

Scoutmaster Minute

How a High School Student Designed the American Flag

If you feel like you have a good idea, stick with it. This story is an example of how persistence paid off and benefited the country as a result. In the late 1950s, the United States was about to add two more territories, Alaska and Hawaii, as states to the union.

This presented a small problem to Congress. You see, Congress is responsible for the design of the flag, and how the white stars appear on the blue background. With 48 states, it was easy to show the 48 stars as six rows with eight stars in each row. But how do you add two more stars and still have a respectable pattern? A teacher in Lancaster, Ohio gave this problem to his class as a school project. A student by the name of Robert Heft had an idea. He thought that if the pattern alternated between a row of six stars followed by a row of five stars there would be a regular and symmetric pattern. Altogether there would be 5 rows of six stars and 4 rows of five stars, giving a total of 50 stars. Robert Heft spent hours sewing stars onto a piece of cloth. He turned his project in, however, his teacher was unimpressed and Robert got a B-minus for his efforts. But that didn't stop Robert. He knew he had a good idea, so he sent his design to his congressman. Congress liked his idea, and as Alaska and Hawaii became the two newest states, the U.S. flag bore the design of Robert Heft, a schoolboy from Ohio.

More information about this story...

Heft only got a B- for his project. However, Heft was given a chance to improve his grade if he convinced the U.S. government to use his flag. The odds were heavily stacked against him, but Heft was on a mission. He began writing letters and making calls to the White House, asking the president to look at his flag.

Two years later, after Alaska and Hawaii became states, Heft received a surprise call from President Dwight D. Eisenhower with the news he was waiting for. His flag was chosen as the model for the new 50-star flag. On July 4, 1960, President Eisenhower invited Heft to Washington, D.C., for a flag raising ceremony at the U.S. Capitol.

Even Heft's history teacher was impressed. "He said, 'I guess if it's good enough for Washington, it's good enough for me,'" recalled Heft. "I hereby change the grade to an A." Since then, Heft's banner has set a new record as the longest-tenured U.S. flag.

Heft went to work as a professor at Northwest State Community College in Archbold, Ohio and served as mayor of Napoleon, Ohio. He also became a highly regarded motivational speaker and he visited the White House 14 times.

Always one to think ahead, Heft also designed a 51-star American flag, just in case Washington, D.C. or Puerto Rico becomes a state. Heft's 51-star flag reportedly has six rows of stars alternating between rows of nine and eight.

Heft, who died in 2009 at the age of 67, will be forever known as the student who designed the 50-star American flag.

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