THE AMERICAN LEGION
Veterans Strengthening America
NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS
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Suggested Remarks for Flag Day 2023

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Fellow Americans and American Legion Family members,

Flag Day 2023 is a milestone. Exactly one hundred years ago, on June 14, 1923, The American Legion led 68 other civic organizations for a gathering at Memorial Continental Hall in Washington, D.C.

The gathering had an important purpose, one that still resonates today. At 9:30 am, Colonel Garland W. Powell, National Director of Americanism for The American Legion, called the conference to order. After a benediction from a bishop, Powell introduced the first guest speaker – Warren G. Harding, president of the United States.

Harding spelled out the purpose of the meeting. “I hope you succeed in formulating a code that will be welcomed by all Americans and that every patriotic and educational society in the Republic will commit itself to the endorsement and observance and purpose of the code that you adopt here today,” the president said.

The National Flag Conference of 1923 accomplished Harding’s goal. In two days, the assembly drafted 15 rules for the proper use and care of the U.S. flag. Two states made flag code instruction required curriculum in their public schools. Congress would later adopt the code into public law. While it remains federal law, violations carry no civil or criminal penalties.

Punishment and shame were never the purposes of the U.S. Flag Code. It is about education. Those who are most likely to fly the American Flag, genuinely wish to do so in a respectful and dignified manner. Through its guidelines, the code brings consistency and nobility to the majestic display of our nation's most visible symbol.

While the Flag Conference and its resulting code led The American Legion to become the nation's leading educator and authority on flag etiquette, Flag Day itself has roots dating back to the founding of the Republic.

It was the Second Continental Congress that passed a resolution on June 14,1777, which stated, "That the flag of the thirteen United States be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be thirteen white five-pointed stars in a blue field, representing a new constellation."

The date chosen for the original flag resolution was especially fitting given that the new nation was celebrating the second birthday of America's continental Army. The U.S. flag would become and remain a symbol of service and pride for millions of veterans.

Sergeant William Carney was one of many veterans who would bleed for the flag. A member of the 54th Massachusetts Colored Infantry, Carney fought valiantly at Fort Wagner, South Carolina during the Civil War. When the color sergeant went down, Sergeant Carney grabbed the flag, led the way to the parapet and planted it. When the troops fell back, he again carried the flag through the fierce fire and was wounded four times.

Sergeant Carney became the first Black recipient of the Medal of Honor, and it was awarded for his defense of the flag.

Even though America was not perfect for Black people like Sergeant Carney, the flag represented the perfect union that those who fought for it hoped it would become.

Legendary labor leader Samuel Gompers shared his view of the flag during the 1923 conference.
“To us,” he said, and I quote, “the American flag means more than even its colors portray. It means the leadership of the democratic and humane struggle that has been carried on through all the ages. It is a struggle that continues to this day. And it is for this reason that we must continue to wave the flag at every opportunity.” – unquote.

There is no single answer as to what the American flag means. During the century since the flag conference, well-meaning patriots have adopted respectful traditions that appear to run contrary to the Flag code.

It is for this reason that The American Legion urges Congress to pass modifications to the code, which would include additional days to encourage the flying of Old Glory, permitting flag patches to be worn on military and first responder uniforms and being able to carry the flag horizontally for patriotic effect.

Respect for the flag should not be limited to Flag Day or Americanism month. The Preamble to the Constitution of The American Legion does not call on Legionnaires to “foster and perpetuate a 100 percent Americanism” only when it is easy.

We salute the flag out of affection and pride not because we fear a tyrannical boot if we don't.

Flag Day is not just about reflecting on the past; it is also about looking to the future. It is a time to recommit ourselves to the ideals and principles that our flag represents. It is a reminder that we must always strive to be a nation that embraces unity, justice and freedom.

The flag brought us inspiration during the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, much like it did during World War II when the Marines famously raised it under withering battle on Iwo Jima. The medal presentations at the Olympics are another venue in which our nation's flag often plays a starring role.

The 1968 Olympics in Mexico City were no exception. Protests and political unrest in the United States made the flag an unpopular symbol for many Americans. Desecration was common and patriotic displays sometimes despised. One Olympian would have none of it.

He was a 19-year-old boxer from Houston, Texas, who won the gold medal by knocking out his Soviet opponent. George Foreman, a future two-time heavyweight champion and grill entrepreneur, grasped a small American flag and waved it in the center of the ring after his victory.

“The only regret is that I didn’t have two flags to wave,” Foreman told The American Legion Magazine in 2013. “I mean because the country hasn’t only been great for me, but I have grandkids now, and I want to show them how great it is.” – unquote.

Millions of viewers worldwide needed no convincing. They had seen the flag many times before as they were liberated from fascist, tyrannical and communist regimes. For them, the flag wasn’t just a symbol of the United States. It was – and remains today – a symbol of freedom.

Thank you, God bless America and God bless the flag of the United States. Long may it wave.