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## Indestructible: The Design of Old Glory

While you can't deny its visual and historical significance, our flag will inevitably change again. Ken Carbone illustrates the options.



**KEN  
CARBONE**

More American than apple pie, baseball and obesity is the American Flag. With Independence Day approaching "Old Glory" will be celebrated in bunting, at barbecues and with plenty of "bombs bursting in air" at fireworks displays. On the Fourth of July everyone is a patriot and no one seems to mind commercial exploitation of our national symbol.

The design of our flag is busy, brash and very John Philip Sousa. Visually it wants to party and is the ultimate symbol of Yankee optimism. Whatever it lacks in the power and graphic simplicity of the Swiss, Japanese or even the Antarctica flag, it makes up for in its distinction of being "scalable" for a growing nation. Its simple forms and colors are built to last.



Anyone 50 years old or younger knows no other American flag, but our 50-star flag is the 27th iteration of the original 13 stars and stripes. And while you can't deny its visual and historical significance, our flag will inevitably change again.

When Puerto Rico gains statehood another star will be squeezed into the "canton" or blue field. What about the addition of Guam, the Marshall Islands, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa or Washington D.C.?

A couple of weeks ago [Slate.com](#) asked mathematician Skip Garibaldi to take a look. Based on his calculations (that max out at one hundred stars), there is ample room to add states, territories and distant planets before the flag's composition requires drastic change.

## The $N$ States of America Slate

How would the stars on the flag be rearranged if more states joined the Union? Historically, there have been many configurations, six of which are included in this widget. Enter a number of stars in the box to see which fit your scenario.

[Read more about the configurations in Slate.](#)

Stars:



However, these are tumultuous times in our nation and significant events could impact the design of our flag sooner than we think.



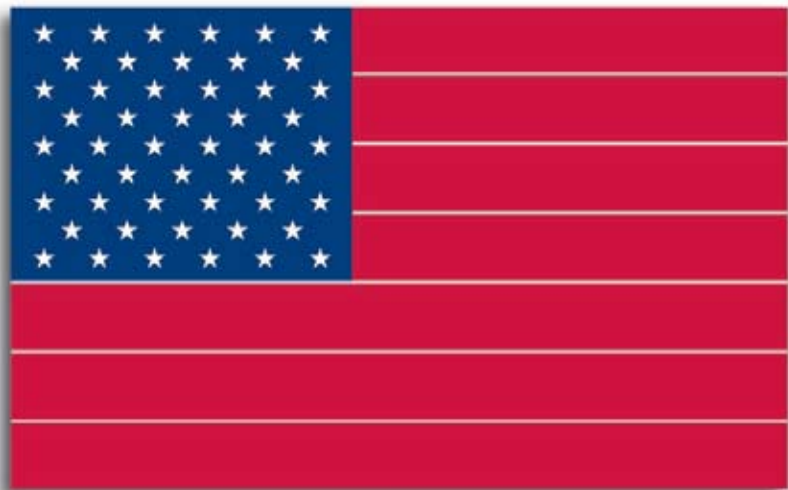
For example, for all of those states that didn't vote for President Obama, we can just delete those stars in the order in which they first appeared on the flag.



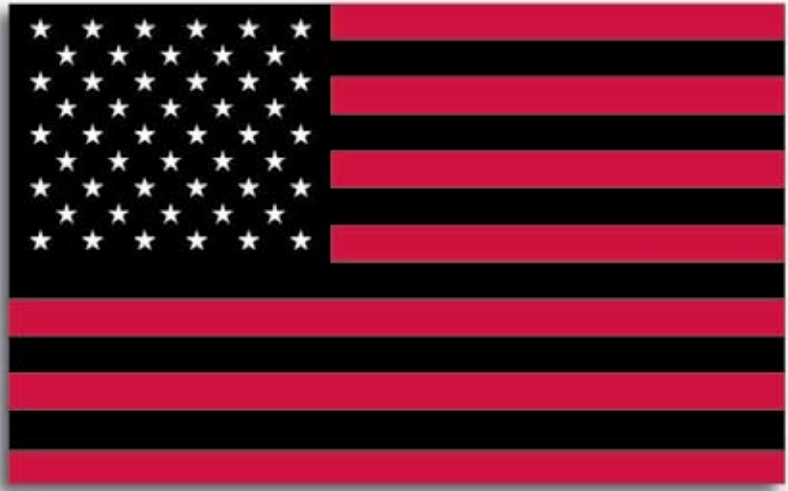
Or if we continue on the path of political rancor, the “Probama” states and the “Nobama” states can each have a flag of their own. This adds a graphic clarity to the issue and might get us through this perilous fight.



Ideological debate, rational thought and the theory of evolution divide our citizenry. Could there be a mass state secession, leaving only the “cultural elite” in California and New York?



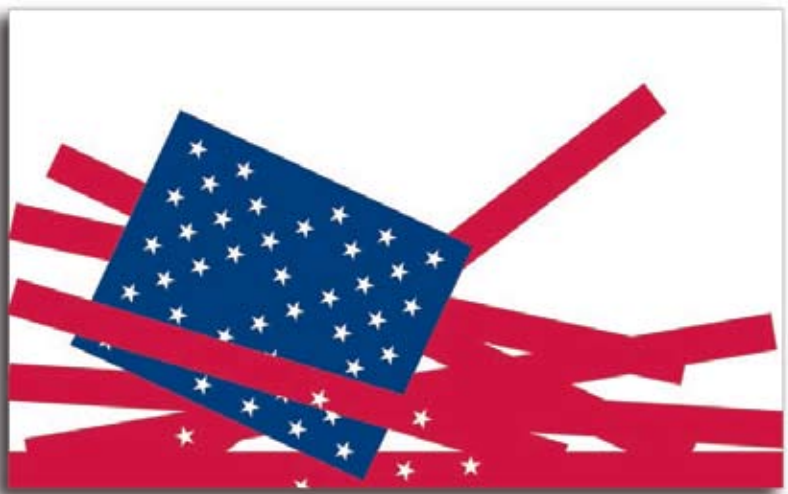
On an international level, when China collects the U.S. debt, the size of our stripes might swell to signal the economic giant’s growing control.



Or what if, in this home of the brave, no clean energy policy is courageously pursued? Our dependency on fossil fuel will go unchecked and our flag could reflect our questionable priorities.



The raging red glare of the Tea Party is heating up. With their demands to slash big government they rightfully deserve a flag to champion their cause.



If unrestrained greed leads to another financial implosion the resulting crisis might also influence the flag's design.

The American flag is a resilient and honored national symbol. Her broad stripes and bright stars have survived hardship, tacky souvenirs and this designer's musings. Whatever the challenge and whatever the design, we can proudly hail that our flag is still there.

Happy Holiday!

*Top flag image via [sxc.hu](http://sxc.hu)*



## KEN CARBONE

*Ken Carbone is among America's most respected graphic designers, whose work is renowned for its clarity and intelligence. He has built an international reputation creating outstanding programs for world-class clients, including Tiffany & Co., W.L. Gore, Herman Miller, PBS, Christie's, Nonesuch Records, the W Hotel Group, and The Taubman Company. His clients also include celebrated cultural institutions such as the Musée du Louvre, The Museum of Modern Art, The Pierpont Morgan Library, The Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and the High Museum of Art.*

