

A U.S. Flag Retirement

Ceremony to Destroy a Worn U.S. Flag

Composed by Stan Pope, a volunteer Scouter for W.D. Boyce Council, BSA, Peoria, IL. Revised 4/20/97.

This ceremony provides an example of, and an explanation of, the etiquette related to destroying a worn U.S. flag. Of all the Flag Burning ceremonies I have seen, this is most elegant in its simplicity and completeness. Group participation is as important as it is moving.

[I am told that the suggestions in the BSA Publication "Your Flag" have changed, and that they no longer include the suggestion to cut the flag into pieces before burning. This may be because some folks felt it to be offensive. Know your group. Use your best judgement. Carry out your ceremony with solemnity and respect.]

[I am also told that some modern synthetic materials emit much noxious smoke when burned. This could detract significantly from the effect of the ceremony. Such flags might better be disposed in more private circumstances. -- SBP.]

Advance Preparation:

Prepare the worn flag by cutting off the supporting edge, and cutting the remaining flag into about 24 to 96 pieces for typical flags. (Pieces about 8" by 12" work well, but be sure to have enough so that everyone in attendance will have at least one.) Cut one of the stars from a piece of the blue field, and cut a bit of a red and a white stripe. Run a length of wire, approximately 12 inches, through the grommets in the standing edge and fasten the ends of the wire together. This will make retrieval of the grommets more reliable after the ceremony. Group five key pieces (the standing edge, star, the blue field and two pieces of stripes) so that they can be located easily, perhaps by fastening them together with a large safety pin. Fold all of the pieces into a properly folded American Flag which will convey the worn flag to the ceremony.

Prepare a cassette tape recording of the National Anthem with about 5 second of blank leader and a minute or two of blank trailer. Have a tape player with the volume set and player positioned so that the tape can be started from your speaking position without fumbling.

Prepare a modest fire lay, such as a council fire approximately 18" to 24" square by 12" to 16" high.

Recruit four or more Color Guards who will carry the flag and who will carefully unfold it during the ceremony. Run through the unfolding ahead of time so that they can do it without dropping pieces of the worn flag. Extra Color Guards will distribute flag pieces to Honor Guards.

The fire should have about a 15 minute head start so that it is blazing well and has formed a good bed of coals. Use lots of light, split wood to accomplish this.

Ceremony:

[Leader and Color Guard take place at the side of the ceremony area. Leader, take place behind the fire, facing the audience.]

"United States Federal Law provides that 'The flag, when it is in such condition that it is no longer a fitting emblem for display, should be destroyed in a dignified way, preferably by burning.' (36 U.S.C. 176(k))

"According to the BSA publication 'Your Flag', 'When our national flag is worn beyond repair, cut it into small pieces that will burn easily and completely on a modest, but blazing fire. This should be done in a simple manner with dignity and respect. Be sure the flag is reduced to ashes unrecognizable as a former flag.'

"This duty may be carried out less ceremoniously than we will do here, and it need not be more ceremonious. It is, I believe, important that the assembled group be participants rather than spectators. I ask you to serve as Honor Guards for this ceremony. On command, please form a circle around the fire so that the Color Guards are a part of your circle.

"I hope that you will find this ceremony as moving as I did when I first experienced it.

"Color Guard, Advance!" [Color Guard forms a line behind the fire, occupying as much space as they will require to unfold the flag.]

"Honor Guard, Assemble" [Wait until the group completes the circle.]

"Color Guard, Present the Colors!" [Color Guard carefully unfolds the flag. Extra members of the Color Guard may support the center of the flag from behind. The flag is left in approximately level position.]

[When the flag has been unfolded, extra Color Guard members first hand standing edge to leader, then each take a bundle of pieces and distribute them to the Honor Guard, withholding pieces for the Color Guard. Color Guards should fold the Colors. They will place their pieces of flag on the fire after the leader, and then wait, at attention, until the last pieces of flag have been placed on the fire. When the pieces have been distributed...]

"This flag has flown proudly over our community, but it is now worn beyond repair. [Adjust this sentence as appropriate.] **I will place these pieces in different parts of the fire so that each can burn fully and easily. Here is the standing edge [place it in the fire]... a piece of a red stripe... a piece of a white stripe... a piece of the blue field... and one of the stars...**

"Honor Guard, two by two, in an orderly manner, starting with the Color Guard, please place your piece of the flag carefully on the fire."

[When the last piece of flag has been placed in the fire and the Honor Guard have returned to their places, start the tape player.]

"Honor Guard, Salute!" [Wait for the Anthem to complete.]

"Two! Color Guard, Dismiss!" [Wait for the Color Guard to withdraw from the circle.]

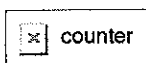
"Honor Guard, Dismiss!" [Stop the tape player.]

When the flag has been consumed and the fire has been extinguished, remove the grommets for disposal in a manner that they will not be disturbed, e.g. in a lake or river.

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Latest update: 4/20/97

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Flag Burning Ceremony

Flag Burning Ceremony

1. Display the old flag, give its history, if known, Pledge of Allegiance
2. Respect paid to the old flag -- read aloud "I AM OLD GLORY"

I am old glory;

for more the 9 score years I have been the banner of hope and freedom for generation after generation of Americans. Born amid the first flames of America's fight for freedom, I am the symbol of a country that has grown from a little group of 13 colonies to a united nation of 50 sovereign states. Planted firmly on the high pinnacle of American Faith, my gently fluttering folds have proved an inspiration to untold millions. Men have followed me into battle with unwavering courage. They have looked upon me as a symbol of national unity. They have prayed that they and their fellow citizens might continue to enjoy the life, liberty and pursuit of happiness, which have been granted to every American as the heritage of free men. So long as men love liberty more than life itself, so long as they treasure the priceless privileges bought with the blood of our forefathers; so long as the principles of truth, justice and charity for all remain deeply rooted in human hearts, I shall continue to be the enduring banner of the United States of America.

3. Explain to the ensemble what will happen next, and a little word or two about it. Taps are hummed slowly while the flag is cut up. The ABSOLUTE SILENCE.
4. Color Guards cuts the field of blue stars out of the flag, with solemnity a quiet. This field of flue is put onto the fire first. The stripes are laid into the fire when the stars are almost fully consumed.
5. There is absolute silence until the entire flag is completely consumed by the flames.
6. Then the color guard, with meaning, says, 'OUR FLAG REST IN PEACE.'

Group says together: Pledge of Allegiance the sing America (my Country Tis of Thee)

Color of the flag: Remember as you look at your Flag, which is the symbol of our nation, that it is red because of human sacrifice. It is blue because of the true blue loyalty of its defenders. It is white to symbolize liberty - our land of the free. The stars are symbols of the united efforts and hope in the hearts of many people striving for a greater nobler America.

Hold the Flag Up: Optional - at this point, each person in the audience or participating in the ceremony, may state what the Flag means to them. Sing: Another appropriate song may be sung (optional) Procedure for Flag Burning: (a pair of scissors should be on hand) Take the flag and unfold. Place stars (as audience sees it) in the upper left hand corner. (One minute of silent meditation may be inserted if desired).

COMPLETE SILENCE

Then either cut or tear the position of the blue containing the stars from the flag. Have one person hold the blue in her arms until the end of the ceremony because the blue and stars is the last part of the flag to be burned. Now tear one stripe off at a time. burn it in the fire by laying it across the flames; not in a lump. Burn each stripe thoroughly before tearing off the next stripe to be burned. After all the stripes have been burned, one at a time, then the blue and stars is ready to be burned. BEFORE the blue and stars is spread across the fire, the blue portion should be KISSED for respect by the person holding the blue throughout the ceremony. The portion is then laid, as a whole piece and not torn in any way, across the fire and all is quiet until the last speck of blue turns to ash.

Sing - Star Spangled Banner; or other appropriate song.

End of the ceremony should be followed by a silent dismissal.

If the flag to be burned is small or there is more than one flag to be burned at a time, the flag may (but not necessarily advised unless due to lack of time) be laid as a whole unit across the fire. This can be done also if the first flag is torn

and burned as describe above, and another laid across the first one at a time.

Nothing should ever be added to the ceremonial fire after the Flag has been burned (out of respect).

The next morning the girls that actually burned the flag and their leader will gather the ashes to be burned.

This could be included as the last step in the ceremony if the wanted all of those in attendance to participate.

A hole is dug, the dirt placed carefully beside it and the ashes are placed into the hole by handfuls. Fill the hole back up with dirt, a marker can be placed.

At the beginning of the ceremony the speaker should say who the flag grommets will be given to. They are a form of good luck and can be carried or worn around the neck of the person who receives one.

If the ashes are entirely out, they can be carried to the burial site in a box, if the ashes are still hot, a bucket could be used, then place by shovels-full into the hole.

A Scout's Own could be an appropriate ending for your Flag burning ceremony.

Flag Burning Ceremony (Another Style)

Flag Burning Ceremony

Lower the colors or unfold the flag.

Tear off stripes one at a time, (we had to cut) saying one statement with each stripe.

Our flag has been used so much, that it is no longer a fitting emblem to display, so we are respectfully burning it.

FIRST STRIPE: The 13 stripes stand for the original ¹³ colonies which are; Massachusetts, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, Georgia, and New Jersey.

SECOND STRIPE: The white stands for purity

THIRD STRIPE: The red stands for courage

FOURTH STRIPE: "Give me liberty or give me death"

FIFTH STRIPE: "One if by land, two if the sea"

SIXTH STRIPE: We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of America.

SEVENTH STRIPE: We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal. They are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. Among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

EIGHTH STRIPE; Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.

NINTH STRIPE; Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech or press.

TENTH STRIPE; "Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth to this continent a new nation."

ELEVENTH STRIPE; The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.

TWELFTH STRIPE; "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."

THIRTEENTH STRIPE; "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

Each state is being represented by a star on a field of blue, which signifies a new constellation being formed.

As we place it in the fire, let it burn brightly and remind us how truly our flag represents our country.

Will you please join us in saying the Pledge of Allegiance and sing The Star Spangled Banner and then Taps.