

**L.A.S.D.
Los Angeles County
Sheriff's Department**

**FLAG DESIGN CONTEST
2002**



A Case Study by
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LOS ANGELES COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT FLAG—2002

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In January 2002, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department issued the following announcement to its 19,000 employees on its Teletype, Intranet, and bulletin boards:

FLAG CONTEST

The Sheriff recognizes that a flag is a symbol that evokes history, tradition, and values. A flag and its logo help raise consciousness and pride, create recognition, and establish identity for an organization. As such, the Sheriff's Department, for the first time in its history, is conducting a flag design contest (open to Department employees only) to uniquely distinguish LASD and create a source of pride and identity for our employees and the communities we serve.

CASH PRIZE: \$2,500. If more than one design is declared a winner, prize monies will be divided equally between the contest winners.

The announcement detailed the entry requirements. It specified the form and size of entries, where and when to make submissions, and the process for separating each entrant's name from the design.



The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD) is the second-largest law enforcement agency in the United States (second only to the New York Police Department). It provides sheriff services to California's most populous county as well as municipal police services to many of the county's cities. Established in 1850, its motto (selected in a similar competition a few years ago) is "A Tradition of Service". Uniformed LASD personnel wear a tan shirt, green pants, and a black belt and shoes. Their badge is a gold six-pointed star with enlarged rounded tips; in the center a blue ring with "Los Angeles Sheriff's Department" encircles a silver grizzly bear (similar to the bear on the California state flag).



The department's chief executive, Sheriff Lee Baca, had recently instituted a strategic re-appraisal and reorganization under the title "LASD2", with key personnel assigned to the effort. After attending the funeral of a sheriff's deputy killed in the line of duty, at which the flag of a police officer motorcycle club figured prominently, he asked that an LASD2 team member lead the adoption of an LASD flag. As a very high-profile community leader (the highest-paid elected official in the U.S.), Sheriff Baca appreciated the value of flag adoption, which would coincide with his re-election in March.

Lt. Dave Waters received the assignment and did his homework well. He studied Peter Orenski's *A Flag for New Milford* (*Flag Bulletin* #168) and my *Good Flag, Bad Flag*. He talked to the Los Angeles County Fire Department, which had recently developed a flag (his counterparts there found their design difficult to fly and expensive to fabricate). He consulted me as he created the contest's rules, timeline, and announcement. He raised the prize money and contest costs from the Sheriff's Relief Association and corporate sponsors. He recruited seven judges and asked me to volunteer to advise the process. The judges were: Sgt. Gil Carrillo, Lt. Jacques LaBerge, Capt. Detta Roberts, Sgt. Gregory Saunders, Dep. Michael Schaap, secretary Jody Thurston, and personnel manager Yvette White.



By the contest deadline, 726 entries had been received, numbered, tabulated by name, and inserted in plastic sheets and filed in several 3-ring binders. Most of the entries were computer-generated, although some had been drawn with pen, colored pencil, or even crayon. Some were cut paper or collages. They ranged in quality from primitive to professional. A very few lampooned the process (few, perhaps, because all entrants were LASD employees). Because of

multiple submissions (of up to a dozen variations of a single design), far fewer than 726 people entered the design contest.

On February 18th, Lt. Waters, the judges, and I convened for a one-and-a-half-day session in a conference room at the La Mirada Community Center, where the LASD maintains a sheriff's station. Lt. Waters' 11-year-old daughter Stacey, usually home-schooled, observed the proceedings. The judges represented a broad cross-section of the department: 5 sworn personnel and 2 civilian employees; 3 white, 3 black, and 1 Hispanic; 4 men and 3 women; ranks from secretary to captain. Their charge: to select 6 finalist designs from which Sheriff Baca would choose the LASD flag. They had all prepared by reading a copy of *Good Flag, Bad Flag*, downloaded from the NAVA website, and seemed eager and enthusiastic about the process.

I attempted to establish my credentials as a NAVA member, *Raven* editor, flag design author, and *vexillonaire*, but perhaps my most persuasive claim to legitimacy was as a Los Angeles County native! Serving as the judges' coach, I trained them on flag design and then organized the process of winnowing down the entries. As the effort progressed through the day, I constantly revised my plan of action. I warned the judges that flags drive strong emotions, and not to be surprised if their colleagues got somewhat worked up.

We began with a two-hour session devoted to the five basic principles of flag design from *Good Flag, Bad Flag*, enhanced by examples of other law enforcement agency flags (researched on FOTW and other sources by my son, Mason Kaye). Using Annin catalogs provided by Elmer's Flag & Banner in Portland, I led an interesting exercise where the judges identified the "best" and "worst" state flags, then discussed the reasons they'd chosen as they did (their "best": TX, NM, AK, AZ, CA; their worst: MD, GA, ND, NJ, NH). I demonstrated how flags wear at the fly with real examples.

We spent a lot of time exploring how the prospective LASD flag would be used. With "Form Follows Function" as the underlying principle, I wanted the judges to test designs against all potential uses. They listed: 1) exterior display at LASD headquarters and other sheriff's department venues, 2) internal display in offices, 3) car flags, 4) mounted patrol display in parades, 5) desk flags, and 6) coffee mugs, lapel pins, and bumper stickers.

With that background in place, we spent the rest of the morning on the “first cut”. With all the designs laid out on large tables, each judge circulated and selected any design that deserved to be considered further, moving it to a separate table. The designers’ names had been separated from the designs, now identified only by a number. There were no limits, no rules—but judges understood that if no one picked a design, it fell out of contention. While at times I stretched my “coach” role by advocating for certain designs, I did not select any myself. With much friendly banter, comparison shopping, and difficult decisions, the judges selected 72 in that first cut, a reduction of 90%. Time for lunch!



In the next step, we taped all 72 designs up on the wall at the front of the room, looked at them closely, then sat down. We began a rollicking discussion of their general merits, recognizability, symbolism, and meaning. The distance (approximately 20-25 feet) forced the judges to evaluate the designs as they might actually appear. At times, I would hold a design by its corner and simulate its draping; at other times I would hold one up and wave it to simulate its flying. Then we culled from those 72 by using the same method: pointing to each design in turn, I asked the judges if anyone thought the design was a “keeper”; if no one spoke for the flag, it came down. This reduced the field to 29 flags.



As part of that exercise, I helped the judges test ways in which designs might be misinterpreted or ridiculed. For example, the blue ring on the badge often appeared as a significant graphic element. Without lettering and enlarged somewhat, the blue ring seemed very recognizable. The judges affirmed that it helped distinguish the badge from those of other sheriff's departments. But when I asked what else it looked like, one judge immediately provided the answer that eliminated its consideration: "a doughnut" (lampooned as the favorite food of law enforcement). Another design, with an expanding white diagonal emanating downward from a star in the hoist, looked to some like a helicopter searchlight, perceived as too intimidating.

In these steps, I was seeking consensus among the judges, avoiding any "scoring" and relying instead on their combined understanding of flag design to narrow the field. At this point, I asked individual judges to volunteer to speak for each design. By describing why they liked certain designs, the judges explored and reconsidered their own perceptions and shared their points of view with one another. At the end of the discussion, we went through another cull, leaving 18 semi-finalist designs.

The semi-finalists shared several common elements: the colors gold, green, and tan, and the badge, often with the bear, and most were very simple. One judge made a perceptive statement: "We are a para-military organization, and our flag should reflect that connection". So far, the judges had very similar opinions although the designs still varied greatly. But here we got stuck. We tried scoring the flags, using the criteria of simplicity, symbolism, color, attractiveness, and distinctiveness. This only showed the wide disparity among the judges' opinions. While I

would have eliminated a third of the remaining flags for using lettering or for their similarity to other existing flags, the rest all qualified as good designs, and each had strong supporters. At this impasse, we adjourned until the next morning.

I realized that we had moved beyond flag design and into a process of interpersonal dynamics and group decision-making. Unlike a civil/criminal jury brought together for one trial, these “jurors” all knew they might well interact again—thus they were less willing to formally challenge one another. They were also keenly aware that their colleagues in the department would hold them personally responsible for the flag—especially if any problems arose, leading them to additional caution. This went beyond my experience, so I refrained from pushing for votes.

One juror, a veteran homicide detective who had actually run against the incumbent sheriff in an earlier election and now served in the Office of the Sheriff, challenged the “no lettering” principle: “If it’s good enough for the Marine Corps [to have lettering on its flag], it’s good enough for us”. He believed he spoke for longtime department members, if not for the majority of the judges, in insisting that the flag should say “LASD” or even “Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department”. At home, he actually had the large letters “LASD” set in tile on the bottom of his swimming pool so that in an emergency the aero patrol could recognize his house. His persistence kept several designs with lettering in the running, although if the judges had voted, those probably would have been eliminated.

While the “let’s retain lettering” proponents were outnumbered, they were emphatic. They raised the valid concern that an organization focused as narrowly as LASD could not be sufficiently symbolized to the general public without the letters “LASD”. Finally one judge (the female captain who commanded one of LASD’s jails) summarized—in terms all could understand—why words on flags are unnecessary, saying: “It’s just like a hooker—we all know what a hooker looks like, she doesn’t have a sign on her back saying *HOOKER!*”.

The next morning, the homicide detective and leader of the “keep lettering” effort began the session by announcing his willingness to abandon that position. While he still would advocate for designs with letters, he would not oppose flags without them. Another judge mentioned

passing by a McDonald's restaurant that morning and noting that the lettering on the flag was completely redundant with the golden arches. This broke the logjam and enabled the judges to proceed to winnow down the 18 semi-finalists.

Some were eliminated as resembling too closely other well-known flags (especially in black-and-white versions), such as Cuba, Trinidad & Tobago, and The Philippines. Others were discarded as less-worthy variations on a finalist. We continued the "keeper" method, where all judges had a say and any could voice support for keeping a design.

The judges quickly reduced the pack to 6 finalists, but often saying "I would vote for that if it were...". They insisted on making changes to each of the final designs, such as altering color shades, transposing colors, removing lettering, substituting badge/bear designs from other entries, and shifting the position of the charge. The judges especially favored a specific stylized badge from one set of entries and wanted that badge on all finalists. One design had support from most judges (and a version of it indeed became the final flag), but some judges were reticent to choose their favorites until all designs could be altered to reflect the judges' changes and rendered in consistent size, color, and style by a graphic artist.

The judges departed, leaving Lt. Waters to find and instruct the artist, consult the judges on their final opinions, brief the sheriff, finalize the design, announce the winner(s), and contract for flag manufacture. He and I visited LASD headquarters to inspect its flagpoles (the LASD flag would replace the county flag), where we observed the U.S. flag flying on its own left. I met Sheriff Baca briefly, and gave him the one-minute pitch for simplicity and no lettering. He understood, and said he enthusiastically awaited the judges' results. As a reward for my services I rode along on an exciting 90-minute helicopter patrol over Los Angeles County that evening before leaving California.

In the days that followed, Lt. Waters prepared the final designs and some variants for the judges' and then the sheriff's consideration. The judges conferred by e-mail and kept me posted on their deliberations. The sheriff selected one, and going beyond the initial plan, made his own changes to it (changing the tan portion to black).



The winning design combined the wavy center stripe from one entry, the stylized badge from another entry, and colors as modified by the sheriff. The wave design was submitted by Deputy Anthony Morga; the badge design was jointly submitted by Sergeant Brian Moriguchi and Lieutenant Richard Shaw. These entrants divided the prize money, to my knowledge perhaps the largest amount ever offered in a flag design contest. The upward-curving stripe symbolized to the judges “continuous progress into the future”, while the colors represented the standard uniform and the badge uniquely identified the department, with the bear additionally representing California.

AAA Flags of Los Angeles fabricated the first LASD flag, which debuted at Sheriff Baca’s re-election victory party the following week. A ceremony is planned for its hoisting at LASD headquarters later this year (2002), with the flag delivered by the mounted enforcement detail color guard, who will hand it off to the color guard on foot; it will then be raised officially. LASD has ordered hundreds of flags for use throughout the county and for sale to raise money for its charitable activities. LASD attorneys have followed up having all the participants sign a notarized “Quitclaim of Copyright” confirming that we renounced any “rights, title, or interest of any kind whatsoever” in the flag’s design.

This exercise taught me several lessons: Neophytes have an innate understanding of good flag design, and a modicum of instruction will enable them to apply it. The principles of *Good Flag*, *Bad Flag* apply well to the broad spectrum of entries such as found in a large contest, but individual judgment remains the best selector of final designs. I found that by educating the judges, they could quickly discard the majority of the entries without needing any formal scoring mechanism. That way they could focus quickly on the best designs. I saw the benefit that real-

time electronic manipulation of flag images could have delivered to the proceedings—to have the judges watch an electronic display of a graphics program while an artist tested potential changes to a design would greatly enhance the speed and effectiveness of future deliberations. A final lesson learned: with trained judges, the final stages of the process require not flag design knowledge but group consensus-building skills.



(above) NAVA member Harry Oswald participated in raising the flag at LASD HQ.

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Ted Kaye is the editor of *Raven*, a Journal of Vexillology, and the compiler of *Good Flag, Bad Flag*, a guide to flag design, both published by the North American Vexillological Association. Vexillology is the study of flags. He may be contacted via raven@nava.org.