



Capture the Flag: A Political History of American Patriotism

By Woden Teachout



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But what does the flag *mean*? In *Capture the Flag*, historian Woden Teachout reveals that it has held vastly different meanings over time. It has been claimed by both the right and left; by racists and revolutionaries; by immigrants and nativists. In tracing the political history of the flag from its origins in the American Revolution through the present day, Teachout demonstrates that the shifting symbolism of the flag reveals a broader shift in the definition of American patriotism.

A story of a nation in search of itself, *Capture the Flag* offers a probing account of the flag that has become America's icon.



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Editorial Review

Review

Ken Burns

“No symbol of our nation carries as much emotional resonance as Old Glory, and as Americans of every era have struggled over how to tap that emotion for their own cause, no symbol has both united and divided us quite so passionately. In this penetrating history, Woden Teachout demonstrates that our shifting uses — and misuses — of the flag tell us more about ourselves and our times than about the Stars and Stripes meant to rally us together.”

Rick Shenkman, author of *Just How Stupid Are We?*

“The mystery of how a simple piece of cloth bearing stripes and stars has been infused with deep meaning by Americans as different as the white robed men of the Ku Klux Klan and liberals like Bill Moyers is unraveled in this fine, thoughtful history of the flag.”

David D. Hall, Bartlett Research Professor of New England Church History, Harvard Divinity School

“A wonderfully accomplished narrative that will surprise every reader in showing how the flag as emblem of patriotism has been emphasized and ignored, contested and affirmed. This is good history that offers lessons for our own times.”

Ted Widmer, author of *Arc of the Liberties: America and the World*

“With eloquence, passion and deep scholarly research, Woden Teachout illuminates the most American subject of them all.”

James Patterson, author of *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy*

“Displaying a fine eye and narrative skill in recounting key episodes—among them the Revolution, nativist riots, the bombardment of Fort Sumter, civil rights activism, and the New York City hard hat riot of 1970—Woden Teachout reminds us of how important the American flag has been as a symbol for a wide variety of patriotic causes.”

Wall Street Journal

“...[A] lively account of the flag's polymorphous and evolving meanings. ‘*Capture the Flag*’ reads like a sort of historical Bildungsroman, a 200-year-long coming-of-age saga in which its innocent protagonist matures from a patched-together sailors' standard to the uniquely potent symbol freighted with the hopes, dreams and expectations that it bears today.” “If the flag's history offers any lessons, and Ms. Teachout argues convincingly in this provocative book that it does, the battle for the flag's meaning is unlikely to end soon, if ever.”

Washington Times

“...Ms. Teachout's analysis will help people understand all kinds of patriotism in their broader context.”

About the Author

Woden Teachout holds a PhD in the History of American Civilization from Harvard University. She has taught at Harvard and Middlebury and is currently Professor of Graduate Studies at Union Institute & University. She lives in Montpelier, Vermont.

From The Washington Post

From The Washington Post's Book World/washingtonpost.com Reviewed by Susan Jacoby Americans tend to assume that familiar patriotic symbols and rituals, like the flag and the pledge of allegiance, have always meant what they mean today. In "Capture the Flag," a lively portrait of the mutable and multiple meanings of our most cherished and contested national emblem, Woden Teachout argues convincingly that patriotic symbols -- like patriotism itself -- have always meant different things to different Americans. A professor at Union Institute and University, an online higher-education program, Teachout uses competing claims to the flag to trace the complicated relationship between American ideals of humanitarian patriotism, rooted in Enlightenment values of individual liberty and political equality, and nationalist patriotism, based on loyalty to a nation-state and emphasis on national security. Although the flag was not the most prominent national symbol before the Civil War, it was used both by nativists and immigrants during the 1840s, which saw the rise of the anti-immigration Know-Nothing Party. The Civil War was the turning point in the rise of the flag as a symbol of both national unity and bitter division. The lowering of the American flag at Fort Sumter, after the Southern attack that ushered in the war, cemented the divide between the Confederacy and the Union. In the occupied postbellum South, the return of the national flag, accompanied by prohibition of public display of Confederate flags, provided equally powerful evidence of the secessionists' defeat. Yet, as the author notes, the flag also partook of humanitarian patriotism. The pledge of allegiance, intended to promote assimilation of immigrants, was written by Francis Bellamy, a Christian socialist, and it simply read: "I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands: one Nation indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for all." Teachout fails to follow up and make the important point that the phrase "under God" was added to the pledge only in 1954. Regrettably, the author does not deal at any length with the conflation of religion, patriotism and flag worship during the McCarthy era and in recent years. In an era of bloated books that seem designed to justify their hardcover price tags (rather like too-large portions in restaurants), it may seem churlish to criticize a history for brevity. But Teachout is in too much of a hurry when she gets to the 20th century. She provides an incisive account of the outraged reaction of many working-class Americans to flag burnings by anti-Vietnam War protesters but skips over World War II almost entirely. The book's most glaring omission involves one of the most important civil liberties cases in American history, the 1943 Supreme Court decision *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*. The court reversed an earlier decision that had upheld the right of schools to require Jehovah's Witnesses -- whose religion forbids saluting any secular symbols -- to recite the pledge of allegiance. In Justice Robert H. Jackson's memorable words, "If there is any fixed star in our constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein." This decision perfectly embodied the melding of humanitarian patriotism and nationalist patriotism, which Teachout discusses in her concluding remarks about the post-9/11 era and the 2008 presidential campaign. She sees Barack Obama's ability to elucidate both humanitarian and nationalist patriotism as a major political strength. The author may well be right in her view of the president as a publicist in chief for both patriotic traditions. But her optimistic conclusion does not explain why Obama, faced with harsh criticism during his early primary campaign for failing to wear a flag lapel pin, now wears a flag pin on every public occasion. The founders, as "Capture the Flag" eloquently reminds us, didn't feel obliged to wear their patriotism on their lapels.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Lisa Knight:

The feeling that you get from Capture the Flag: A Political History of American Patriotism is the more deep you excavating the information that hide within the words the more you get interested in reading it. It doesn't mean that this book is hard to recognise but Capture the Flag: A Political History of American Patriotism giving you thrill feeling of reading. The writer conveys their point in certain way that can be understood by anyone who read that because the author of this guide is well-known enough. This particular book also makes your current vocabulary increase well. So it is easy to understand then can go along, both in printed or e-book style are available. We recommend you for having that Capture the Flag: A Political History of American Patriotism instantly.

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The particular book Capture the Flag: A Political History of American Patriotism has a lot details on it. So when you read this book you can get a lot of benefit. The book was authored by the very famous author. The author makes some research before write this book. This book very easy to read you can get the point easily after reading this article book.

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