This compelling book argues that American patriotism is a civil religion of blood sacrifice, which periodically kills its children to keep the group together. The flag is the sacred object of this religion; its sacrificial imperative is a secret which the group keeps from itself to survive. Expanding Durkheim’s theory of the totem taboo as the organizing principle of enduring groups, Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle uncover the system of sacrifice and regeneration which constitutes American nationalism, show why historical instances of these rituals succeed or fail in unifying the nation, and explain how mass media are essential to the process. American culture is depicted as ritually structured by a fertile center and sacrificial borders of death. Violence plays a key part in its identity. In essence, nationalism is neither quaint historical residue nor atavistic extremism, but a living tradition which defines American life.

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Blood sacrifice and the nation
Blood sacrifice and the nation

Totem rituals and the American flag

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Contents

Illustrations page ix
List of graphs xii
Acknowledgments xiii

1 Introduction 1
2 That old flag magic 9
3 Theorizing the flagbody 41
4 The totem myth 63
5 Death touchers and border crossers 98
6 Strategic tinkering: totem memory and succession 129
7 Refreshing the borders 172
8 Dismemberment and reconstruction 215
9 Fresh blood, public meat 248
10 One size fits all 292
11 Epilogue 312

Appendix 1 The flag in life: Representational politics of the Stars and Stripes 317
## Contents

| Appendix 2 | Representative coding categories | 335 |
| Notes      | 337 |
| Selected bibliography | 383 |
| Index      | 390 |
Illustrations

Chapter 2
2.1 Abraham Lincoln as American primitive in parsed flag costume. 1863 political cartoon.  page 14
2.2 Zone of taboo magic surrounds dead totem. President Dwight Eisenhower lies in state beneath Capitol Rotunda. (Bob Gomel/Life magazine/c Time Warner)  33

Chapter 4
4.1 Totem flag marks border that transforms willing sacrifices. Korean War. (National Archives)  70
4.2 World War II totem chieftain General George C. Marshall flanked by flags and totem ancestor, General John J. Pershing. (Ed Clark/Life magazine/c Time Warner)  81
4.3 School children worship the totem on the eve of World War II. (Historical Society of Pennsylvania)  94

Chapter 5
5.1 Columbia and States as regenerative female center of nation in Civil War lithograph. Totem fathers occupy the border. (Library of Congress)  114
5.2 Totem class marks ultimate group border by propitiating angry dead who might return. (AP)  118

Chapter 6
6.1 World War II pieta. At wartime services flag is sacrificed son. (Alfred Eisenstaedt/Life magazine/c Time Warner)  150
Chapter 7

7.1 Affiliative segregationists march on totem border. Little Rock, 1959. (Frances Miller/Life magazine/c Time Warner) 174

7.2 Affiliative member drives perceived invader from border. Boston, 1975. (Stanley Forman) 175

7.3 Affiliative Boy Scouts model totem class violence. (Frank Scherschel/Life magazine/c Time Warner) 178

7.4 Affiliative groups appropriate symbols of killing authority. Ku Klux Klansman with hangman’s noose, cross, Bible, sword, Confederate flag and the most powerful killing authority, a totem flag. (Ed Clark/Life magazine/c Time Warner) 181

7.5 Generative totem father George Washington presides over affiliative effort to mate with the totem. German-American Bund meeting, 1939. (Otto Hagel Hansel Meith/Life magazine/c Time Warner) 184

7.6 Affiliative brothers unify in opposition to the totem. (Al Tielemans/Sports Illustrated) 206

Chapter 8

8.1 Popular protest: antiwar movement waves the parsed flag. (Charles Harbutt) 218

8.2 Modern Betsy Ross creates parsed flags in the popular domain. (Henri Dauman) 223

8.3 Orgiastic reunion of totem class and fertile center marked by flag. Celebrating peace on Hollywood Boulevard, 1945. (Walter Sanders/Life magazine/c Time Warner) 232

8.4 Flagwaving removes death mark from returning Gulf War soldiers who reunite with popular domain. (Jim Estrin/New York Times) 234

8.5 Regenerative center wields popular magic to protect Gulf War soldiers. (Joe McNally/Sygma) 238

Chapter 9

9.1 Mating ritual between totem suitor and symbol of fertile center who wears flag in her hair like a flower, 1992 presidential campaign. (Jose R. Lopez/New York Times) 249


9.3 Popular grotesque flag display. Presidential candidate Ross Perot embraces supporter, 1992. (Kathy Willens/AP) 258
List of illustrations xi

9.4 Totem suitor Bill Clinton offers himself as sacrifice in 1992 presidential campaign. (Jim Estrin/New York Times) 262

9.5 Marriage between affiliative women and totem suitor “delivers” newly incarnated infant totem. Cartoon parody of 1992 totem creation rites. (Signe Wilkinson/Cartoonists & Writers Syndicate) 273

9.6 Newborn totem presented for sacrifice in popular pietà. 280

Chapter 10

10.1 Commerce shows its affinity for the parsed popular flag. (Carolyn Marvin) 300

Chapter 11

11.1 Totem claims future sacrifice. Medals resurrect fallen father in infant son. (National Archives) 316
## List of graphs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graph</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Total flag and patriotic images. <em>Life</em> magazine data study.</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Total and parsed flag images by year. <em>Life</em> magazine data study.</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Parsed flag images by frame and domain. <em>Life</em> magazine data study.</td>
<td>324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Flag images in text during war and peace. <em>Life</em> magazine data study.</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Flag images in advertisements during war and peace. <em>Life</em> magazine data study.</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Flags in text during three wars. <em>Life</em> magazine data study.</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Flags in advertising during three wars. <em>Life</em> magazine data study.</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

The anthropologist Evans-Pritchard observed strikingly different levels of religious belief among members of the Azande tribe. In so doing he challenged our modern predisposition to think of so-called primitives as religiously uniform. Writing this book has provided David W. Ingle and myself with not so dissimilar encounters with members of our own American tribe, among whom there are also strikingly different levels of belief in the religious power of nationalism. In general, we had only to announce the subject of this book to elicit suspicions that we were either unabashed patriots, fundamentalist believers in what Harold Bloom has called our unacknowledged civil religion, or flag-destroying iconoclasts. That we were in the presence of religious taboo was often signaled by awkward silences and jokes as both non-believers and the faithful tried to figure our take on that delicate topic, the deep, unspeakable meaning of the American flag.

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This is our project. We have watched the flag wave and the totem system operate since 1989, when this project began with a classroom exercise. From the standpoint of flag study, we were lucky that during the period of the
formulation and writing of these ideas, the United States engaged in several
calendrical rites of renewal and one crisis of the gods. That is, the country
waged war, participated in the Olympics, and conducted two presidential
campaigns unusually full of totemic doubt, all major occasions of patriotic
practice for our observation.

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