—to join the old flag (which came in last place in NAVA’s 2004 American City Flag Survey).

Did you have assistance preparing the update?

Correspondence with readers since 2001 provided helpful input, as did the thoughtful commentary of other writers, feedback solicited on the Designing Flags Facebook group page, and advice from the current *Raven* editor and members of the NAVA board—especially President Peter Ansoff. The original layout designer, now Melissa Meiner, updated her original work for the new version. I again financed it and have contributed another 1,500 copies to NAVA—enough for several more years.

What are your hopes for the revised “Good” Flag, “Bad” Flag?

I hope that *GFBF* will continue to promote NAVA and its broad approach to flag studies. I hope the updates temper the concerns some have expressed about it. I hope it will earn more money to support NAVA’s mission and find a place in NAVA members’ flag book libraries. Most importantly, I hope this little booklet will continue to guide any who design flags, reassure those who make decisions about their adoption, and inspire vexillographers worldwide.

¹ Donald T. Healy, *Flags of the Natives Peoples of the United States*, special issue, *Raven* 3/4 (1997).

² See Ted Kaye, “Tribal Flags Fly at Lewis & Clark Events”, *NAVA News* 38, no. 4 (September–December 2005): 6–9; and Edward B. Kaye, “American Indian Flags and the Lewis & Clark Bicentennial”, in *Colours of History: Flags and Banners in the World: Proceedings of the XXII. International Vexillological Congress, FlagBerlin 2007*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Board of the German Vexillological Society, 2009): 77–91.

³ Ted Kaye, “New Mexico Tops State/Provincial Flags Survey”, *NAVA News* 34, no. 2 (April–June 2001): 4.

⁴ Ed Jackson, “The Long Search for a State Flag”, *The Flag Bulletin* 212 (July–August 2003): 135.

⁵ Edward B. Kaye, “The American City Flag Survey of 2004”, *Raven* 12 (2005): 41.

⁶ “NAVA Members Choose Their ‘Most Important Flag Books’”, *Vexillum* no. 5 (March 2019): 17.

⁷ Perry Dane, “Flags in Context: A Discussion of Design, Genre, and Aesthetics”, *Raven* 15 (2008): 75–76.

⁸ John Hartvigsen, “Flag Design ‘Rules’: An Idea with Many Aspects”, *Vexillum* no. 4 (December 2018): 16.

⁹ Roman Mars, “Why City Flags May Be the Worst-Designed Thing You’ve Never Noticed”, https://www.ted.com/talks/roman_mars_why_city_flags_may_be_the_worst_designed_thing_you_ve_never_noticed.

¹⁰ Joint Commission on Vexillographic Principles of North American Vexillological Association and The Flag Institute, “The Commission’s Report on the Guiding Principles on Flag Design” (Boston: North American Vexillological Association, 2014), <http://nava.org/navanews/Commission-Report-Final-US.pdf>.

¹¹ Tony Burton, *Vexillistics: An Illustrated and Practical Guide to Flag Design* (Milsos Point, N.S.W.: Flags Australia, 2015).

¹² Martin Joubert, *Modern Flag Design: An Expansion of Good Flag, Bad Flag: How to Design a Great Flag* (Morrisville, N.C.: Lulu.com, 2015), <https://flagdesignbook.com>.

¹³ Devereaux D. Cannon, Jr., “The Genesis of the ‘Stars and Bars’”, *Raven* 12 (2005): 4.