

EAGLE VS. TURKEY: AMERICA'S FIRST BIRD CONTROVERSY

Nations often adopt animals as symbols: England has its lion, India its peacock. On the afternoon of July 4, 1776, just after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the



Continental Congress appointed a committee made up of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin to select a design for an official national seal.

The three patriots had different ideas and none of them included the bald eagle. They finally agreed on a drawing of the woman Liberty

holding a shield to represent the states. But the members of Congress weren't inspired by the design and they consulted with William Barton, a Philadelphia artist who produced a new design that included a golden eagle.

Because the golden eagle also flew over European nations, however, the federal lawmakers specified that the bird in the seal should be an American bald eagle. On June 20, 1782, they approved the design that we recognize today.

At the time, the new nation was still at war with England, and the fierce-looking bird seemed to be an appropriate emblem. But from the start, the eagle was a controversial choice. Franklin scowled at it. "For my part," he declared, "I wish the eagle had not been chosen as the representative of this country. He is a bird of bad moral character; he does not get his living honestly. You may have seen him perched in some dead tree where, too lazy to fish for himself, he watches the labor of the fishing hawk and, when that diligent bird has at length taken a fish and is bearing it to his nest for his young ones, the bald eagle pursues him and takes the fish. With all this injustice, he is never in good case."

Some people have since questioned whether the eagle would have been chosen to adorn the seal had the nation not been at war. A year after the Treaty of Paris ended the conflict with Great Britain, Franklin argued that the turkey would have been a more appropriate symbol. "A much more respectable bird and a true native of America," he pointed out. Franklin conceded that the turkey was "a little vain and silly," but maintained that it was nevertheless a "bird of courage" that "would not hesitate to attack a grenadier of the British guards who should presume to invade his farm yard with a red coat on." Congress was not convinced, however. The eagle remained our national symbol.

In truth, both the turkey and the bald eagle are native to the Americas. But if the issue is a bird that represents our nation, Americans can't really lay exclusive claim to either species, since both traditionally ranged in Canada and Mexico as well.

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