

Nine US Symbols to Revisit Some American Civilization Aspects

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ABSTRACT

American civilization is part of academic study programs worldwide, especially those dedicated to general American studies. Being one of the most powerful countries in the world in the economic and military spheres, the USA is distinguished through its colorful plurality in terms of race, culture and origin, but also in terms of its tolerance vis-à-vis its opportunity doors open to all without discrimination. Over several decades, the USA has been influencing both third world countries and developed countries thanks to the American dream of being the land of the free and the home of the brave. But as far as geopolitics is concerned, the USA is also facing challenges relating to illegal immigration, and humanitarian crises through direct wars or wars by proxy in the Middle East especially. This paper presents nine national symbols that portray some aspects of American civilization.

Keywords: American flag, national anthem, national march, Great US seal, national bird, Uncle Sam, national motto, Oath of Allegiance, national mammal

INTRODUCTION

People in the USA are proud of being American and like to show or say it. They put American flags in their houses or on bumper stickers which say for instance: "I'm a proud citizen of the USA". This feeling is also conveyed in political speeches. Many Americans share the view that America is right and that the rest of the world has a lot to learn from the American experience. This sense of pride and this mindset symbolize what America represents in the world. Merriam Webster (2024) provides five definitions of "symbol", but two of them are relevant to this study. A symbol is something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance, especially a visible sign of something invisible. A symbol also constitutes an act, sound, or object having cultural significance and the capacity to excite or objectify a response (Merriam Webster, 2024).

How are these definitions related to the nine symbols highlighted in this study? The nine symbols discussed in this study have direct relationship with the American experience since the Mayflower landed on Plymouth Rock. They are intrinsically associated with the early European settlements, Europeans' encounter with the various Native American tribes, and the forced deportation of Africans to toil on plantations. These nine symbols have cultural significance as each of them encompasses the relics of American civilization.

The immersion of this paper in American national symbols is an attempt to answer the following question: what do the American flag, national anthem, national march, Great Seal, national bird, "Uncle Sam" nickname, national motto, Oath of Allegiance and national mammal mean? These nine symbols appear everywhere in the USA. This study revisits American civilization through these symbols.

A. Flag and National Anthem

"The Star-Spangled Banner" is the name of both the national anthem and the flag of the United States. The lyrics of the national anthem come from the "Defence of Fort M'Henry", a poem written by American lawyer Francis Scott Key on September 14, 1814, after he witnessed the bombardment of Fort McHenry by the British Royal Navy during the Battle of Baltimore in the War of 1812. Key was inspired by the large US flag, with 15 stars and 15 stripes, known as the Star-Spangled Banner, flying triumphantly above the fort after the battle (Wikipedia, 2024a).

“The Star-Spangled Banner” has four verses, although the second through fourth verses are not commonly performed. The first verse is sung as follows:

O! say can you see
By the dawn’s early light
What so proudly we hailed
At the twilight’s last gleaming?
Whose broad stripes and bright stars
Through the perilous fight
O’er the ramparts we watch’d
Were so gallantly streaming?
And the Rockets’ red glare
The Bombs bursting in air
Gave proof through the night
That our Flag was still there.

O! say does that star-spangled Banner yet wave
O’er the Land of the free and the home of the brave.

(Wikipedia, 2024a)

The national anthem depicts the valiant battle mentioned above. The bodies of men all around gruesomely decorated the battlefield. They kept fighting until death to keep the flag flying to signify that the Fort was still theirs. The anthem is a visual description of American defiance against overwhelming odds and certain defeat. This refreshes the mind on the iconic photograph of six United States marines raising the US flag atop Mount Suribachi during the Battle of Iwo Jima in the final stages of the Pacific War.

Taken by Joe Rosenthal of the Associated Press on February 23, 1945, the photograph was published in Sunday newspapers two days later and reprinted in thousands of publications. It won the 1945 Pulitzer Prize for Photography and has come to be regarded in the United States as one of the most recognizable images of World War II (Wikipedia, 2024e). Below is a figure that portrays the US flag atop Mount Suribachi.



Fig 1. Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima

The US flag is also called “the Stars and Stripes” or “Old Glory”. The red and white stripes represent the thirteen original colonies. The thirteen colonies founded along the Eastern seaboard in the 17th and 18th centuries were not the first colonial outposts on the American continent, but they are the ones where the colonists eventually

pushed back against British rule and designed their own version of government to form the United States. These colonies were: Jamestown (Virginia), New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia (History.com Editors, 2024).

They were established by British colonists for a range of reasons, from the pursuit of fortunes, riches, wealth and a plenty of treasure, and to escape from religious prosecution to the desire to create new forms of government (History.com Editors, 2024). The following table shows the order of establishment of each colony.

Table 1. The 13 colonies and their order of establishment

| <i>Colonies</i> | <i>Establishment year</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Virginia/Jamestown | 1607 |
| 2. Massachusetts | 1620 |
| 3. New Hampshire | 1623 |
| 4. Maryland | 1632-1634 |
| 5. Connecticut | 1636 |
| 6. Rhode Island | 1636 |
| 7. Delaware | 1638 |
| 8. North Carolina | 1663 |
| 9. South Carolina | 1663 |
| 10. New York | 1664 |
| 11. New Jersey | 1665 |
| 12. Pennsylvania | 1681 |
| 13. Georgia | 1732 |

Source: Revolution ary War, 2020

The first permanent English settlement in North America was Jamestown. It was founded in 1607. It would be followed by the Massachusetts Colony thirteen years later. Then were founded, by intervals of three, nine, seventeen or more years by all the other colonies: New Hampshire, Maryland, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Delaware, North Carolina, South Carolina, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Georgia. The huge interval between the foundation of Jamestown and the last English settlement Georgia, which is one hundred and twenty-five years, evidences the abnegation of the English to civilize the American continent. The great grandchildren of the pioneers who permanently settled in Jamestown created the Georgia settlement. The figure that follows is a map of the original thirteen colonies settled on the coast facing the Atlantic Ocean.

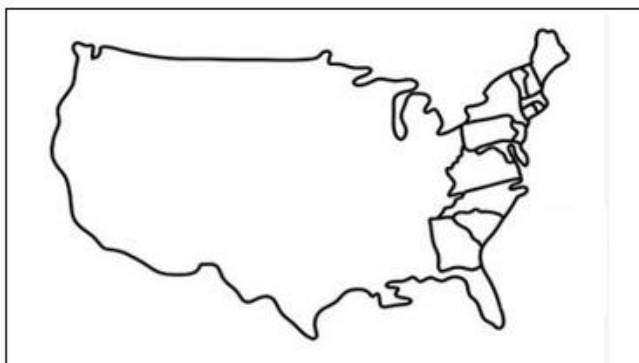


Fig 2. The 13 colonies' map

Historians often overlook the pursuit of fortunes that urged Europeans to immigrate to the New World but it deserves deeper research. In the cinema industry, historical film and series directors reproduce the pursuit of fortunes. For example, in the TV show *Jamestown*, Henry Sharrow, the eldest of the Sharrow brothers, went into a dangerous adventure that cost him almost his life. Saved by the Native Americans, Henry Sharrow continues his perilous trip for gold until he finds out silver. Sharrow is among the earliest men present in the colony, having arrived in 1607 alongside many others, and, therefore being one of the first settlers to lay claim to the land of Virginia. His acres of land are not enough because his happiness and bright future depend on the gold that would make him a wealthy and respectable man not only in the Jamestown colony but also in the motherland England (Gallagher, 2017).

B. National March

“The Stars and Stripes Forever” is a patriotic American march written and composed by John Philip Sousa in 1896. By a 1987 act of the US Congress, it became the official National March of the United States of America (Wikipedia, 2024a). Sousa evokes the US flag and the eagle in his lyrics as symbols of patriotism and pride. The following verse sing American patriots who are proud of their origin:

The red and white and starry blue
 Is freedom’s shield and hope.
 Let eagle shriek from lofty peak
 The never-ending watchword of our land;

(Wikipedia, 2024b)

The US flag sung by Sousa has meanings. The fifty white stars of the upper left-hand corner on a blue background symbolize the 50 states which include Alaska and Hawaii. Below is a table that illustrates the order of the 50 States’ admission into the USA.

Table 2. Order of the States’ admission into the USA

| | | | | | |
|-----|----------------|---------------|-----|---------------|---------------|
| 1. | Delaware | Dec. 7, 1787 | 26. | Michigan | Jan. 26, 1837 |
| 2. | Pennsylvania | Dec 12, 1787 | 27. | Florida | Mar. 3, 1845 |
| 3. | New Jersey | Dec. 18, 1787 | 28. | Texas | Dec. 29, 1845 |
| 4. | Georgia | Jan. 2, 1788 | 29. | Iowa | Dec. 28, 1846 |
| 5. | Connecticut | Jan. 9, 1788 | 30. | Wisconsin | May 29, 1848 |
| 6. | Massachusetts | Feb.6, 1788 | 31. | California | Sept. 9, 1850 |
| 7. | Maryland | Apr. 28, 1788 | 32. | Minnesota | May 11, 1858 |
| 8. | South Carolina | May 23, 1788 | 33. | Oregon | Feb. 14, 1859 |
| 9. | New Hampshire | June 21, 1788 | 34. | Kansas | Jan. 29, 1861 |
| 10. | Virginia | June 25, 1788 | 35. | West Virginia | June 20, 1863 |
| 11. | New York | July 26, 1788 | 36. | Nevada | Oct. 31, 1864 |
| 12. | North Carolina | Nov. 21, 1789 | 37. | Nebraska | Mar. 1, 1867 |
| 13. | Rhode Island | May 29, 1790 | 38. | Colorado | Aug. 1, 1876 |
| 14. | Vermont | Mar. 4, 1791 | 39. | North Dakota | Nov. 2, 1889 |
| 15. | Kentucky | June 1, 1792 | 40. | South Dakota | Nov. 2, 1889 |

| | | | | | |
|-----|-------------|---------------|-----|------------|---------------|
| 16. | Tennessee | June 1, 1796 | 41. | Montana | Nov. 8, 1889 |
| 17. | Ohio | Mar. 1, 1803 | 42. | Washington | Nov. 11, 1889 |
| 18. | Louisiana | Apr. 30, 1812 | 43. | Idaho | July 3, 1890 |
| 19. | Indiana | Dec. 11, 1816 | 44. | Wyoming | July 10, 1890 |
| 20. | Mississippi | Dec. 10, 1817 | 45. | Utah | Jan. 4, 1896 |
| 21. | Illinois | Dec. 3, 1818 | 46. | Oklahoma | Nov. 16, 1907 |
| 22. | Alabama | Dec. 14, 1819 | 47. | New Mexico | Jan. 6, 1912 |
| 23. | Maine | Mar. 15, 1820 | 48. | Arizona | Feb. 14, 1912 |
| 24. | Missouri | Aug. 10, 1821 | 49. | Alaska | Jan. 3, 1959 |
| 25. | Arkansas | June 15, 1836 | 50. | Hawaii | Aug. 21, 1959 |

Source: Arkansas Secretary of State, 2024

C. Seal and National Bird

The Great Seal of the United States carrying a bald eagle design on it is the official seal of the United States of America. The design of the obverse is the coat of arms of the United States, an official emblem, mark of identification, and symbol of the authority of the government. A bald eagle also appears on the obverse side as it appears on many state flags. The bald eagle has been the national bird of the United States since 1782, a symbol of pride and strength that earned it a place on the seal of the United States (Terrall, 2019). The eagle is a powerful and majestic bird that has come to symbolize the United States in many ways. With its fierce gaze, outstretched wings, and proud stance, the eagle represents the strength and freedom of the nation (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024a).

On the reverse is an unfinished pyramid topped with an eye enclosed in a triangle. The seal contains three Latin phrases: *E Pluribus Unum* (“Out of many, one”), *Annuit cœptis* (“He has favored our undertakings”), and *Novus ordo seclorum* (“A new order of the ages”). Largely designed by Charles Thomson, secretary of the Continental Congress, and William Barton, and first used in 1782, the seal is used to authenticate certain documents issued by the federal government of the United States. (Wikipedia, 2024c). The following figure represents the obverse and reverse side of the US seal.

Fig 3. US seal



Source: Wikipedia, 2024c

D. Uncle Sam

Next to the eagle symbol, “Uncle Sam” is a friendly way to address the country. It also bears the same initials of “US”. As a popular symbol for the United States, Uncle Sam is usually associated with a cartoon figure having long white hair and chin whiskers and dressed in a swallow-tailed coat, vest, tall hat, and striped trousers. His appearance is derived from two earlier symbolic figures in American folklore: Yankee Doodle, a British-inspired nickname for American colonials during the American Revolution, and Brother Jonathan, a rural American wit

who, by surprising displays of native intelligence, always triumphed over his adversaries in plays, stories, cartoons, and verse (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024a). Figure 4 is a popular portrayal of Uncle Sam.

Fig 4. Uncle Sam



Source: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024c

The origin of the term Uncle Sam, though disputed, is usually associated with a businessman from Troy, New York, Samuel Wilson, known affectionately as “Uncle Sam” Wilson. The barrels of beef that he supplied the army during the War of 1812 were stamped “US” to indicate government property. That identification is said to have led to the widespread use of the nickname Uncle Sam for the United States, and a resolution passed by Congress in 1961 recognized Wilson as the namesake of the national symbol. (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024a).

Probably the first US political cartoonist to crystallize the figure of Uncle Sam was Thomas Nast, beginning in the early 1870s. By 1900, through the efforts of Nast, Joseph Keppler, and others, Uncle Sam was firmly entrenched as the symbol for the United States. One of the most familiar treatments in the 20th century was shown in James Montgomery Flagg’s World War I recruiting poster, also used in World War II, for which the caption read, “I Want You” (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024c).

E. National Motto

The modern motto of the United States of America, as established in a 1956 law signed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, is “In God we trust”. The phrase first appeared on US coins in 1864. (Wikipedia, 2024d). God occupies a crucial place in American life even though the American society is becoming more and more atheistic. The name of God and other divine references are referred to in many American presidents’ speeches since George Washington. God is the greatest symbol of faith. Faith is the invisible conviction in a better future, success and victory one clutches on in time of hardship.

Faith in the USA evokes the first settlers. As Anglicanism, during the 16th century, became the official religion of England, other religions suffered discrimination and persecution. Some non-Anglicans left for the colonies. They included the Roman Catholics who settled in Maryland (founded by Lord Baltimore) in 1634, and the Quakers, also known as the Society of Friends, who settled in Pennsylvania (founded by William Penn) in 1681, and the Pilgrims, a small group of Puritans, who sailed on the Mayflower in 1620 to settle at Plymouth, Massachusetts. Determined to escape persecution by establishing a New World colony, the Pilgrims organized a joint-stock company. By the year 1733, the English owned thirteen colonies (Gordon, 1979, pp. 7-276). The table below shows the pluralistic population of those thirteen colonies and how much the English outnumbered all the other settlers from different European countries.

Table 3. The pluralistic population of the 13 colonies by 1775

| <i>Ethnic origins</i> | <i>Number</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| English settlers | 1,500,000 | 56.6% |

| | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------|--------|
| The Scots, Irish and Welsh | 370,000 | 13.96% |
| Germans | 200,000 | 7.55% |
| Dutch | 67,500 | 2.55% |
| Swiss | 25,000 | 0.94% |
| Swedes and Finns | 20,000 | 0.75% |
| French | 15,000 | 0.57% |
| Spanish and Portuguese Jews | 2,500 | 0.09% |
| Blacks | 450,000 | 16.98% |
| Total | 2,650,000 | 100% |

Source: Gordon, 1979, p. 7 (with my own slight improvements)

F. Oath of Allegiance

The principles embodied in the Oath of Allegiance are codified in Section 337(a) in the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). The Oath of Allegiance contains the following text:

I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God.

(U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2020)

Throughout the US history, foreign-born men and women have come to the United States, taken the Oath of Allegiance to become naturalized citizens, and contributed greatly to their new communities and country. The Oath of Allegiance has led to American citizenship for more than 220 years (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2020).

Since the first naturalization law in 1790, applicants for naturalization have taken an oath to support the Constitution of the United States. Five years later the Naturalization Act of 1795 required an applicant to declare an intention (commitment) to become a US citizen before filing a Petition for Naturalization. In the declaration of intention the applicant would indicate his understanding that upon naturalization he would take an oath of allegiance to the United States and renounce (give up) any allegiance to a foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty. Applicants born with a hereditary title also had to renounce their title or order of nobility (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2020).

Three points in the Oath of Allegiance deserve consideration: the US Constitution, the US Armed Forces and citizenship. The Constitution of the United States was drawn up by the Constitutional Convention of 1787 to create the system of federal government which began to function in America in 1789. Since then, 26 amendments have been added. The first 10, called the Bill of Rights, were adopted in 1791. The 26th Amendment was ratified on July 5, 1971. The Constitution is concise and brief: its general statement of principles has made possible the extension of meanings to foster the growth of the nation from 13 states clustered on the Atlantic side of the Allegheny Mountains in the eastern United States, to a flourishing nation of 50 states spanning the North American continent and extending into the Pacific (United States Information Agency, n.d.).

The original document, like the Declaration of Independence, is on public view at the National Archives building in a case designed to provide the greatest possible protection against decay (United States Information Agency,

n.d.). The Constitution was established to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to the American people and to their prosperity.

The US Armed Forces guarantee both domestic and foreign protection against enemies. It is a high-spending branch of the country but for legal and legitimate purposes. In its fiscal year 2025 presidential budget request of \$185.9 billion release, the Army detailed how the service intended to man, train and equip the force into the future. The request includes approximately \$3.9 billion for military construction supporting a total of 45 projects across the total Army. That includes \$2.4 billion for barracks restoration, construction and sustainment, a 325% increase for barracks construction over last year's request and the first time in recent history the Army has funded 100% of the sustainment requirement (Herd, 2024).

Next to the Army's huge budget stands citizenship. The American people value citizenship. Citizenship is not only the fact of belonging to a community. Citizenship is the act of serving the community and being useful to it. 44th President of the United States Barack Obama served a good example of a citizen of value. Following graduation in 1983, Obama worked in New York City, then became a community organizer on the South Side of Chicago, coordinating with churches to improve housing conditions and set up job-training programs in a community hit hard by steel mill closures. In 1988, he went to Harvard Law School, where he attracted national attention as the first African American president of the *Harvard Law Review*. Returning to Chicago, he joined a small law firm specializing in civil rights (The White House, 2024).

G. National Mammal

The US national mammal is the bison since 2016 (Polsky, 2022). The largest terrestrial animals in North America, bison are characterized by a hump over the front shoulders and slimmer hindquarters. Both male and female bison have a single set of short, sharply pointed, hollow horns that curve outward and up from the sides of the massive head. The head, neck, forelegs, and front parts of the body have a thick coat of long, dark hair. The adult bull adds to this thick coat with a black beard about one foot long. The rear part of the body is covered with much shorter hair. The shaggy head is the most heavily insulated part of their body, which has adapted as such to withstand blizzards as the animal stands facing into the wind. Heavy coats are shed in the spring as the animals roll to loosen the hair, which falls off in gobs (Smithsonian's National Zoo & Conservation Biology Institute, 2024). The following figure shows a bison facing the camera operator.



Fig 5. The American bison

Being the national mammal does not mean that the massive animal is worshiped. Today it is protected by law but it has a past that linked it to American civilization. The most helpless, impotent, silent and unfortunate victims of European immigration, civilization, settlement and especially expansion in New England is the American bison. Today it is classified as near threatened by extinction (Smithsonian's National Zoo & Conservation Biology Institute, 2024). How could this be? The movie named *Butcher's Crossing* about bison hunt in the Old West gives a sad and yet better portrait of the what happened to the mammal.

The movie begins with a scene in a kind of bison hide trade counter in a village strewn with bison hides. Inside

the counter is sitting an old man filing on a big register his business records. He dismisses a bison hide hunter who fails to negotiate correctly the fixed price of the animal hide before getting busy filing again. Most interestingly, the movie shows a mysterious frontiersman leading a group of men on a treacherous bison hunt. While they came across a big herd with hopes to make money, they soon find themselves in a fight for survival as the harsh elements start to test their resolve and sanity (Polsky, 2022).

The movie ends with authentic pictures of bison skulls heaped up until they reach a height of about seven meters and bison hides so densely packed that they give the impression of several cabins built side by side in the wilderness. The historical facts gathered in the movie tell that in 1860, an estimate of 60,000,000 bison roamed the Old West. Just two decades later, the bison population fell down to 300 heads. Today, North America has about 30,000 bison thanks to the Native American's conservation efforts (Polsky, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The history of the USA is rich with meanings of both sorrow and happiness. Giving a good and faithful portrayal of US history, this study has probed nine US symbols full of teachings. A symbol may look less significant than many other aspects in a country's civilization until its representation shows its true content. This paper has rummaged through nine American symbols as pretext to revisit some essential aspects of US civilization.

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