

While guidance in designing new flags is useful, it is incorrect to assume that if a flag fails to follow “rules of flag design” that makes it a “bad flag”, which should be replaced with a “correct design.” Many of the most successful national, state and local flags break the supposed rules of flag design while being recognizable, significant and beloved. These flags are often, if not most often, based on history rather than a snapshot of current thought. A flag brought up to date today may be out of date in the future.

I detailed a number of these successful flags that break the rules in an article published in December 2018 (John M. Hartvigsen, “Flag Design ‘Rules’: An Idea with Many Aspects” (*Vexillum* No. 4, December 2018), p. 15.).

- California: Has too many colors, has a shaded realistic figure (a bear) and lettering (CALIFORNIA REDPUBLIC). Nevertheless, it is very successful and beloved by Californians.
- Maryland: Too many colors, a complex design, and represents the heraldic arm of the Lords of Baltimore before the U.S. Revolution. It is well known and recognized.
- Washington, District of Columbia: Based on the Washington Coat of Arms, which were only used by Washington on a bookplate. According to rules of British Heraldry, Washington did not have right to display them, but they did belong to his ancestors.
- Mexico: Has too many colors and shaded, detailed emblems. The design is complex and includes Aztec glyphs, a form of writing. However, I would be careful telling Mexicans they need a redesigned flag.

I included the following about the Utah State flag in the article:

The Utah State Flag. The design, strictly speaking, is not a seal, but an emblem based on the State Seal which was in place when Utah achieved statehood in 1896. It uses letters for a motto and the state’s name. It has a multitude of symbols and some symbols (U.S. flags and bald eagle), which appear to symbolize the federal rather than the state government. Yet, when we understand why these symbols were selected at Utah’s statehood in 1896, its symbolism becomes powerfully apparent.

a. On one level, the name of the state, Utah, may have been included to identify the flag and the state it represents. However, it is also a subtle reminder that the pioneers who settled the area chose the name Deseret, which they maintained had the meaning of “honey bee” and tied in with the state symbol, the beehive. Congress refused to adopt a name strongly favored by these pioneers, but instead forced the name Utah upon them.

b. The years shown on the flag do not only represent the year the Mormon pioneers arrived in the Salt Lake Valley (1847) and the year of statehood (1896), but they also define a period known as the struggle for statehood. It took almost fifty years for the United States Congress to admit as a state the area, which is now Utah. During that time neighboring states were admitted on all sides, with each taking a chunk of Utah Territory on their admission.

c. The two U.S. flags displayed behind the shield and the bald eagle perched on the top of the shield are a way of saying, “It took half a century, we were denied repeated requests, but we made it; Utah is finally a state!”

d. These symbols show how the early citizens of the new state viewed themselves and how they wanted others to see them.

The Utah State Flag and its symbols are all about branding Utah as a state, and this branding and the flag is recognized and well known. Changing the branding with a new state flag would be cumbersome and expensive. The correction of the Utah State flag passed by the Legislature in 2011 was financially neutral as flags could be replaced gradually as they wore out. Now, eleven years later some old flag have not been replaced, and that has presented no great difficulty. A complete redesign of the Utah State flag would require faster replacement and rebranding of many state sites.

Flag designing is more an art than a science regulated by rules. Flag Design as a part of Vexillology is about studying the design of existing flags, not activism to redesign flags judged to be “Bad Flags.”

I urge the Legislature to not adopt the proposed flag design (House Bill 292), and to proceed carefully, if at all, with any effort to redesign the Utah State flag (House Bill 219).