

THE FLAG

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We've all seen Thomas Franklin's photograph of three defiant firefighters raising the American flag at Ground Zero on 9/11. Of all the images that went on the wire services from that day, Franklin's photo uniquely presented a semblance of hope and comfort for a nation shocked by the horror of the attacks. As rescue workers dug through the rubble for survivors and family members pinned up the faces of the missing, the picture asserted that Americans would overcome and persevere. When the *New York Post* ran the photo on the front page two mornings after the attacks, the headline read: "...OUR FLAG WAS STILL THERE."

It was, in the words of one picture editor, "Our Iwo Jima moment"--referring to Joe Rosenthal's image of six marines raising the flag in 1945--and much like that photograph, the emotional power of this flag raising was not lost on the media, the public or politicians. Overnight, the firefighters became not only heroes, but symbols for a public desperately in need of something--anything--to counter the anxiety and fear sweeping the nation. Pushed over the internet--at a speed never before possible--the image quickly went viral. It was emailed, shared, downloaded, printed and pinned to refrigerators, blackboards, car windows and cubicles. By the end of the week, the photo had run on front pages across America and was featured on the cover of *Newsweek*. The photo became the most reproduced image of the new century.

The flag itself became at once a sacred object, a potent symbol and a celebrity of sorts: it was brought to Yankee stadium, signed by Mayor Giuliani and Governor Pataki and then sent to the USS Theodore Roosevelt to serve as the carrier group's battle flag. As America steamed towards inevitable war, *Vanity Fair* editor David Friend commissioned photographer Harry Benson to shoot the flag on the Roosevelt for an upcoming 9/11 pictorial. Hovering above the deck of the carrier, Benson shot a beautifully lit photograph of the deck crew proudly holding up the signed flag just days before the beginning of the war. The only problem was--as Friend later learned-- the

flag on the carrier wasn't the same flag raised at Ground Zero. In fact, the **original was missing--either misplaced, stolen or secreted away** by unknown forces in the chaos of Ground Zero.

There is a story behind every iconic picture, but this one, much like the Iwo Jima of *Flags of Our Fathers*, is an epic tale that has much to say about the best and worst of human nature against the backdrop of history. Just *how* do you mint heroes ready-made for public consumption? But more, how is it possible that one of the most powerful symbols of 9/11 has gone missing without a trace or nary an official comment? Who would take a sacred flag from the most hallowed ground in America? The story of the flag is not only an incredibly compelling mystery about a national treasure, but also a profound vehicle to deconstruct the enormity of what happened that day and in the ensuing decade. It's important to revisit how we *really* felt that day. Many in the media were proclaiming the "the end of irony"--and they meant it. You couldn't look at the devastation or *that* picture and feel any different. It was literally a "rally 'round the flag" moment for the public, the media and the administration. As the flag steamed towards war on the USS Roosevelt, the President's approval rating of 92% was the highest in history. **We may never find the flag, but by retracing its journey we may very well find other things we lost.**