The United Nations Emblem and Flag

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This note, written on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the United Nations, outlines the history and present status of the UN emblem and flag.¹

Background.
The history begins with the emblem, and the first to have been used, at San Francisco in 1945, was an unofficial emblem. The design for this original emblem, which was in several respects different from the subsequent official UN emblem, is believed to have been created by the Presentation Branch of the United States Office of Strategic Services in April 1945 in response to a request for a badge or symbol for the United Nations Conference on International Organization. The unofficial emblem appeared on the original copy of the UN Charter and on early UN documents. The Charter was signed on June 26, 1945 and entered into force on October 24, 1945, a date which in each year thereafter has been observed as United Nations Day.

In view of the obvious need for some insignia to be considered the official emblem of the United Nations, the first UN Secretary-General, Trygve Lie, proposed a draft resolution concerning the adoption of an emblem as well as certain legislative measures on the subject. The Sixth Committee of the UN General Assembly, responsible for legal questions, suggested several modifications to the original design which had been used at San Francisco.²

The present distinctive emblem of the United Nations was approved on December 7, 1946 by a resolution adopted unanimously during the first session of the UN General Assembly.³ The resolution also recommended that UN members should take legal or other appropriate measures necessary to prevent any use of the emblem not authorized by the UN Secretary-General, in particular for commercial purposes. The same resolution authorized the use of the emblem as the official seal of the United Nations and likewise recommended measures to prohibit the unauthorized use of both the seal and the name of the United Nations, as well as abbreviations of that name.

Before a year had passed, an urgent need was recognized to choose a flag which would serve both as a symbol of the organization and as distinctive identification in the field, at headquarters and in other offices and information centres. On October 20, 1947 the UN General Assembly resolved that the official emblem “centred on a light blue ground” would be the UN flag.⁴ By the same resolution the Secretary-General was authorized to draw up a code and regulations to govern the use of the flag and to protect its dignity.

The Emblem.
The design adopted for the UN emblem may be described as follows: A map of the world on a north polar azimuthal equidistant projection inscribed in a wreath of crossed conventionalized branches of the olive tree; the projection extends to 60 degrees south latitude and includes five concentric circles, all except the central roundel being divided into octants, with the Greenwich meridian as the lower vertical axis. Colours are not specified, but the original proposals envisaged the emblem in gold on a field of smoke blue with water areas in white. Areas south of the 60th parallel south, including the entire continent of Antarctica, are not shown. This de-

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sign differs from the emblem devised for the San Francisco Conference and used on the original Charter and on the first UN documents in that the unofficial emblem extended to only 40 degrees south latitude, had only four concentric circles and took the meridian 100 degrees west of Greenwich as the vertical axis.

The two symbols composing the emblem are the olive branch which can be traced back to antiquity as a symbol of peace, and the world map which depicts the area of concern to the United Nations in achieving its primary intended purpose of maintaining international peace and security. The map projection, occasionally referred to as Guillaume Postel’s projection, represents the world somewhat as a round stadium in which all nations are assembled. The design possesses the essential requirements of simplicity and dignity, as well as an aesthetic quality, which have enabled it to survive with a considerable measure of success as an effective international symbol enjoying global acceptance.

The use of the emblem without the authorization of the UN Secretary-General constitutes an improper use on the basis of General Assembly Resolution 92 (I) of 1946. Many UN member States, and at least one non-member, Switzerland, have adopted legislation prohibiting the use of the emblem without authorization. In cases of unauthorized use in States where no such legislative or administrative action has been taken, the government concerned may be advised of the circumstances by the UN Secretariat and requested to obtain a cessation of such use. Authorization to use the emblem is not granted where commercial purposes are involved, where an erroneous impression of UN endorsement or sponsorship could be created or, inter alia, where its use would not be in keeping with the dignity of the emblem. The use of the emblem on documents and publications of the UN system is regulated by special administrative instructions. The emblem also appears on UN medals, the use of which is governed by regulations established by the Secretary-General.

The Flag.
The use of the flag is regulated by the United Nations Flag Code and Regulations issued by the Secretary-General. In the event of any provisions of the Code or Regulations being in conflict with the laws of a State governing the use of its national flag, the latter prevail, according to a note to this effect printed at the end of the publication containing the Flag Code and Regulations.

Under the Flag Code, first issued on December 19, 1947 and currently as amended on November 11, 1952, the design of the flag is specified as the emblem in white “centred on a United Nations blue background”. The dignity of the flag is protected and the manner and places in which it may be flown are prescribed. In particular, the UN flag shall not be subordinated to any other flag. Under Art. 4(1) of the Code the flag shall be flown from all buildings, offices and other property occupied by the United Nations, and from any designated official residences. Under Art. 4(3) it may be flown from buildings, offices and other property occupied by the specialized agencies. Under Art. 4(2) the flag shall also be flown by any unit or other entity established by the United Nations when necessary in the interests of the United Nations. The flag may be used by governments, organizations and individuals, in accordance with the Code, to demonstrate support of the United Nations. Art. 6 of the Code provides that in military operations the flag may only be used upon express authorization by a competent UN organ. Under Art. 9, the flag may be manufactured for sale only upon the written consent of the Secretary-General.

The current Regulations, effective since January 1, 1967, specify the proportions of the flag and lay down the protocol for its use. The proportions of the flag may