

Opinion: Is it time to outlaw the first flag?

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff

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G8

In Michigan, a school superintendent's apology has ignited another heated debate about a flag.

This time it's not the Confederate flag, though, but the original "Betsy Ross" flag. Although historians are not sure whether Betsy Ross actually made the flag, her name is forever associated with it. Everyone recognizes the flag, the one with 13 stars on a blue background and 13 red and white stripes.

It was approved by the Continental Congress in 1777. There, the convention delegates adopted a resolution stating that "the flag of the United States be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation."

Era of Slavery

In Michigan, however, the problem with the flag is not its origin.

The problem is whether the flag, since it's been adopted by some white supremacist groups and because it was flown during the era of slavery, should be considered a symbol of "exclusion and hate." That's the concern of Forest Hills School Superintendent Dan Behm. He believes the flag is so offensive "to some" that it has no place at a high-school football game.

The controversy got rolling last weekend when Forest Hills High School played a game on the home field of Ottawa High School in Grand Rapids. Forest Hills is a predominately white school, while Ottawa High School is predominately black.

First Flag and Donald Trump

Some Forest Hills students were parading around not only with the first flag but also with a banner supporting Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump. They were also chanting "go green" and "go white," which are the school colors.

The combination offended, among others, Matthew Patulski, a white parent of two students enrolled in Grand Rapids public schools. Trump is known for his "support of racist ideologies," Patulski wrote in an open letter on his Facebook page. The "Betsy Ross" flag, he added, is "a piece of history co-opted by white supremacists who see it as a symbol of a time in our nation's history when slavery was legal."

At first, Forest Hills's Behm said that the Forest Hills students were participating in a "red, white and blue" theme night. "The theme for each game changes, but students have generally had the 'red, white and blue' theme each year around the September 11 anniversary."

By Tuesday, however, Behm apologized in an open letter, calling the display "inappropriate."

Hostility and Confusion

"Parading our current United States flag in a manner that is inconsistent with proper etiquette is disrespectful to all who have served our nation," he wrote. "And, to wave a historical version of our flag, that to some symbolizes exclusion and hate, injects hostility and confusion into an event where no one intended to do so. To our gracious hosts ... and to the student-athletes, coaches, officials and supporters of both teams, we are truly sorry."

Nobody, he said, is being punished for the incident.

Behm's apology has elicited praise in some quarters but been slammed in others. "This whole PC thing has gotten way out of hand," said one online commenter. "Why is it acceptable to proudly wear a Black Lives Matter T-shirt, and not our country's flag?"

Support for Free Speech

"All students across the country have the right to free speech," said another. "Kids aren't allowed to hold a flag? ...What's next, will the school band not be allowed to play the national anthem? Can't hold a Trump sign? ..."What's next?"

Others suggested that if they had been holding a Hillary Clinton banner, everything would have been different.

On the other side, Grand Rapids school superintendent Teresa Weatherall Neal thanked Behm for his leadership, and his letter and apology.

"I cannot deny the hurt, disrespect and outrage that I and so many others in this community felt about these actions that took place in our backyard. ...This type of behavior should not and will not be tolerated in our stadium or schools — nor should it in any community across our state and nation."

Briana Urena-Ravelo, a Grand Rapids resident and Black Lives Matter activist, explained to TV8 in Michigan why she thought the flag was offensive: "What were the conditions for people of color when that flag was created? I was property. Other people were getting their land stolen," she said.

Time to Retire First Flag?

The incident in Michigan raises the question of whether America's first flag, along with the Confederate flag, is destined to become another point of controversy in the country. For the general public, that would be a change.

The "Betsy Ross" flag is depicted on the Department of Veterans Affairs official shield.

It's routinely hauled out for Flag Day, and for other occasions. And yes, it's also been displayed from time to time by supporters of Donald Trump and by the Patriot movement, which includes some groups that promote white supremacist views.

Forest Hills Schools parent Patricia Gerondale, whose son brought the Trump flag to the game, said the visiting students never intended any harm or intimidation. "It wasn't done to put anyone down or cause any negative feeling," she said, and carried "no message behind it."

But it's apparent that for some, that's not the case. This, in turn, raises the question of whether white supremacist groups have the power to blemish symbols and icons simply by adopting them, to the point that they become offensive by association.

Should the original flag of the United States be retired? Using evidence from the text, support your opinion:

Would we even be having this conversation if Donald Trump was not running for president? Explain: