

The United States of America: The search for a national coat of arms

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So, you are a brand new country, having just declared your independence, wanting to make your own way in the world among the community of nations. And, naturally enough, you have decided that you want a new symbol of some sort to express your unique identity. So what do you do? If you are like most governments, historical and modern, you ... form a committee to look into the matter.

The First Committee

Late on the afternoon of July 4, 1776, the same date as the official date of the Declaration of Independence which had been adopted two days before, the Continental Congress of the newly-declared nation appointed three members of the committee of five which had drafted the Declaration (Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson), as follows:

"Resolved, That Dr. Franklin, Mr. J. Adams and Mr. Jefferson, be a committee, to prepare a device for a Seal for the United States of America."

Over the course of the next month, these three gentlemen considered several possible designs, and on August 20, 1776, presented to Congress their final design [Fig. 1]:

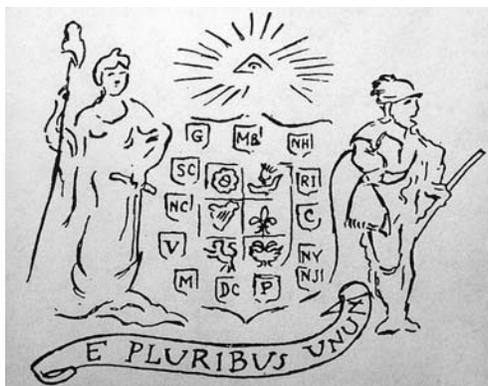


Figure 1

“The great seal should on one side have the arms of the United States of America, which arms should be as follows:

“The shield has six quarters, parti one, coupé two. The 1st Or, a Rose enameled gules and argent for England; the 2nd Argent, a Thistle proper for

Scotland; the 3d Vert a Harp Or for Ireland; the 4th Azure a Flower de luce Or for France; the 5th Or the Imperial Eagle Sable for Germany; and the 6th Or the Belgic Lion Gules for Holland, pointing out the countries from which these States have been peopled. The Shield within a border Gules entwined of thirteen Scutcheons Argent linked together by a chain or, each charged with the initial letters Sable, as follows: 1st M.B., 2nd N.H., 3d R.I., 4th C., 5th N.Y., 6th N.J., 7th P., 8th D.C., 9th M., 10th V., 11th N.C., 12th S.C., 13th G., for each of the thirteen independent States of America.”

The initials stood for: Massachusetts Bay, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware Chesapeake, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. With supporters (Liberty and Justice), a crest of the Eye of Providence in a radiant triangle, and the motto, *E Pluribus Unum*, “Out of many, one.”

Congress’ action on this proposal? The Journal of Congress entry dated August 27th, 1776, notes: “the committee appointed to prepare a device for the Great Seal of the United States, brought in the same with the explanation thereof. Ordered to lie on the table.” Apparently, like us, Congress was not impressed by the submitted design.

The Second Committee

Nearly four years later (well, admittedly, the Congress had other things on its mind, such as the fact that the Continental armies kept losing battles to the English regulars and Hessian mercenaries they were fighting), in March 1779 another committee was formed to look into the matter of a seal and coat of arms for the nation. The chairman was James Lovell of Massachusetts, and the other two members were John Morin Scott of New York and William Churchill Houston of New Jersey.

The committee sought the assistance of Francis Hopkinson, who had designed the new flag that Congress had adopted in 1777.

More than a year later, the committee delivered its report to Congress, on May 10, 1780: “On one side [of the Seal], the Arms of the United Sates, as follows: The Shield charged on the Field with 13 diagonal stripes alternate red and white.” The supporters were an armed warrior and Peace, and the crest was “a radiant constellation of 13 stars.” [Fig. 2]



Figure 2

Once again, Congress did not consider the second committee's proposal suitable, stating: "After debate the report was ordered to be recommitted to a new committee."

The Third Committee

The third committee was formed consisting of chairman Arthur Middleton of South Carolina, with John Rutledge (also of South Carolina) and Elias Boudinot of New Jersey.

Arthur Lee of Virginia replaced Mr. Rutledge early in the committee's deliberations. And as with the previous committee, they sought a consultant, and were directed to William Barton.

Only 28 years old (young and enthusiastic, I guess!), Barton had studied heraldry in England. Right away, he came up with a design that was far too complex for purposes of a seal.

I have not found a contemporary illustration of it, but this one is created from the blazon, which was: *Barry of thirteen pieces, Argent and Gules; on a Canton, Azure, as many stars disposed in a Circle, of the first; a Pale, Or, surmounted of another, of the third; charged, in Chief, with an Eye surrounded with a Glory, proper; and, in the Fess-point, an Eagle displayed on the Summit of a Doric Column which rests on the base of the Escutcheon, both as the stars.*

[Fig. 3]

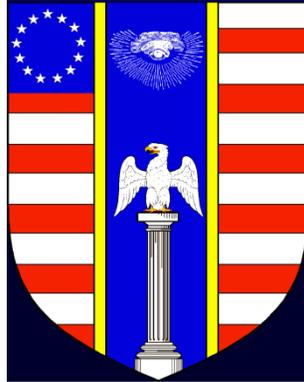


Figure 3

Apparently, not even the Committee thought it was a good design, and a few days later, Barton offered a second design, which the committee submitted to Congress on May 9, 1782. *Barry of thirteen pieces Argent & Gules; on a pale, Or, a Pillar of the Doric Order, Vert, reaching from the Base of the Escutcheon to the Honor point; and from the summit thereof, a Phoenix in Flames with Wings expanded, proper; the whole within a Border, Azure, charged with as many stars as pieces barways, of the first.* The supporters were a maiden representing the Genius of the American Confederated Republic and an American warrior. [Fig. 4]



Figure 4

As with the proposals from the previous two committees, Congress was not impressed.

The Final Design (or, A Committee of One. Well, okay, two.)

A month later, on June 13, 1782, Congress turned over Barton's design – along with the other two committees' designs – to Charles Thomson, and asked him to come up with a suitable “Device for an Armorial Atchievement and Reverse of a Great Seal for the United States in Congress Assembled.”

Aged fifty-three at the time, Thomson had served the previous eight years as Secretary of the Continental Congress, where he gained a reputation for fairness, truth, and integrity. A former Latin master at an academy in Philadelphia, he was well-versed in the classics.

With the reports and drawings of the three committees before him, he set about designing a seal incorporating what would become the arms of the United States.

Thomson incorporated symbolic elements from all three committees with ideas of his own to create a bold yet comparatively simple design. He made a sketch and wrote a description of his preliminary proposal, blazoned [Fig. 5]: On a field Chevrons composed of seven pieces on one side & six on the other, jointed together at the top in such wise that each of the six bears against or is supported by & supports two of the opposite side, the pieces of the chevrons on each side alternate red and white. The supporter was a single eagle displayed, wingtips inverted, holding in its dexter talon an olive branch and in its sinister a bunch of arrows. The “crest” was a constellation of stars surrounded with bright rays and clouds.



Figure 5

After consulting with the specialist consulted by the third committee, William Barton, the posture of the eagle was changed to "displayed" (with tips up) and the blue field and striped chevron on the shield was changed to the vertical white and red stripes and blue chief we see today. [Fig. 6]



Figure 6

The final design of the coat of arms, crest, supporter, and motto was a combination of elements provided by all three committees:

From the first committee

E Pluribus Unum

From the second committee

Thirteen red and white stripes and blue on shield

Constellation of 13 stars, surrounded by clouds and glory

War and peace theme, including olive branch and (on first draft) arrows

From the third committee

Eagle (though not a bald eagle)

From Charles Thomson

Overall design

Bald eagle

And from William Barton

Vertical stripes on shield

Position of eagle's wings

The official explanation of the symbolism of the achievement of arms was given by Charles Thomson upon presenting the final design for adoption by Congress. He wrote:

“The Escutcheon is composed of the Chief and the Pale, the two most honourable ordinaries. The thirteen pieces paly represent the several States in the

Union all joined in one solid compact entire, supporting a Chief which unites the whole and represents Congress. The Motto [E pluribus unum, out of many, one] alludes to this Union.

“The pales are kept united by the Chief and the Chief depends for its support upon that Union and the strength resulting from it to denote the Confederacy of the United States and the preservation of their Union by Congress.

“The colours of the pales are those used in the flag of the United States of America; White signifies purity and innocence; Red, hardiness and valour; and Blue, the colour of the Chief, signifies vigilance, perseverance and justice. The Olive branch and arrows denote the power of peace and war which is exclusively vested in Congress.

“The Constellation denotes a new State taking its place & rank among other sovereign powers.

“The Escutcheon is borne on the breast of an American Eagle without any other supporters to denote that the United States of America ought to rely on their own Virtue & not on foreign support.”

Thomson submitted this design to Congress and the Great Seal, including the arms on its obverse, was that same day “Passed June 20, 1782,” a little less than a year before the Treaty of Paris ending hostilities was signed in 1783.

And the United States of America has had a coat of arms since then.

Or Has It?

There have been quibbles about whether the United States even has a coat of arms as such. Until fairly recently, the Wikipedia article on the Great Seal of the United States did, and a number of different websites still do,¹ include the statements that “the United States has never adopted any national coat of arms,” and that “the image from the obverse of the great seal is often used informally as national arms” (emphasis added). I have been unable to find any authority or basis for that assertion, unless the author is arguing somehow that Congress did not intend for the shield on the obverse of the Great Seal to be the arms of the United States. Or perhaps the argument is that it needed to be a separate creation? I can find no authority for that

idea, either, and the history of the design, and its usage by the federal government since that time, indicate pretty clearly that Congress intended the shield and accompanying heraldic elements to be in fact the coat of arms of the nation.

The Blazon

The “official” blazon of the final, accepted design – *Paleways of 13 pieces, argent and gules; a chief, azure* – what we might less archaically blazon as *Paly of thirteen Argent and Gules a chief Azure*, has come under criticism nearly since its original publication until today.

Much of that criticism is based on English blazon practice, as summarized in James Parker’s *A Glossary of Terms Used in Heraldry*:

Paly: when the field is divided by perpendicular lines into an even number of equal parts, the first of which is generally a metal, and that last of a colour. An uneven number ... would be blazoned as of so many *pales*.

A difficulty with blazoning the arms of the United States in this manner is that the emblazon might not be reproduced accurately from the blazon. For example, this depiction [Fig. 7, below] of *Argent six pallets Gules a chief Azure* may reasonably closely follow that blazon, but it loses the symbolism of having thirteen equally wide stripes, representing the thirteen original states of the union.

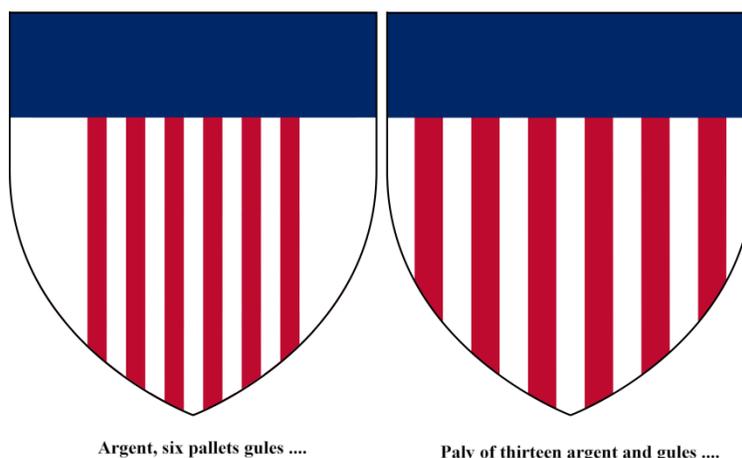


Figure 7

Then, too, as early as September 1786, in the *Columbian Magazine*, in “Remarks and Explanation” believed to be by William Barton, we find: “It is not consistent with the dignity of an imperial state, that its armorial insignia must necessarily be blazoned according to the general

rules of blazonry prescribed by heralds.” Or in other words, “It’s ours, and we can blazon it however we like. So there.” Not the most convincing argument, I believe, but there it is nonetheless.

And finally, as John Gibbon stated in 1682, a full century earlier, in his *Introductio ad Latinam Blasoniam*:

Foreigners make no matter, neither in Paly, Barry, nor Bendy, whether the pieces be even or odd, provided they be of an equal latitude.

So, naysayers of the Eighteenth – or the Twenty-First – Centuries to the contrary notwithstanding, it seems, to me at least, that *Paly of thirteen Argent and Gules a chief Azure* is an accurate and acceptable blazon for the arms of the United States, one which will permit a faithful reproduction of the emblazon by any heraldic artist who follows it.

Other Origins?

Just as there are those who will try to tell you that the flag of the United States was based on the family arms of George Washington (no matter that the historical evidence adequately demonstrates that it was pretty clearly derived on the earlier flag of the Honourable East India Company and the Grand Union flag), there are those will try to tell that the arms of the United States were based on some individual’s coat of arms.

As only one example, the website of the Belcher Foundation baldly states: “The U. S. Seal was probably derived from the Belcher coat of arms.”

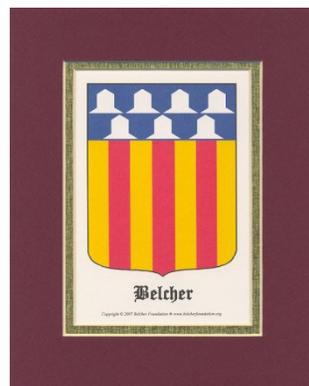


Figure 8

These arms [Fig. 8] were used by Jonathan Belcher as Governor of New Jersey in the mid-1700s, and he knew and was known by several members of the various committees

commissioned by Congress to design a coat of arms for the United States. As the Belcher Foundation website goes on to note:

“The Belcher coat of arms already had that pattern of symbolism: A ready-made template. All that was needed was to nearly double the number of pales from seven to thirteen, change gold to silver, and have a solid blue chief instead of one that was blue and white.”²

But as has often been noted, “correlation does not imply causation.”³ In other words, just because there are some superficial visual similarities between the two coats of arms, that does not mean that one of them is based upon the other one. Especially when there is nothing at all in the documentary history to indicate anything more than a very tenuous connection between the two.

Indeed, if one is going to give credence to the argument that the Belcher arms were the inspiration of the arms of the United States, you might as well say that the arms of de Salis de Pergamo from the 15th Century *Codice Carpani* [Fig. 9] inspired the arms of the United States arms, too, for the same sort of correlations that the Belcher Foundation is claiming, but I don’t think that any of us would give serious credence to that hypothesis.



Figure 9

Uses of the Arms by the Federal Government

The coat of arms and often the full achievement is used by itself by the United States government on letterhead, automobile license plates issued to foreign diplomats, and perhaps most noticeably in Europe, on the cover of passports issued to U.S. citizens.

It can also be found on some of the currency issued by the federal government. For example, the arms can be found on the reverse of the one dollar bill [Fig. 10], and on the back of

the recently redesigned penny [Fig. 11]. (Though here, as you can see, the Mint has added the motto to the chief.)



Figure 10



Figure 11

Use by the Executive Branch

Other uses of the arms by subdivisions of the federal government include the Executive branch, most notably in the seals of the President [Fig. 12] and Vice President, which can be found on the Presidential podium; on the President's official aircraft, Air Force One; and even carved into the ceiling of the President's office in the White House.



Figure 12

The arms can also be found as an element of, or inspiration for, numerous departmental seals and arms of various branches and offices of the executive branch of the federal government. Examples include:

The Department of State (adopted September 15, 1789) [Fig. 13]



Figure 13

In the Department of Commerce, the Civil Aeronautics Board, whose accident investigation powers were transferred to the National Transportation Safety Board in 1967, both of which agencies used a modified form of the national arms, as did the Federal Maritime Commission.

The Department of Justice [Fig. 14], and one of its subsidiary agencies, the Federal Bureau of Investigation [Fig. 15]. Here the arms of the FBI are clearly inspired by rather than incorporate the arms of the U.S.



Figure 14



Figure 15

Many branches and divisions of the Armed Forces of the United States incorporate the U.S. arms into their own. A few examples include:

The Department of Defense [Fig. 16]



Figure 16

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence incorporates the national arms in its seal, as does the National Security Agency, both in its original insignia as used in 1963, and in its current one [Fig. 17]. It is also used by those mocking the NSA, some going so far as to call it the “National Spying-on-You Agency” [Fig. 18].



Figure 18



Figure 17

In the armed forces of the United States, the Central and Northern Commands, two of the six theater-level Unified Combatant Commands of the Department of Defense, incorporate modified versions of the national arms in their emblems.

The U.S. Military Academy at West Point [Fig. 19] bases its insignia on the U.S. arms.



Figure 19

So does the Naval Criminal Investigative Service [Fig. 20], which may be also seen occasionally on the popular American TV series “NCIS.”



Figure 20

Even some individual ships in the U.S. Navy incorporate the arms of the United States in their individual insignia; here the USS Mobile Bay guided-missile cruiser. [Fig. 21]



Figure 21

Use by the Legislative Branch

The arms of the U.S. may also be found used in Legislative Branch of the federal government:

In the seal of the U.S. Congress [Fig. 22], and here, the arms of one-half of the Congress, the United States Senate [Fig. 23]; as well as in the arms of the Senate's President pro tempore.



Figure 22



Figure 23

Use by the Judicial Branch

The third, Judicial, branch of the government also makes use of the arms of the United States on the exterior and interior walls of U.S. courthouses [Fig. 24], and used by some of the United States District Courts, as can be found on their websites.



Figure 24

Other governmental entities which incorporate the arms of the United States, or some variation of them, include:

The States of Wisconsin [Fig. 25], Illinois [Fig. 26], Wyoming [Fig. 27], Missouri, Alabama, and Mississippi [Fig. 28] (where they've used 11 stripes and placed 11 stars on the

chief, possibly a reference to the short-lived Confederate States of America, which consisted of eleven states).



Figure 28



Figure 27



Figure 25



Figure 26

The national arms, or some variation of it, may also be found used in the arms and seats of cities as diverse as Chicago, Illinois [Fig. 29], Austin, Texas [Fig. 30], Santa Fe, New Mexico, [Fig. 31] and Winchester, Virginia.



Figure 29



Figure 30



Figure 31

The coat of arms of the United States, or variations of it, are used even by non-governmental groups, associations, and corporations with no direct ties to the federal government. Just a few of the many examples of these are: as you may have seen in the recent World Cup from Brazil, the US Soccer team [Fig. 32], the National Football League, the Boy Scouts of America, the National Rifle Association [Fig. 33], the United States Cycling Federation, USA Military Medals [Fig. 34], the Civilian Marksmanship Program, and the Union Pacific Railroad [Fig. 35].



Figure 35

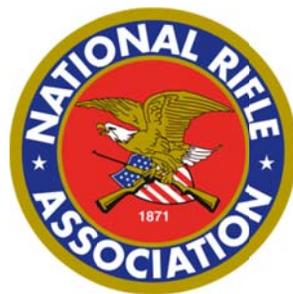


Figure 34



Figure 33



Figure 32

Woodmen Circle, the female auxiliary of the fraternal organization Woodmen of the World base their emblem on the arms of the United States (though they have changed the color of the chief to green and added their own emblems over the paly field) [Fig. 36].



Figure 36

And a lot of other folks who want you to know that their products are made in the USA by marking them with a reference the arms of the country. [Fig. 37]



Figure 37

You can even find the arms of the United States, or some variation of it, on clothing. For example, Sam's Town Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada has this item for sale, which as you can see, I couldn't resist buying for myself. [Fig. 38]



Figure 38

Conclusion

So there you have it. A new young nation decides it needs, as George Washington stated just a few years later, an “Armorial device to authenticate [its] official instruments.” Three separate committees, with three members on each committee, plus another individual, and two outside consultants, created multiple proposed designs over the course of six years, and finally, after all of that, the newly independent United States of America had a coat of arms. (I suspect that the College of Arms probably could have done it more quickly, but it was probably impolitic for these new rebels to ask the heralds in London to assist them with a grant of arms for their nation, don’t you think?)



Figure 39

Still, the final, and simplest, design has held up well in the ensuing two and a quarter centuries [Fig. 39], and the arms have, as I have tried to show here, found use not only as the emblem of the nation, but have been incorporated into the insignia of many branches of the government – federal, state, and local – of the nation. In addition, many non-governmental organizations and associations have incorporated the arms of the United States, or some variation of them, into their own logos and emblems as a means of demonstrating their origin in, and loyalty to, the nation.

Addendum

A question was asked at the Congress following this presentation regarding whether there was any legal protection for the arms of the United States. I noted at the time that the only legal protection for any arms that I knew of was for the symbol of the International Red Cross and for the arms of Switzerland, but that there were none for the arms of the United States.

Some additional research after returning home while preparing this presentation for inclusion in the Proceedings of the Congress led me to, not protection of the coat of arms itself, but for the Great Seal of the United States and a few others. U.S. Code Title 18, Part 1, Chapter 33, §713 is entitled “Use of likenesses of the great seal of the United States, the seals of the President and Vice President, the seal of the United States Senate, the seal of the United States House of Representatives, and the seal of the United States Congress,” and states in Part (a):

Whoever knowingly displays any printed or other likeness of the great seal of the United States, or of the seals of the President or the Vice President of the United States, or the seal of the United States Senate, or the seal of the United States House of Representatives, or the seal of the United States Congress, or any facsimile thereof, in, or in connection with, any advertisement, poster, circular, book, pamphlet, or other publication, public meeting, play, motion picture, telecast, or other production, or on any building, monument, or stationery, for the purpose of conveying, or in a manner reasonably calculated to convey, a false impression of sponsorship or approval by the Government of the United States or by any department, agency, or instrumentality thereof, shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than six months, or both.

So the coat of arms itself, alone, is not protected by law, but the full achievement – arms, eagle, motto, and crest – or other accompanying elements, and including the legend around each circular seal of the United States [Fig. 10 above], the President [Fig. 12 above], Vice President, Congress [Fig. 22 above], Senate [Fig. 23 above], and House of Representatives is protected, but only to the extent that you cannot give the impression that you are sponsored or approved by the U.S. government by the use of such seal.

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¹ http://www.bioreference.net/encyclopedia/wikipedia/g/gr/great_seal_of_the_united_states.html;
http://docs7.chomikuj.pl/305743974.PL.0.0.4_National_symbols_and_government.doc

² <http://www.belcherfoundation.org/seal.htm>

³ http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Correlation_does_not_imply_causation.html;
<http://www.fastcodesign.com/3030529/infographic-of-the-day/hilarious-graphs-prove-that-correlation-isnt-causation>