

# Vexillology with E. Tory Laitila

## Ologies Podcast

### September 3, 2019

Oh heeey, it's that guy from work that goes to amusement parks alone and has to convince people he's not a creep, he just likes admiring the art design, Alie Ward, back with another episode of *Ologies*. In which, we let one expert let his freak flag fly. And by freak, I mean flag, so we let his flag-flag fly. This dude loves flags. I love him for it, but before we run this interview up the pole, let's thank a few folks, shall we? Okay, yes.

First of all, thank you to all the Patrons at [Patreon.com/Ologies](https://patreon.com/Ologies). Y'all make this show possible. It would not exist without you. I love your questions each week. Thank you to everyone buying Ologies merch like hats, and shirts, and totes, at [OlogiesMerch.com](https://OlogiesMerch.com). To everyone who supports this show for zero dollars just by gabbing about it, or using your finger on your phone to keep it in the top ten science podcasts by rating it. Subscribing also helps. Most of all, leaving a review, all of which get read by my tired and sometimes teary eyes because y'all are so kind. Such as for example, PodcastPretty, who says,

*This podcast is weird. And by weird, I mean perfectly vulnerable and fascinating and my new favorite podcast I've recommended to everyone. I am now making an effort to show up like I belong and try to have fun. Thanks Alie.*

Thank you PodcastPretty and everyone who leaves reviews. I do read them. I love them. Thank you so much.

Okay. Vexillology. Aren't you glad that there's a parenthetical (FLAGS!) after that? Because who knows what vexillology means? Where does this word even come from? Buckle up shit's about to get cute. Vexillology has its roots in Latin for 'little sail'. *Velum* is a sail or curtain and it's related to veil. So, if you rip a flag, are you piercing the veil? Because that would be a disaster. This reference will only make sense if you listened to last week's Disasterology episode. And I'm just sorry. I'm sorry to everybody else. That was cheap and I went for it.

The term vexillology, it was coined in 1959 by a flag enthusiast, and designer, and political scholar, the late Whitney Smith Jr. And if you're like "Dammit, I wish I were a vexillologist!" but you're just a flag fan, don't worry. You're still a vexillophile. Drop that on a first date, see how that's received.

*[deep voice "Heeey!"]*

Okay, so this vexillill... mmm. *[more slowly]* vex-il-ol-ologist... vexillologist came into my life one fateful day in Hawaii. I was on that Atlas Obscura trip with teuthology guest, squid expert – and as of a few days ago – Dr. Sarah McAnulty. And I was about to get a behind-the-scenes tour of the majestic Bishop Museum on the island of Oahu. And wonderful persons, Hadley Andersen and Megan Ramsey – who are Ologites and museum workers – met up with me, they hooked me up with a local flag expert. So we met the next day in my hotel, I rushed in straight from the beach with very bad hair and mascara on my face. And he was nattily dressed in a vintage tiki suit, he had a fresh haircut, he was sipping some soda at the hotel bar. He handed me a miniature Hawaiian standard flag. We ducked into a room to chat flags.

You're about to go through quite a journey, hearing about everything from why flags exist, to if you can get arrested for stomping on one, to how to dispose of a flag, to what flags have to do with conspiracy theories, to some pirate trivia, why Hawaii has a Union Jack on its flag, the hardest flags to draw, which colors we don't see on flags and why, which state flag needs a makeover the hardest,

how to design a flag, how to store one, who designed our modern American flag, and how you too can have fun with flags all year round. So get ready to fly high with flag professional and Vexillologist, Tory Laitila.

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**Tory Laitila:** Laitila. L-A-I-T-I-L-A

**Alie Ward:** Laitila?

**Tory:** Laitila.

**Alie:** Okay. I wanted to make sure I say that right. You are a vexillologist.

**Tory:** Yes, I am a vexologist... vexillologist.

**Alie:** It's not an easy one to say.

**Tory:** No, it's not. No it's not. But my day job is Registrar. So, I would consider myself an amateur vexillologist. But I *do* do it as part of my day job. So I do get called upon to answer quite a few flag questions during the week.

**Alie:** What does a registrar do?

**Tory:** I'm an arts registrar. So, I manage the city and county of Honolulu's public art collection. So, a registrar is a person in a museum who handles all the records and sometimes the physical objects. I handle a public art collection for the city and county of Honolulu. So, right now we have 1,117 works in the collection.

**Alie:** As of today?

**Tory:** As of today, yes.

**Aside:** So, Tory got his bachelor's in museum studies at the University of Mānoa in Hawaii and spent 17 years as a registrar in the Honolulu's Mayor's Office of Culture and the Arts. He was an expert in charge of public art collections and who flies what flags, when. Starting in September, though, he'll be the Curator of Textiles and Fashion at the Honolulu Museum of Art, which is very exciting for him. The dude digs flags! He loves fabric.

**Alie:** How did you get into it?

**Tory:** I actually have a background in art history. My degree is in art history, but my focus was costume.

**Alie:** Really? I was going to say, because you are very nattily dressed. You are very well dressed. You have lovely hair and an awesome printed blazer.

**Tory:** Well, I noticed you're a fan of vintage clothing so I wore a tiki blazer today.

**Alie:** Did you make this?

**Tory:** Yes, I did.

**Aside:** So, side note. It's true that I have a collection of vintage dresses. Not only do they never go out of style, but just try to beat a \$24, hand-sewn, thrift store gown, that someone else farted in. You can't. History is rich and I love it. Tory's blazer, by the way, was a replica of a type of 1960s tropical Polynesian style sports jacket, which was unlined so you could wear it in the tropics and not schvitz too hard. But the originals tend to be made too small for this tall dude. So, his work and passion for historical textiles involve not just flags but clothes too. His career is like a rich tapestry and it also does involve tapestries.

**Tory:** And so you start dating... the ability to date clothes, their usage, and who used them. Because there was a time where the appearance of a person would dictate, maybe, their economic class, occupation, and other things. I like to say that clothing is the most intimate of artifacts. It tells you about a specific individual.

**Alie:** And so, does it make sense that you would also be interested in a fabric banner that says a lot about a country?

**Tory:** Well, I did take a History of Textiles class in college and that was never covered, so on my final I brought it up and that was my argument. We did not study these small pieces of cloth that have affected history and have caused people to die or give their life to over time. That wasn't...

**Alie:** That was your final paper?

**Tory:** Well, that was my final argument on the final for that class.

**Alie:** What did you get? What grade?

**Tory:** I passed.

**Alie:** *Nice!* Was your teacher forced to write "*Nice!*" at the end?

**Tory:** Um, I think she reluctantly admitted that it wasn't covered in class.

**Alie:** She's like "Next year, good point, alright fine." She *waved the white flag*, if you will.

**Tory:** Yes.

**Aside:** So, in his costuming and textiles final, he argued that flags were hugely important. And they were like, "Hmmm, the guy's got a point." As for the tiki culture throwback, it spans at least a generation. So, Tory's mother was from Guam, an island of Micronesia that's a US Territory – and side note, has a very cute flag featuring a little blue background and what looks like a tiny portal of a tropical scene, replete with a coconut tree and a canoe. And it also has a border of red around it to symbolize the hardships that the islands endured. It's a pretty great flag.

Anyway, Tory's mom, from Guam, moved to Ohio and worked in this famous tiki bar. Columbus's renowned hangout the Kahiki Tiki Bar until the family moved to Hawaii when he was a teeny baby and Tory spent his summers between the Midwest and Guam. Honestly, google the Guam flag, it looks like a Girl Scout badge. It's very cute.

**Alie:** So, you had an interest in island culture and a background in island culture growing up?

**Tory:** I grew up in Hawaii. I was born in Columbus, Ohio, and my parents moved to Hawaii. I was maybe, like, 6 months old.

**Alie:** And so, you've lived in Hawaii most of your life. And when did you want to get into the preservation of its art and artifacts?

**Tory:** Well, I've always liked... things, stuff, and how they work and where they come from. And when I went to college, I saw, "Oh, Art History. What's that?" And so, you know, a little lightbulb went off and said, "Well, I could study history in the context of *stuff*."

**Alie:** [*laughs*] History in the context of items. And now, tell me a little about what it takes to get to know flags. Where did you start? Did you start just perusing books?

**Tory:** So, I read a lot as a child. I had an encyclopedia at home and I would read the encyclopedia; just pull off a volume and start reading. But my mother, for a short time, she was actually

working at an import/export company, so she would sell things to the shops at Waikiki. But she worked for a heraldry shop in Waikiki.

**Alie:** What is that?

**Tory:** Well, a heraldry shop would be one where you would go in, and they would look up your name, and then they'd find the coat of arms for your name and you could buy stuff with that coat of arms on it. [*clip from On Her Majesty's Secret Service: "There's a picture of my own coat of arms, actually."*] So heraldry are coats of arms. They all have meaning. You know, the shield, or the crest, would have the coat of arms and it would tell you something about that person; whether they came from England, or France, or Germany. Whether they were the second-born son or what families married.

**Alie:** So, you kind of started with that. Was that your entrée? Was that like the creaky door. [*door creaking*]

**Tory:** So, the heraldry leads to flags because a lot of flags use a similar language or are derived from that style of heraldry.

**Alie:** Now, what's the difference between a flag and a pennant?

**Aside:** Oooh boy howdy! Okay, buckle up for some vexillological terminology.

**Tory:** So, a flag is usually a rectangular attached to one of its sides and can flutter in the wind. And a pennant is usually a streamer, either pointed, so triangular, or with a swallowtail. And the other item would be a gonfalon. So a gonfalon would be a vertically hung pennant.

**Aside:** So, this is the first time I had ever heard the word 'gonfalon'. But I looked it up and it's essentially a squarish flag or a seal, sometimes with little tassels at the bottom, and it's hung from a crossbar. It kinda seems like something you'd see at the head of a formal procession, or like a mass. But also, a gonfalon sounds a little too close to Kurt Vonnegut's 'granfalloon', which, if you ever read *Cat's Cradle*, you might remember is the term for "people who feel united but are really only tethered together by an association that's utterly meaningless."

Then I started down to spiral down an existential rabbit hole about nationalism and what it means to live on a bordered planet... but also community and belonging are important. Then I just had to snap out of it. [*"Snap out of it!"*] Anyway, Tory has a ton of flags at home and I asked if they were kept in an orderly fashion.

**Alie:** What's the best way to keep a flag?

**Tory:** Rolled.

**Alie:** Rolled? Okay. Don't fold that thing unless it's specifically folded?

**Tory:** Well, you *can* fold it, and interestingly, not every country has guidelines for folding a flag. So, in the US, we have where you fold the flag in quarters lengthwise and then you do a triangular fold. There's one in the Navy tradition because you can leave the flag folded, attach it to the halyard, and pull it up and it will automatically unravel.

**Alie:** [*impressed*] Weeeelllll.

**Tory:** The other common way, which the UK will do sometimes, and I believe Japan does, where they fold it into quarters, and then it's folded into thirds, and then rolled up the last third, and then tied with string. And so, I know in UK tradition, you use a small piece of string,

attach it to the halyard, and then when you pull it, when you give it a jerk it will break the string and the flag unfurls.

**Alie:** [*like a fanfare*] Bah-bup-buh-da! To much fanfare and trumpetry, correct?

**Tory:** Fanfare. For a flag.

**Alie:** Fanfare. Trumpetry: not a word. [*both laugh*]

**Aside:** Quick aside. Trumpetry is the blaring sound of trumpets and fanfare is a short and lively sounding of trumpets. So, I hereby give you permission to say a fanfare of trumpetry. Just to annoy anyone who's not a fan of redundant redundancies.

**Tory:** But not every country has flag protocols like the US.

**Alie:** I always think of how easy Japan has it when you're a kid and you have to draw your flag. You're like, "I've got a dot in the middle, I'm good to go," and then Mexico's like, "I gotta draw a serpent... and some kind of bird." Some flags are just geometric blocks and then others have these drawings on them that are difficult to replicate. Who decides what goes on a flag?

**Tory:** So, it's usually the country or the head of state. So, if you look at a lot of older flags, they are just sometimes one, two, three colors; horizontal lines or vertical lines, stripes. That goes back to heraldry, where there was the king. And he might have a coat of arms and it might have one or two colors. So, you replicate that on the flag.

**Alie:** Ohhh!

**Aside:** Okay. Quick aside about the Japanese flag. Also called the Hinomaru. So that big crimson dot is representing the sun because Japan is known as 'the land of the rising sun'. And while their big signature red dot on a field of white has been used since the 1400s, it was designed formally in 1870, it wasn't legally adopted until 1999. That's like being engaged for 129 years! Everyone just assumes you're married, but really, hmm, there's drama at home.

So, folks opposed didn't like a certain shift towards post-war nationalism, so adopting it officially was a big deal, but it's been 20 years since it's been the flag of Japan by law. Bonus, it's pretty easy to draw though. Why is this a bonus? According to the North American Vexillological Society's 2006 edict *Good Flag, Bad Flag*, there are a few key principles to designing a good flag. The five principles are:

1. *Keep it simple: The flag should be so simple a child can draw it from memory. (Or an adult who's bad at drawing.)*
2. *Use meaningful symbolism.*
3. *Use 2 or 3 basic colors.*
4. *No lettering or seal. Never use writing of any kind or an organization's seal. (Wow that law's broken a lot.)*
5. *Be distinctive or be related. (So, avoid duplicating other flags but use some similarities to show connections.)*

Anyone who heard Roman Mars's spectacular 2015 TED Talk on city flags might be familiar with these flag fashion Do's and Don'ts, which make us all now qualified flag critics.

Now, Mexico, I love you. Your flag? What the hell, man? Growing up, trying to draw the flag of Mexico with this ornate eagle eating a serpent while perched on a prickly pear, this was an

exercise of childhood artistic humility. Or really, for anyone without a studio art degree. But I did some reading, and knowing it's a symbol delivered by a god of war via a dream to an Aztec leader about where to settle what's now Mexico City, I'm like, "Alright, yes, this flag is very badass *and* is very beautiful, and I love it." Mexico, please don't be offended if my rendition looks like a cat eating a noodle.

Now, as we talked I was holding this small version of the Hawaiian flag. This red, white, and blue stripy number with a British flag where the US stars would be on a US flag. What? What's happening here?

**Alie:** And now why do you think, red, white, blue... Why are those colors so common? Or do I just think they're common because I'm holding a red, white, and blue flag and the country I was born in has those colors?

**Tory:** Well, in the US we refer to it as red, white, and blue. In Hawaii it's white, red, and blue. So it's the order of precedence for the lines.

**Alie:** Ooohhh! Wait, so when you say red, white, and blue on an American flag, does that mean that the red stripe is on top?

**Tory:** So, it's red and white, and then blue is for the Union, or the canton, which is that field on the side. So, there are parts of the flag.

**Alie:** Oh yeah! Give me... Yeah, break me down some anatomy 101 on a flag.

**Tory:** [*laughs*] So, flags are usually square or rectangular and the part that attaches to the halyard, which is the rope that pulls it up and down, that's called the hoist. The opposite side is called the fly. And usually the top is the top or the head, and the bottom is the bottom.

**Alie:** Is that where 'on the fly' comes from?

**Tory:** 'On the fly' being 'ready to go'?

**Alie:** Yeah, I don't know. Like, "Oh I'm on the fly." I don't know. I'm going to look it up.

**Aside:** Okay, side note. 'On the fly' is not a vexillological idiom. It comes from baseball, like a fly ball. And to recap flag anatomy: the field is the main area and the canton is the picture-in-picture area. And these specific terms were necessary because in the oldie-timey days you couldn't just airdrop your design. You had to, like, scream it into a tin can connected to another tin can, and then etch it via a spent matchstick on some birch bark, and then let an owl grasp it in its talons to drop off at the weaver.

**Alie:** Now, we're in Hawaii. 50th star.

**Tory:** Yes. Now, there wasn't a 49-star flag.

**Alie:** Right, because Alaska and Hawaii, same time?

**Tory:** Because they don't change the US flag until July 4 of the following year.

**Alie:** [*incredulous*] They don't?? Oh my gosh! So they were admitted at the same...

**Tory:** Within the 12-month span, to get –

**Alie:** Nice. Because that would have been a little bit awkward.

**Tory:** It would. So I understand there were a few 49-star flags made but they just delayed it and made the 50 stars.

**Alie:** Well that makes sense. Now, we have a 50-star flag. What about, say, Puerto Rico or Guam? Let's say those become states in the future. What would we do with a 51st? Could we put it anywhere?

**Tory:** It would have to go back to design. And they would figure out where... if they would change the arrangement of the field. Because there were times throughout US history where the arrangement of the stars changed. I mean, people are familiar with the Betsy Ross flag, where they're in a circle. I mean, during the Civil War, sometimes they were lined up, and sometimes they were arranged in circles with a few outlier stars.

**Aside:** Quick aside. Is the Betsy Ross flag origin story flimflam? What's the deal? So, a little more on that in a bit. But, a fun fact, some folks – but not all – use the 13-star Betsy Ross flag as a throwback to pre-abolition days. Which is gross and scary. Some people. Probably a slim minority. So, let's continue the discussion about US territories and plunging a flag into them.

Why aren't territories – such as, for example, Guam, and Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands, and American Samoa – states? So, this is a discussion called the 51st State, and as of a 2017 referendum, 90% of voters in Puerto Rico chose statehood. Although, their voter turnout was pretty low so it's hard to say how many people in Puerto Rico in general support it. So why are some US Territories states, and others aren't? Is this just simply a design issue? Hmm? Heads up: the 51st State Debate probably is not a design issue.

In fact, as a high school student, a guy named Bob Heft heard that Alaska was set to become the 49th state and so for a class project he took his parents' flag, with 48 stars on it then, and spent days arranging 50 stars on it. His teacher thought his project sucked and gave him a B minus. So, Heft, looking for some extra credit, he petitioned Congress to accept it as the new 50-star design after Hawaii and Alaska became states. Ha! And it's been in rotation ever since. Thanks, Heft. Heft says he has a 51-star flag ready, should the country keep expanding. So no, the 51 State Debate probably is not just a design issue, goes a little deeper than that.

**Alie:** And now, do you think that there's any holdup in adding more states because we feel too lazy to change the flag? [*“Got room for one more.”*]

**Tory:** [*laughs*] Well, they could decide not to change the flag, but I would assume they would add stars for any additional states.

**Alie:** And what are the most common colors in flags that you see?

**Tory:** Red, white, and blue are pretty prevalent, globally, for flags.

**Alie:** What do they mean?

**Tory:** They have varying degrees. So, in the US they do have a few poems, and we could actually look up... the Elks Lodge has a really nice poem that describes the red, white, and blue of the flag beautifully and very poetically.

**Aside:** So, I did find on USFlag.org that the colors red, white, and blue did not have meanings for America when it was adopted on the flag in 1777. However, the colors of the Great Seal did have specific meanings. So, Charles Thomson, Secretary of the Continental Congress, reporting to Congress on the Seal, stated that White signifies purity and innocence; Red, hardiness and valor; and blue signifies vigilance, perseverance, and justice. So, it was on the Seal and they were like, “Just use it on the flag.” Kinda like eating leftover pizza for breakfast. Which is also very American.

So, I looked all over for this Elks Lodge poem and I swear I could not find it. But I did find out that Idaho and Michigan both have elks on their flags. Michigan has what appears to be an elk dancing with a moose over a banner that reads '*Circumspice*' which I just learned, in Latin, is "keer-kum-SPEE-kay" and it means, "Hey, look around you." So, Michigan, look around you. Maybe you'll see an elk dancing with a moose. God, that'd be dope.

**Alie:** Do you ever have people show you a picture of a flag and quiz you to see if you know where it's from?

**Tory:** They don't quiz me, but every once in a while we will run across flags somewhere with some group and we're like, "Where is this from," and I have to look it up, I don't have all the flags memorized. It would be great trivia. But in my daily work, my vexillological duties usually fall under what would be the job of the protocol officer, and so that would be determining order and precedence of flags.

**Alie:** Oh my god! [*"They were very specific about it."*]

**Aside:** There are approximately one million rules in terms of how to fly an American flag, but I will summarize. So, the US flag always goes on the left when you are looking at it, or on the tallest of the flag poles, or on the top of the flagpole with the state and the city flag under it. And you can't fly an advertising flag on the same pole as the US flag. So, if anyone is out there messing it up with their city flag, and a banner for Metamucil, and the US flag all on one pole – woohoo! – that's a real mess. Now, so:

**Tory:** You go from larger political entity to smaller political entity. But, like the Olympics, when you have all the countries present, what order do you put them in?

**Alie:** Right!

**Tory:** So, the Olympic committee is usually alphabetical order of the language of the host country. So, when you see the position of the flags it's in the alphabetical order of the language of the host country.

**Alie:** The language of the host country. Okay. Where do these rules get stored? Are they in a big dusty book or do you have to check on a website that changes all the time?

**Tory:** The big dusty book is called the US Flag Code.

**Alie:** Okay. [*laughs*] How old is it? How thick is this book?

**Tory:** Fortunately, the US Government Printing Office does have a publication called *Our Flag* which can be distributed and has pictures in it so you know how to put flags on display, and you know if they're going to be crossed, or if you put them across a north-south street the Union has to be on the north side. Or if it crosses a... It details all of these in the US Flag Code.

**Alie:** Are you a person that likes etiquette because it's interesting and kind of vintage, like Emily Post style? Or do you begrudgingly acknowledge and adhere to etiquette?

**Tory:** I do have a copy of Emily Post at home and at work. And at work I also keep Letitia Baldrige as well.

**Alie:** [*laughs delightedly*] I don't know anything about Letitia Baldrige.

**Tory:** So, she was the Protocol Officer at the White House for over two decades.

**Aside:** I will be very honest. Protocol and etiquette freaks me out because there are so many tiny, quiet ways to fail. So you either have to go all-in and read *Miss Manners*, or Emily



Post, or just screw it and always be the social equivalent of a rhino with diarrhea, which I sometimes fear I am.

**Alie:** And how about our wife? Is she as much a stickler for etiquette? Or do you kind of make sure that you guys send presents in the right amount of time and write thank you notes? Are you guys different?

**Tory:** We try. We try.

**Alie:** Does she kind of have the same vibe?

**Tory:** Um, I'll say we try. *[laughs]*

**Alie:** Okay. *[laughs]*

**Tory:** We will refer to... We will have morning discussions where we'll go to the OED, or sometimes... Emily Post does live next to the OED when we have our morning discussions over breakfast sometimes. We'll have questions that come up sometimes and we'll just read the dictionary or etiquette manual over breakfast conversation.

**Alie:** Do you have a flagpole at your house?

**Tory:** Before I was married, I had a flagpole in my house and outside my house.

**Alie:** Reeaaaally? Now, does the one inside stay out all the time and the outside one you have to take down and put up every day?

**Tory:** I have a light so I can leave the flag up 24 hours. But I do not always fly the US flag. So, I actually... I very rarely fly the US flag on my flagpole outdoors. Where I used to live before, it was near my door. You know how you have it on your front porch? I had neighbors and they would kinda get a kick out of it, and sometimes they didn't figure out what it was. So, I'll fly a flag relating to the date *[clip from Mean Girls: "It's October 3rd."]* or a significant event. So, if they don't know they'll come over and say, "Oh what's today?" or "What's tomorrow?"

**Alie:** How many flags do you have?

**Tory:** Oh, I don't know... A hundred or so.

**Alie:** A hundred? So you change them out? Like every couple of days?

**Tory:** As the mood is fit, or weather, because you can have a storm flag, which is usually a smaller flag you fly on the same pole so that your big flag doesn't get as beat up. So if it's stormy, I won't fly a flag. But I will have flags... like for Oktoberfest, I'll fly the Bavarian flag. For Royal Holidays in Hawaii, I do fly the Royal Standard, and I do have some of the standards of the monarchs and some of the princesses. There's Anzac Day, or Canada Day, or Australia Day. I'll fly the appropriate flag.

**Aside:** Anzac, by the by, stands for Australian and New Zealand Army Corps and it's the Australian version of Memorial Day, but it's in April. And about a month later, Australia also recognizes Aboriginal suffering with Sorry Day. I mean, simple. To the point. And among the activities on Sorry Day is raising the Aboriginal Flag, which is a really beautiful design of a black top half representing the Aboriginal people of Australia, a red bottom half for the earth and the ochre that they use in ceremonies, and in the middle, a yellow circle for the sun. Beautiful, simple, gorgeous.

**Alie:** What about... Do you put out a pride flag at all? Or is that in the neighborhood?

**Tory:** I am in receipt, it's still in my office, of a Pride Flag from San Francisco from the Mayor. So, I have it... It's a really nice flag because I will usually fly the economy flags at home. This is a nice flag. So I have one, I just haven't... It's a nice flag.

**Aside:** Side note, we recorded this in late June, which was Pride Month, and that led me down a rabbit hole to the history of the Pride Flag. It was designed by the late artist and activist Gilbert Baker before the 1978 Gay Freedom Day Parade in San Francisco. And it initially had eight stripes and they each had a specific meaning. It had a hot pink stripe that stood for sex, red stood for life, orange for healing, yellow for sunlight, green for nature, turquoise for magic and art, indigo for serenity, and violet for spirit. But hot pink fabric was hard to come by in the '70s apparently, and eventually the turquoise and the indigo were just blended into one royal blue stripe.

Gilbert Baker was a huge part of shaping Pride culture and he was also an activist with the drag nun group, The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. His nickname, Busty Ross. [DJ airhorns] So, after you're done flippy-flapping them around outside, do you have to iron them? Do you have to Febreze them? What's the protocol?

**Alie:** And what about washing flags? How do you wash them?

**Tory:** So, you can get them dry cleaned. Flags nowadays are made out of, typically, nylon, polyester, or cotton. Historically they were made out of wool or silk, which is a much more hardy material. I kind of like polyester because you can get polyester that will have the texture of wool. It will flow nicely in the breeze; nylon is a little stiffer. Depending on the material, that dictates how long it will last. Cotton can be nice, but if cotton gets wet, the colors do or can run.

**Alie:** And isn't it, "These colors don't run"?

**Tory:** So, don't put a cotton flag outside in the rain.

**Alie:** Okay, but maybe go for a polyester or a nylon one.

**Tory:** Correct. Or wool if you want to make it yourself.

**Alie:** Can you get a wool flag?

**Tory:** It's very rare to get a wool flag. You can have one made. So you can actually have a flag company make you a flag and they'll still be hand-stitched. And there are companies that make flags in the US and there's still people in the factory that will hand sew the flag together.

**Alie:** But you gotta use some cedar chips or something because what could be worse than having a moth eat your flag.

**Tory:** Well you fold it up and you put it in a case.

**Alie:** How do you feel when someone drapes themselves in a flag for their album covers? I'm thinking there's gotta be like ten different musicians who have done that.

**Tory:** That's what bunting is for.

**Alie:** What is bunting??

**Tory:** So, bunting are pieces of material in red and white stripes, or sometimes with blue and white stars, that are *reminiscent* of a flag, but not a flag.

**Alie:** What makes them different? They're different lengths?

**Tory:** Well it's not the ratio of a flag with a field of red and white stripes and the Union in the corner. It's usually maybe a long piece of fabric that's just maybe two or three stripes of color and maybe stars on one end or not.

**Alie:** That would kind of be like a costume flag.

**Tory:** Or you can put it on your patio on the 4th of July, or decorate your float, or maybe your speaker's podium. You decorate it with bunting.

**Alie:** Now, what are you going to do for 4th of July?

**Tory:** 4th of July, I will fly the Betsy Ross flag.

**Alie:** Ohhh! Nice! And now, I need to look up her story. Do you like her story? Is it worth telling? Or are you like, "Eh, it's apocryphal."?

**Tory:** Well, you know there are theories on who came about with the flag, and there is some evidence that she did sew a flag with the stars in a circle arrangement. We'll acknowledge that as being the Betsy Ross design. Although there were other designs at the time.

**Alie:** Is there any truth to the fact that George Washington's wife...

**Tory:** So, there's a story that's passed down through the Ross family that says there was a meeting, and the generals got together, and Betsy Ross was the wife of one of the generals, Washington was there, and they did a little sketch, and so she sewed the flag. So there is that story. [*Is that the truth?*]

**Alie:** What do *you* think happened?

**Tory:** There were other flags that were flown by American patriots at the time. Some of us are familiar with the Bunker Hill flag, or the Gadsden flag, the "Don't Tread on Me" flag. So, you see these other flags that were used during the American Revolution. And the red and white or the Stars and Stripes as it came to be called, really became the one that was accepted nationally.

**Alie:** What do you think about the "Don't Tread on Me" flag?

**Tory:** It's fine. It's another flag that has its uses and some people have adopted it today to mean other things.

**Alie:** Right.

**Aside:** Gadsden's flag, side note, is primarily mustard yellow and it features this impossibly coiled and, I guess, ready to strike rattlesnake with 13 rattles representing the original colonies. It dates back to that time. And it's sometimes used in modern days by conservative parties to hearken back, I guess, to an era when the country was smaller and we didn't have indoor plumbing and rattlesnakes were able to hover in the air like a broken mattress spring. Must have been a wild era.

But there are some mocking "Don't Tread on Me" memes that are just a source of priceless parody. I suggest you google these. One of my favorites involves a cartoon baby snake that just says, "Pwease No Steppy," and another of a foot on the snake and the text below it, "I specifically requested the opposite of this." And then there's one that retains the original "Don't tread on me" text, but just the image of a single Lego. Anyway, changing up flags for fun.

**Alie:** So, do you have a calendar memorized? Or do you have a planner that has, like, "Hey, change the flag today"?

**Tory:** I try and write significant dates on my calendar.

**Alie:** Mhmm. That's smart. Do you check it every day?

**Tory:** I still have a written calendar.

**Alie:** Oh god! Me too!

**Tory:** So, I'm very low tech. I have a wall calendar on my wall at home and a desk calendar on my desk at work, and they're both handwritten notations so they have to have big squares so you can put things in them, and I'll just go back and forth and check. There are a few historical calendars out there that are really fun to look at that have "On This Day in History" so you can add those to your calendar, whichever seems significant or that you'd enjoy, and put them on your calendar.

**Aside:** If you're in the US, September has a few flag-worthy days. This episode will come out on Labor Day, the evening of, you can celebrate Unions. September 11, the flags will be flown at half-staff, or half-mast if you're on a boat. Constitution Day, AKA nomology-o'clock, is September 17. There's National Prisoner of War and Missing-in-Action Day, September 19, and Native American Day is September 27 in California and Nevada. But Indigenous People's Day is the 2nd Monday in October, nationwide. This led me to a website that sold flags, CRWFlags.com. They have all manner of banners, including some that with different dog breeds emblazoned on it. Wouldn't you know it? That CRW Flags themselves have a flag! It's a red, white, and blue one and it says "CRW Flags" in brush script. It's a choice, it's an artistic choice.

**Alie:** Do you have a favorite-looking flag? One that you're just like, "Man, I wish we had that one"?

**Tory:** Well, one of my favorite flags... It's hard to tell which one is your favorite, because... There's a flag I fly a lot at home, but a really cool-looking flag is Ohio's.

**Alie:** What?! Really? I'm sorry, Ohio, for doubting you. Okay. Tell me about it.

**Tory:** It's a swallow-tail pennant.

**Aside:** Damn, Ohio, I had no idea you had what patent-holding flag designer John Eisenmann describes as, "a triangular forked or swallow-tailed flag corresponding to the shape generally known as a 'cavalry-guider' or 'broad pennant.'" So beloved is Ohio's flag, it's even sold as a necklace. So, a patented pennant pendant, if I may be pedant. [*whispers*] Pardon.

**Tory:** So that means it's pointy but then the end is in a point. It's got a swallowtail in it. So you can fly it upside down and it still looks right side up. But who else has a swallow-tail pennant?

**Alie:** No one! How'd they get so fancy? They've got tux tails.

**Tory:** Well it's all about the hills, and the valleys, and the rivers of Ohio.

**Alie:** Oh man. And the rest of us just have squares?

**Tory:** Well, if you look at the Flag Code... So, there is a government specification on the ratio of the flag, the height and the width. And some states and other municipalities have different sizes. So, some flags are a little more square, some are a little more rectangular, but most of us in practical usage will fly what's referred to as the NATO standard.

**Aside:** Some standard sizes: 3x5, 4x6, but what's the smallest flag, you want to know? Is it the size of, like, your thumbnail? Pinky nail? Smaller? Is it the size of a crumb of banana bread? Oh, you have no idea!

I looked it up and according to the Guinness Book of World Records, there exists a flag that is 1/100th the width of a human hair. It's only viewable with an electron microscope. Who made this?! What wizardry is this? What is on the flag? A maple leaf. And it was made with UV photolithography on a wafer coated with electron-sensitive hydrogen silsesquioxane film by the Institute for Quantum Computing NanoFab in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. I'm pretty sure I said some of those words wrong. Please bear with me nanotechnologists.

Canadians, this achievement is small but it is mighty. It's absurdly awesome and it makes the palm-sized Hawaiian flag Tory gave me just seem gargantuan in comparison.

**Alie:** And now, tell me a little about the Hawaiian flag, because what I know from being here this week is that there are great ways to make a statement with a flag that I didn't realize that you could do. And so, the Hawaiian flag. How would you describe it?

**Tory:** The Hawaiian flag is rectangular, the ratio is 1:2. It has a field of 8 stripes with white, red, and blue alternating and a Union Jack in the canton.

**Alie:** How did they come up with this design?

**Tory:** So, it was during the reign of Kamehameha the first where Hawaii started trading. Ships needed ways to recognize themselves when they went into foreign ports. And so, when Hawaii started trading outside of Hawaii, it needed a flag to be recognized and so they came up with the Hawaiian flag. It was drafted by a British Officer.

**Aside:** Kamehameha the Great was a ruler who united the Hawaiian Islands in the late 1700s. And here's a fun tidbit, his full name is:

*[clip of Ologies Patron saying Kamehameha's full Hawaiian name:]*

*Kalani Pai'ea Wohi o Kaleikini Keali'ikui Kamehameha o 'Iolani i Kaiwikapu kau'i Ka Liholiho Kūnuiākea*

Another fun tidbit, I did not say that. Hawaiian-born patron, Iris McPherson did because I did not trust my mouth and brain and eyes to get it together on that.

*[repeated: Kalani Pai'ea Wohi o Kaleikini Keali'ikui Kamehameha o 'Iolani i Kaiwikapu kau'i Ka Liholiho Kūnuiākea]*

Anyway, he ruled through 1819, and this has nothing to do with anything, but one of his wives took the throne after his death, and among the things she changed was that women were finally allowed to eat bananas. [*"It's bananas."*] She was also protestant. There was a lot of badness with missionaries.

Eventually, the US took control of the Kingdom of Hawaii in 1893 in an overthrow that Congress has since admitted was illegal. Which is why, just in general, a Union Jack flag seems a little awkward. It's kinda like dating someone who still has their ex's name tattooed on their stomach. And maybe that was a toxic relationship, but also, they never wanted to date you, but you're forcing them illegally. But anyway, everyone just shrugs like, "Wow, that's a lot of bad stuff."

**Tory:** And it does hold the Union Jack because of the close alliance between Hawaii and Britain at the time. Now, Kamehameha I [the first] liked flags too so he would just fly whatever flag he liked at his compound.

**Alie:** Now, what is flown most commonly in Hawaii?

**Tory:** You see the Hawaiian flag. Now, the Hawaiian flag, as far as I know, is the only flag that has flown unchanged for 5 different forms of government.

**Alie:** Why is that? Why didn't they switch it up at all?

**Tory:** I guess for continuity. I mean, it flew under an absolute monarchy, a constitutional monarchy, a republic, a territory, and a state. And they did not change the flag.

**Alie:** When it became a state, the US didn't say, like, "Okay, real cute, you got a Union Jack. That era's over, people."

**Tory:** Well you know, it was the territory and they just kept the flag.

**Alie:** And I have heard a little bit about the way the flag is flown can express different viewpoints, sentiments, protestations perhaps. Is it flown upside down, right side... what does it mean?

**Tory:** So, when a flag, any flag, is flown upside or is visibly upside down, it's a sign of distress. [*"A little help please?"*] So, it's usually maybe sending out an SOS signal to somebody, because there was a time when flags were our communication. So, when a ship came into port and you're expecting someone to be on that ship, if you saw their flag at half-mast – mast on a ship – you knew somebody had passed away. If it was flying upside down, you knew that ship was in trouble or distress.

**Alie:** Oh wow. You'd have to know a little bit about the flag that you're looking at.

**Tory:** Correct. And then some flags, they look the same right side up or upside down.

**Alie:** Oh no! What do you do?

**Tory:** You'd be in trouble.

**Alie:** Yeah. And so, what does it mean in the Hawaiian flag if it's flown upside down?

**Tory:** Well, that is a sign of distress. And some people in Hawaii do fly it upside down as a sign of protest.

**Alie:** I found it fascinating that we were told by guides like, "Oh you know, if you look at the flag this way..." I thought that it was a pretty powerful statement. It's funny that the flag is... demands a certain kind of respect and that the people can talk back to authority by using the signal of the authority itself, you know?

**Tory:** So, there is some protest. There has been a sovereignty movement in Hawaii and currently there is actually an anti-development movement in some locations of Hawaii and so they'll raise the flag upside down as a protest.

**Aside:** So, inverting a flag has long been a statement by Indigenous populations. And Lakota activist Russel Means once said, "An upside-down flag is an international sign of distress. Now we, the Indian Nations, are in distress. I will wear this flag upside down as long as my people are in distress."

Tory says you can fly the Hawaiian Royal Standard flag upside down instead of the Hawaiian flag if, say, you're supporting the Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement or protesting the building of the 30-meter telescope on top of a sacred volcanic summit. Remember, Tory is a gentle soul who respects etiquette. But protests aren't necessarily supposed to tiptoe around the feelings of the oppressors. Now, if you're going to piss someone off with a flag, you gotta make it a real burn. Ooh! Which reminds me.

**Alie:** If you burn the flag will you get thrown in jail?

**Tory:** So, you can burn the flag on the First Amendment. But you may also burn a flag to dispose of it. So, there are a couple of ways of disposing of a flag. When a flag is tattered or worn... So, it is a rectangle, and when the ends fray you can hem it so you can get some more life out of it. But when it starts really falling apart or the colors really fade, you can cut it up so it's no longer a flag. You cut out the canton so it's just the stripes and you just cut it up into little pieces and you can just throw it away because it's no longer a flag. Or you can ceremoniously burn it.

I know a lot of Veteran's groups and a few Scout groups will do it. So, if you have... You take your flag to your local flag shop, they may be able to take it to somebody, and it's usually folded and then placed on a fire and burned.

**Alie:** Oh! I was thinking you just toss it in like an old bath towel. But that makes more sense that you would do it ceremoniously.

**Tory:** Because it is a national symbol so you treat it with signs of respect. Even touching the ground, if you are somewhere and the flag falls down and you didn't mean for that, that's okay. But you don't want to drag the flag on the ground purposefully. You want to take care of this national symbol because you have to remember at the time... We use the term flag, but they were also known as standards or colors. So, when you were in a unit or you went to battle, it's not like you had... You didn't go to the flag store and buy 20 flags. No, you had *a* flag. You had your color guard who would protect the colors along with the color bearer or the color sergeant. And that was your rallying point, or your symbol of your unit or your nation. So, it was your *one* flag. You didn't have lots of flags around.

**Aside:** Back in the day, wars would be won or lost based on the flag. If someone snatched your flag, you lost the war. Hence, the game Capture the Flag. So, if you are a person who's like, "Mmmn... It's just a piece of fabric. Everyone just chill out," (i.e. me, Alie Ward), I guess you have to see it in the context of a bunch of dead people to whom these colorful tablecloths meant they had new overlords.

**Alie:** And now, what do you think of people who put American flags on their cars around 4th of July or after September 11th? Did you ever see that? Do guys have that here?

**Tory:** Yes. Why not do that more often?

**Alie:** Yeah. I'm wondering about that. I mean, this is... Super side note: After September 11th, I remember I did a road trip and I happened to go to Las Vegas to meet up with some people from work. That's beside the point. I kept seeing these flags on the side of the road in tumbleweeds. So, I started to pull over and get them because I thought it was so interesting that they were just being shed from cars, like this patriotism was just sloughing off.

**Tory:** They fell off the cars?

**Alie:** Yeah. And so, I would see one up ahead. I would see the red in a bush or a tumbleweed, and I'd ["rrrr" *brakes screeching noise*]. I had a Miata at the time, and I'd ["rrrr"] – so dangerous – and then I'd go out, and I'd grab the flag, and then I had a sharpie and I'd mark where I got it from and the date, and then I would roll it up and put it all together. And I did it... It's been 18 years since September 11th and I think I have like 50 or 100 flags, and they're from all over the country, from just driving and being like, "Oh there's one!" And I've missed so many because it would have been so dangerous.

**Tory:** So, it's like you're a vexillologist.

**Alie:** It's like I'm a vexillologist! And I want to put them up somewhere. But it's interesting to me how they're different textures, different amounts of tattered. But I wondered how a vexillologist felt about automotive ones, if they're prone to falling off? Is that like, "Yay, you're flying it?" Or "Oh no, you're endangering it?"

**Tory:** Well, I do like having a flag on a car, and there are those devices you can clip to your window. But there is also a protocol for attaching it to vehicles.

**Alie:** Really? What is it?

**Tory:** So, you don't see it too often anymore. But there was a time you would actually have a post physically mounted to the front bumper of your car so it's very, very secure. And the flag would be on there and the flag is not just stapled to the... it's actually well attached to the post so you could drive around with the flag on the vehicle.

**Alie:** Almost like a presidential motorcade situation?

**Tory:** Correct.

**Alie:** I feel like that's the only time I've seen one like that, like on a Presidential limousine.

**Tory:** And I have seen it on like Flag Officers.

**Aside:** Let's switch gears from automotive to global ones. Guess how many countries there are in the world? Before I googled this, today, I was like, "One thousand, four million." I had no idea. There are 195, which means there are 195 country flags you can memorize to impress people. My nephew did this, he was 7. We were all very impressed. Now, what do you do if you don't have a brain as sharp as a 7-year-old?

**Alie:** I bet that there are flashcards where you can flash a card and have to guess... There's gotta be a parlor game.

**Tory:** That was more common in the 19th century. You'd have... You remember cigarette cards? You'd have cigarette cards with flags on them and you could carry these around and be like, "Oh, I know what that flag looks like," or "I know what this flag looks like."

**Alie:** [*giggling*] Back in the daaaayy! I think there's gotta be a parlor game.

**Aside:** Did I look this up? Of course. Is there one? Of course. Flags of the World is a board game you can play guessing the flappers of countries and The Board Game Kaptain on YouTube provided a 25-minute video tutorial and a review.

[*clip from YouTube video*]

*Player 1: "The first clue says, 'Over 90% of the population are Albanians in this country, which lies north of Macedonia.'"*

*Player 2: "Is it Kosovo?"*

*Player 1: "Correct!"*

So, if you want to get good at flags, get your mitts on Flags of the World. I did notice that it's for people 8 years and up, and I'm sure that my 7-year-old nephew would kick all of our asses and just hand them back to us on a platter, and we would be impressed.

**Alie:** Did you ever play flag football?

**Tory:** I did play flag football.

**Alie:** Were you like, "I'm only using American and Hawaiian flags?"



**Tory:** *[laughs]* Well you have to remember, the term 'flag' doesn't have to be these symbols. It can also be utilitarian. Like flag football, sprinkler flags, the checkered flag. They have other meanings and they're more utilitarian. Semaphore flags.

**Alie:** What about surrender flags?

**Tory:** That's more of a utilitarian tool because it didn't stand for anybody. It was just a white flag.

**Alie:** Was that just someone taking gauze off and...

**Tory:** It could be anything. If you have to surrender, you use whatever you have.

**Alie:** "Someone take your underpants off! I've gotta wave something here!"

Can I ask you questions from listeners?

**Tory:** Sure.

**Aside:** But before we unfurl your questions, a few words from sponsors of the show who make it possible to make a donation to a charity of each ologist's choosing. And this week, Tory said he'll go with Connecting to Collections Care, a program under the American Institute for Conservation that provides resources to those individuals and institutions working with collections, and it helps smaller cultural institutions provide well-informed care for valuable collections. So, it's supported by the Foundation for Advancement and Conservation, which seeks to increase understanding of our global, cultural heritage and that donation is made possible by the following sponsors that I like very much.

*[Ad Break]*

There'll be a link in the show notes to that non-profit and the sponsors. Okay, on to your flag inquiries.

**Alie:** Okay.

**Tory:** This is exciting!

**Alie:** 105 questions about flags. People have been wanting this one for a whiiiiille! Jack asked: Isle of Man, what's going on there? I have no idea what he's talking about.

**Tory:** The Isle of Man, I believe, is the only flag with a triskele. It's a three-extended device on a field of red.

**Alie:** A three extended device?

**Tory:** Like how you have... a cross would be four extensions. It would actually have three extensions.

**Alie:** Ooohh!

**Tory:** I'm trying to remember if it's arms or legs.

**Alie:** How did they get permission to do that?

**Tory:** I believe it goes back to heraldry because those limbs are a heraldic device.

**Alie:** *[shocked whisper]* Oh my god!

**Aside:** I was like, "The fuck is this flag?" So I looked it up, and the Isle of Man is an island right smack between Ireland and England, just floating between them like an only child of a divorced couple. And according to our friend Werkerpedia, it is a self-governing British crown dependency. Its flag is red with three armored knight's legs smack in the middle just

like a wheel of disembodied legs that have found each other and formed a new terrifying entity that loves jogging.

But just when you think that's weird, like a human centipede made of robo-legs, you get a gander at Sicily's flag, which is the same leg configuration but naked and with a face in the middle that looks like if Barbie got stoned and went to Olive Garden. They also tossed in a pair of angel wings and some leafy dongs.

You thought flags were boring, didn't you? Hell no. People light 'em on fire, they die for them, they have grassy-looking dicks on them. So many of you wanted to know why they even exist. Like, for example, Taryn Fernacz, Jack, Steph, Juliebear, Heather Dekle, Erica, Ellen Voss, Holly Andrews, Deli Dames, aaannd...

**Alie:** Jam Cruz, first-time question-asker, says: Was there a specific moment when flags became a specific thing for every country?

**Tory:** Well, that's a good question because I'd say flags and their use go back to Babylonia, and the Romans used them in different styles and different ways. Pennants and gonfalons, those were used. But I think, probably – and this is just my opinion – with the United Nations, the League of Nations, and then the Olympics was where you needed something to rally behind. Politically, not necessarily for military. So, I think flags really became more popular and more visible. And it's at the Olympics where you actually saw duplication. There would be times where the country had almost the same flag or sometimes the same color.

**Alie:** Oh, embarrassing!

**Tory:** So, what do you do? You show up to the party with the same dress, what do you do?

**Alie:** Same gown at the Oscars! You gotta change it! Now, is that your favorite part of the Olympics? Are you *there* for the Opening Ceremonies?

**Tory:** I like the Opening Ceremonies.

**Aside:** Okay, mark your calendars for July 24th, 2020. Opening Ceremonies. Summer Olympics. Tokyo, Japan. Flag-a-palooza. There will be a quiz.

**Alie:** Hadley wants to know: Did you love the 'Fun with Flags' segment on *The Big Bang Theory*? [clip from *The Big Bang Theory*, Amy Farrah Fowler: "It's called Fun with Flags."]

**Tory:** I enjoyed it. It could have been expanded. [Alie laughs] We've been doing that for a while, so yes the "Fun with Flags" was enjoyable. Hi Hadley.

**Alie:** Oh, hi Hadley. [laughs] I just realized that. I was like, "That's Hadley!"

**Aside:** Hadley works at the Bishop Museum in Hawaii and introduced me to Tory. She is a peach. Now, the next topic was also on the minds of patrons Megan King and Aviva Elizabeth.

**Alie:** Zane Liebrum wants to know: Are there are any vessels out there that still fly the black Jolly Roger flag?

**Tory:** Yes.

**Alie:** Why do they do it? What is it?

**Tory:** Okay. So, people think of the Jolly Roger as the one and I've actually seen a Molly Roger. So, it's actually a cat-of-nine-tails and the skull has lipstick on it. A modern designer came up with the Molly Roger. But you have these pirate flags, and they were slightly different. I think Edward Teach had a skeleton and a heart. So, they actually had meanings but they were the

black flag of the pirates. And, not to endorse piracy, but there are those pirate ships that you can go party on. They fly the pirate flag.

**Alie:** And why did they have that Jolly Roger? Was that just a, “Oh shit, we’re here and we’re gonna mess your stuff up”? [*“So, watch out everyone.”*]

**Tory:** Well that was the way that ships communicated with each other. Sometimes a ship would fly a false flag to get in close. And when they attacked, then they would fly whatever flag they’re flying under. So privateers... Remember, privateers were the legal pirates and then you had pirates.

**Alie:** Oh, I didn’t know that privateers were legal pirates.

**Tory:** So, a pirate would be raiding other ships, and a privateer was somebody raiding for their country under... They were sanctioned.

**Alie:** Ugh. So they were just thieves. And then they were just like, “I’m thieves for my country.” [*whispering*] Wow.

**Tory:** Privateers.

**Alie:** So, what do you think of false flag conspiracy theories?

**Tory:** False flag conspiracy theories?

**Alie:** Ugh. I’ll put in an aside here.

**Aside:** Some people think that some tragedies are inside jobs. Like, for example, the fleshy embodiment of human conflict, *InfoWars* host Alex Jones, for a long time denied that mass shootings such as Sandy Hook were real. Saying it was a “giant hoax.” Now he has since admitted in a deposition that those assertions were a “form of psychosis where I basically thought everything was staged, even though I’m learning a lot of things aren’t staged.”

Now, the term ‘false flags’ comes from pirate ships flying other countries’ flags during attacks and that misled their victims in terms of “who’s to blame for this?” But pirates and conspiracy theorists aside, some false flags apparently have totally existed. The conflict that led us into the Vietnam War, the Gulf of Tonkin Conflict in the mid-’60s that was used to justify US involvement in the Vietnam War, turns out, part of that attack on US Naval ships was an outright fabrication.

Now, a less super serious issue. How ugly are city flags? Again, Roman Mars’s TED Talk, illuminating as hell. It made me look up the LA city flag which features these zigzag bands of color. There’s green, gold, and red, with the city seal just plunked right in the middle. In a 2015 *Time Out* article titled “We Need to Talk about the Los Angeles City Flag,” this flag was described as a “Rastafarian clipart nightmare.”

Can we switch it up, I wondered? Can a city built on a culture of before and after photos change its flag? I am not the only concerned citizen with this question, as patrons including Sarah Terry, Jessica Friz, Ezra, Caroline Schmiechen, Dorian Gray, Meghan McLean, Christopher Rougeux, Leanna, Ira Gray, and Todd Peterson all wanted to know.

**Alie:** Schmitt Thompson wants to know: How best should folks go about trying to update a bad city flag? Are grassroots movements like the People’s Flag of Milwaukee common?

**Tory:** Well, I actually have a listing of American city flags, and there was a TED Talk a while ago, and I got a few flag queries about my city flag where I work. And I have to say, there are a few cities that have changed their flags.

**Alie:** [*surprised*] Realllyy?

**Tory:** Yes. I have heard... I believe Sacramento was one in the last few years where they actually changed the city flag and they had a contest. And surprisingly, there are a lot of contests that go back to these flags even for a hundred or so years, to have contests to submit designs and they get reviewed and approved. And so, yes you could go about changing your city flag, or municipality, or locality. Some of them don't have any so you could propose one. Say you go before your local council or committee and propose a flag.

**Alie:** Make some noise!

**Tory:** Yeah. The Honolulu flag is one of those that was considered not-so-nice because they just took the city seal and stuck it on a field of yellow, but specifically 'ilima yellow because that's the island flower. But you could do something else like use, maybe, some heraldic device, or if there's a landmark, or a bird, or a flower and incorporate that into your flag. I have to agree with some of the people on that TED Talk. If you're going to put text on your flag, it's probably not a great flag.

**Alie:** Oh. Good call. You should be able to say it in imagery, perhaps.

**Tory:** Right, the iconography of the flag.

**Alie:** Iconography! Good call. There's a show called *Community*, and they had a flag made for their school but it looked like an asterisk but it wasn't well received.

**Tory:** I've heard of the show but I haven't watched it.

**Aside:** It features a large pink asterisk. [*in a deeper voice*] It looks like a butt hole. [*clip from Community: "You know, this is classic Greendale. That place deserves an anus flag."*]

**Alie:** Natalia Cruz-Aguayo asks: How do you feel about the current kneeling-versus-standing for the flag debate in the US and do you personally believe that flags should be respected?

**Tory:** I believe the flag should be respected because it is our.... The US flag is our national symbol. So, we should respect it. If you're in the military, you render honors or salute. I try and stand whenever it is and you should face the flag or where the music is coming from. The civilian salute is the hand over your heart or take off your hat. I think respect should be given to the flag; it is our national symbol. So, there are other ways of expressing other actions. At least for our national symbol, we all should stand behind.

**Aside:** Different people have different views on this. In America, some people feel the flag has been kinda re-appropriated as a symbol of nationalism and nostalgia for a time when people had fewer personal freedoms. So, I think to use it to amplify the voices of people seeking the freedom this nation was founded on *is* a respectful means to an end. You may disagree, that's okay too. Anyway, I changed the subject to hands over hearts, specifically mine.

**Alie:** I got my hand stuck in an escalator when I was four and I have terrible scars on my right hand. It's fine now, but at the time I was pretty stoked that I always knew which hand to put over my heart. Because I was four so I was like, "Which one do I put??" then I was like, "Yeah, it's the one with the scars!" And so then I could always tell my hands apart. I wouldn't recommend getting your hand stuck in an escalator though. There are better ways of figuring it out.

Let me see, oooh! Ashley Herbel has a great question: With space exploration expanding, should we have an official Earth flag to represent ourselves when we find other life?

**Tory:** There are Earth flags out there.

**Alie:** Whaaaaat?! What are they?

**Tory:** There are actually several. There hasn't been one that's been approved or recognized by everyone. There are, like, SETI flags, and then you have the Earth Day flag, which has a picture of the Earth on it. There's another one I like, which was developed in the US, where you actually just have an arc of yellow that represents the sun, and then little dots for the planets, and then a large one that represents the Earth. So, there are other science flags out there. Some of them are geometric patterns with different colors to represent the arrangement of Earth and the Solar System. But there are planetary flags out there already.

**Alie:** Now, do you fly them on Earth Day? Do you fly an Earth Day flag?

**Tory:** So, I have one of these science Earth flags and I will fly it on days related to science.

**Alie:** Reeaaaally? What other science days are there?

**Tory:** I'm trying to remember. There was a walk for science, I think. Maybe I had Madame Curie's birthday, or maybe when the Nobel awards go out. Or maybe the Voyager Probe anniversary or something like that, I'd fly that flag.

**Alie:** Man, I'm gonna start having to get flags now.

**Aside:** Did you know that National Moth Week is the last week of July? Because now you do. I just went to see if there are any moth-themed flags out there and, sadly, no. But it does seem the perfect time to fly a woolen flag that's been moth-eaten. A moth buffet of freedom and fibers.

**Alie:** Meredith Loy wants to know: Is there any significance in countries that have flags of similar patterns and the same colors but in a different order? Like France versus Paraguay, Belgium versus Germany, etc.?

**Tory:** Well you have a lot of those, you could say, "Old World" flags where they really are established and based on national colors so they're very, very simple. Those are older flags as opposed to some of the modern flags where you have a little more modern iconography on it. So you have, like, the Scandinavian Cross, like all the countries of Scandinavia, it's that same cross pattern in different colors.

**Aside:** Why do so many Scandinavian countries have that Nordic cross motif? I was like, "Hmmm, this is gonna be some old, good Viking shit. Like maybe where the land intersects with the sea or the latitude of the summer sun." But no. It's just a straight-up Christianity symbol. So what about flags that look like Neapolitan ice cream?

**Tory:** You know, it's like the tricolor. You have the French tricolor. You have Ireland and Italy's. It's basically using national colors just on a flag.

**Alie:** Oh! Okay. So it's just kinda like, "Hey we're cousins." A little bit?

**Tory:** Or the flags are old enough we just needed a couple of colors on it.

**Alie:** *[laughs]* Back when it was so simple.

**Tory:** Back in the day when we just needed one or two colors on the flag and it was just one color or two colors.

**Alie:** Vendretta wants to know if you have a least favorite US state flag?

**Tory:** A least favorite US state flag... Well, there are a few that are just fields of blue with the coat of arms of the state on it and the date. They're not as engaging as some of the colorful ones with hidden iconography.

**Aside:** I wasn't going to look this up, but I did on a whim. Holy shit. Look up all the state flags in the United States. So many are a seal on a field of blue. Like, take a page out of Ohio's book! Make something weird! Or Oregon. Oregon has a front *and* a back. There's a cartoon beaver chilling on a log in the back just like, [*high pitched voice*] "Hiiiiii." New Mexico, a bright golden yellow with a red sun motif to honor Pueblo roots. Hell yeah! Maryland's flag looks like a jumble of wallpaper swatches or a magic eye poster. But I respect the daring of it.

Those are all dos. A don't? I'm looking at you, Mississippi, with a Confederate flag in your canton. So Mississippi's flag, dating back to 1894, some have called state-sanctioned hate speech. And it continues to fly. There's a Mississippi-born artist named Laurin Stennis and she's proposed a new design. It's cleaner visually, emotionally, but numerous bills to make it the new state flag have failed. Mississippi, can you do me a solid? Get this shit together. It's 2019. [*echoing voice*] Get the Confederate flag out of your canton.

**Alie:** Bee Wilson says: So recently found that pledging allegiance to a flag is sort of an American thing and as a kid I always felt really weird doing it. Now, I feel like a lot of other people do too so I don't feel so weird. Essentially, in terms of flag history, especially globally, are there any other countries that pledge allegiance to a flag?

**Tory:** Oh, that's a good question. I do know there are other national anthems, some with words, some without words, some a little more long, and some a little short. I'm not familiar with other pledges.

**Aside:** PS you know the "under God" part? That was added much later. You can thank President Dwight Eisenhower, who just wanted to toss it in because he thought it would freak out communists. That's a fun thing to talk about at dinner with your new girlfriend's parents, get into it!

**Alie:** A few people asked: Where's the purple?

**Aside:** Those people's names I will now say with my mouth. They are Jack, Helene Rousset, and Samantha E.

**Alie:** Why aren't there more... "Why is there a lack of purple?" asks Samantha E.

**Tory:** In flags? Well, remember purple was the royal color, and so... how many monarchies do we have running a country?

**Alie:** Ooohhh! So it still would be a symbol of royalty?

**Tory:** Yes. If you go to a ren-faire and you're wearing purple, the queen might pick on you.

**Alie:** Really?

**Tory:** Yes.

**Alie:** Because you should not be wearing that color.

**Tory:** You're wearing purple.

**Alie:** Oh my god! Good to know.

**Tory:** So, purple is *the* royal color.

**Alie:** I don't wanna get hazed by a ren-faire queen! That sounds like a nightmare. She'll have your head on a stick or throw Pepsi on you.

**Tory:** And get your turkey leg.

**Alie:** *[laughs]*

**Aside:** Quick aside. Why was purple such a royal color? Well, because it was expensive as hell. It was gathered from mollusk shells. So Queen Elizabeth I [the first] wouldn't even allow non-royals to wear it.

Now, one flag that's purple is, the Native American and First Nation, Iroquois Confederacy. It features a string of four boxes with a tree in the middle, and it's flown to represent unity with other tribes. Now, why is it purple? Also mollusks. It's based on a wampum belt made from shell beads. Now, vexillology, malacology, all up in each other's history. Conchology is the study of shells, should I do it? Shell yeah.

Also, side note. Iroquois is the name given to the tribe by colonists, but they call themselves the Haudenosaunee, which is a way more beautiful word.

This next question is about a flag that looks like two triangle pennants on top of each other. Just, like, gives no fucks about being a rectangle and instead represented mountains, and later, two prominent religions in the region. A bunch of people asked about it, including first-time question-asker Kelty, Liv Shaffer, Todd Peterson, Shaun McGregor, and Graham Tattersall.

**Alie:** Szilard Gyalay wants to know: Why is Nepal's flag so cool?

**Tory:** That is a cool flag.

**Alie:** What's the deal?

**Tory:** So, basically it looks like stacked triangles. It's very, very tall, or long. It's not square. And so, that is a country where you have prayer flags or pennants being flown so it's very similar to something you may have had previously, before what's known as modern flags. I've opined that it could be an adaptation of that.

**Alie:** Nathan-Andrew Leaflight asked a question, I feel like a lot of people probably have this question.

**Aside:** Aviva Elizabeth also asked it.

**Alie:** Are there official guidelines for fly flags at half-mast and who is empowered to make that decision?

**Tory:** Yes. So, there are guidelines. It's in the flag code and there are specific days that you fly a flag at half-mast, like Memorial Day. And then to fly a flag at half-mast or half-staff... Masts are for ships and staffs are on the ground. It has to come from an executive order of the President. So that would dictate all US flags in the country. And subsequently that would be state flags and municipality flags because the American flag is always the highest.

**Alie:** How long are they supposed to stay down?

**Tory:** That depends on the executive order. So the executive order that goes out would go for the time period; usually a day, or the weekend, or a week. But, for sitting politicians – I'd have to double-check this – but I think if a President dies in office, the flags are at half-mast for 30 days.

**Alie:** Wow! 30 days.

**Tory:** And then it goes down from there.

**Alie:** Oohh. That's if a President dies in office?

**Tory:** Correct.

**Alie:** [*quietly*] What if the country's not sad about it? [*"I'm just kidding, that's... It's a joke."*]  
Just kidding. [*laughs*]

**Tory:** I could check the Flag Code; I did bring it with me.

**Aside:** Ah! I kid, I kid. We all know that Vice Presidents are scarier anyway.

**Alie:** Deli Dames wants to know: What's the oldest flag that you know of?

**Tory:** The oldest flag I know of? Well, there are – in existence, I don't know in existence, but I do know that in Babylonia, they would have standards, poles, and they would have tablets on them, and then later on the Roman legions would have a staff, and it may have streamers on it, but it would have devices. So, how we have the eagle on the top of the flagpole, they may have an eagle, or another bird, or some other symbol that denoted that unit or that leader. The oldest flag in existence? I don't know what the oldest flag in existence is right now. But flags do go back millennia.

**Alie:** Dang!

**Aside:** Hello, Scotland! Your flag was established in the literal Dark Ages, 832 to be exact. It's just a blue field with a big white X, representing the crucified St. Andrew. [*high pitch voice*] Cheery!

**Alie:** P Tuscadero wants to know: Who invented semaphore codes? How is that done? Do you know anything about semaphores?

**Tory:** You know, I learned semaphore in Boy Scouts.

**Alie:** Oh, you did?!

**Tory:** Yes. So, besides the heraldry shop my mom worked at, I was in the Boy Scouts, and I was in the Civil Air Patrol, and I did enjoy being on color guard detail. So, I don't know how far back semaphore goes. I know they were very popular in the early 20th century.

**Aside:** A semaphore, side note, is when someone holds two flags, moves them around to different positions to make different letters to spell out words. So just think, you could destroy someone by signaling an F and a U. Or you could make their day by adding an N. Fun! Fun with flags.

**Tory:** And it's almost like reading a clock, so depending on where the hands are, notate what the letter is.

**Alie:** Is it like texting but with your arms?

**Tory:** Yes.

**Alie:** And do you use short codes? Or do you spell out everything?

**Tory:** You would spell out words or clipped words. Sometimes you would clip out maybe a vowel or something. So you cross the flags to start a sentence or a word, and then you spell out the word or use a number sign, and then you wave the flags to end it. Kinda like Morse code.



**Alie:** Yeah. Oh my gosh. Was it hard to learn? How long did it take you?

**Tory:** I don't remember. That was a while ago. But I still have a semaphore set in my flag collection, though.

**Alie:** Do you think if someone tried to semaphore you a message, you would be able to decode it?

**Tory:** I'd probably only get SOS.

**Alie:** [laughs] Well that's the most important one. ["It doesn't look like an SOS."] Do flag nerds know each other?

**Tory:** I know there's two others on the island. We do know each other. One actually owns a flag shop and the other one is a professor at a local university.

**Alie:** Did you ever think you could do this for part of your job?

**Tory:** No.

**Alie:** No? [laughs] Now, what is something about flags that's annoying? Or what is a part of your job dealing with flags that sucks?

**Tory:** I get a lot of the repetitive questions. So it's like, "Okay we have two or three flags, where do they go?" It's like, "Okay, the American flag is always on its right, the viewer's left. It goes on its right." Some of these very, very basic things that people ask me. And I do get upset when I see flag poles getting used for holding up banners or other signs.

**Alie:** You're like, "Get that windsock outta here! What is this fish windsock on the flagpole?!"

**Tory:** Well, I don't want to see the banner promoting the festival on the weekend. Put it on the side or something don't put it on the flagpole.

**Alie:** Now, what is the thing you love the most about your job, or your life as a vexillologist? Or about flags!

**Tory:** It's just a bit of history and to recognize what's been in the past and use some kind of visible symbol to recognize those dates. I have a good job, I think.

**Alie:** Do you think you have an old soul or you were born in the wrong era? Because you seem to have such a nod and a flair for things vintage. Do you ever feel like maybe you're a ghost that was born into modern times?

**Tory:** That has been said of me. I've been working in the museum field for over 25 years now. I did work at one site where we did living history. So, yes I am not a stranger to living history or period clothing, particularly the 19th century, and I do enjoy a good period history event. And it's a more gentler time, with etiquette and protocol.

**Alie:** Do you think in the future we're just going to use space holograms for flags?

**Tory:** I don't know about holograms, but you know how retro is becoming more popular? Maybe we'll regress a little bit.

**Alie:** I love that you're keeping the past alive by continuing to make it cool because *you're* cool. Thank you so much for doing this. I loved this.

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So ask well-dressed and informed people stupid questions because there's weird trivia flying right over our heads all the time. You might as well ask about it. We're all going to die, go for it. Ask questions.

Now, for more info on flags, NAVA.org is a great resource. You can find a local vexillological club. Let your nerd flag fly.

We are @Ologies on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#). I'm [@AlieWard](#) on [both](#). Links to all of that plus the cause of the week and sponsors are always in the show notes. *Ologies* merch is available at [OlogiesMerch.com](#), including some new stickers. Hot damn! Yes, we have stickers. Thank you Boni Dutch and Shannon Feltus for managing that. Thanks to Erin Talbert and Hannah Lipow for adminning the wonderful Ologies [Facebook Group](#). Hello to the Ologies Podcast Subredditors out there, too. Thank you Assistant Editor Jarrett Sleeper of the mental health podcast *My Good, Bad Brain*. And of course, the jolliest of the Rogers, Steven Ray Morris, for Betsy Rossing all the pieces together each week. Steven also hosts *The Purrrcast* about kitties and *See Jurassic Right* about dinos. Both wonderful podcasts. Nick Thorburn wrote and performed the theme music, he's in the band Islands, which is a very good band.

Now, if you stick around to the end of the episode, you know I tell you a secret. And this week's secret is that this episode was *so hard* to make. There's so much political history, and colonist bullshit, and painful stuff when it comes to something that seems just as simple as flags. So, thanks for waiting an extra week for this. I'm recording this on the morning of my parents' 50th anniversary. We're going to go celebrate it and I'm down in their downstairs recording it really quick to send to Steven. And then I'm taking the rest of the weekend off to celebrate with them.

And the other secret I will tell you is that I moved into a new house about four months ago and I have not yet bought a garbage can. I've just been hanging a garbage bag from a cabinet knob. For four months! I keep meaning to go to Bed Bath & Beyond and just blow through the stack of coupons I've been hoarding. So, I swear I will do that this week... probably.

Also, y'all, I feel like I've told you this but those Bed Bath & Beyond coupons, they don't really expire. So just take yours out of your neighbor's trash. Put them in your glove compartment. That way, you're like, "Oh! I've gotta stop there!" Use them whenever you want! 20% off you guys! I'm here to help.

Okay. Next week, a chemistry episode that draws on the spells of Harry Potter. Potterology is up next week. Are you ready for it? Probably not. It's going to rule.

Okay. Berbye

*Transcribed by Brian Davis, Outer Space-Loving Office Drone.*

### **Some links which may be of interest:**

A donation went to: [Connecting to Collections](#) via [CulturalHeritage.org](#)

[LA city flag: "a Rastafarian clipart nightmare"](#)

[Guidon](#) vs. [Gonfalons](#) vs. [Granfaloons](#)

[Kahiki Tiki in Columbus, OH](#)

[Guam's flag](#)

[Girl Scouts badges](#)

[Veterans cremating flag](#)

[Good flag, Bad flag: how to design one](#)

[Is it illegal to desecrate the flag? Nah.](#)

[Gregory Lee Johnson, old school flag-burner](#)

[Roman Mars's fabulous vexilological TED Talk](#)

[Russell Means](#)

[Flag terminology](#)

[Mexico's flag: Beautiful and hard to draw](#)

[Mexican flag backstory](#)

[Flag code](#)

[State flags](#)

[Flag poems that are not from the Elks?](#)

[Meaning of the American flag's colors](#)

[Betsy Ross controversy](#)

["On the fly" idiom etymology](#)

[CRW Flags](#)

[Hawaiian Flag history](#)

[TMT \(Thirty Meter Telescope\) protests in Hawaii](#)

[Ohio flag necklace](#)

[Flags of the World Game Review by the Game Captain](#)

[Nordic Cross Flags](#)

[False Flags/Alex Jones](#)

[Stennis flag to \(hopefully\) replace Mississippi's Confederate canton](#)

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