

Demand for Old Glory not flagging July 10th, 2002

By Kevin B. O'Reilly

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WASHINGTON _ Americans' demand for flags flown over the U.S. Capitol reached a fevered pitch immediately after the Sept. 11 attacks and continues today, even though the United States has settled in for a long fight against terrorism.

Since the 1950s, the office of the Architect of the Capitol has flown flags over the dome at the request of Congress members. Members make the request on behalf of constituents.

The month of September best illustrates the increased demand for flags flown over the Capitol. For September 2000, the number was 7,000. That figure doubled _ to 14,000 _ for September 2001. But even that 100 percent increase doesn't accurately reflect the increased demand for flags flown over the Capitol, said Bruce Milhans, communications officer in the architect's office.

"At the end of the (fiscal year, in September) we were hampered because there was such a demand that the supply of flags available to us was exhausted," Milhans said.

For example, after flying the 14,000 flags in September, the office flew only 6,433 flags in October and 4,843 in November, even though the U.S. military was engaged in fierce warfare in Afghanistan.

Traditionally, the demand for flags has gone up during wartime. The single-year record for flags flown over the Capitol is 154,224 in 1991, the year of the Persian Gulf War. The architect's office typically flies 130,000 flags a year.

The House Administration Committee, known by some as the mayor's office of Capitol Hill, is charged with ordering the flags flown over the Capitol. But committee staff members had no idea how Americans would respond to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. Orders that usually took four weeks to fill were backlogged for months.

"We all were overwhelmed," said Jim Forbes, spokesman for the committee. "We were definitely humbled and overwhelmed by the patriotism of all Americans. We just tried to keep up with supply, and eventually we did."

The committee sent staff members to the Internet looking for manufacturers who could help fulfill the demand for Old Glory. But it was difficult, Forbes said, because the manufacturers must be U.S.-owned and the flags must be made in accordance with official standards of the U.S. government.

"You really can't just take anyone," Forbes said. "There are many different ways to make flags. We have strict standards that must be met."

Specifically, flags flown over the Capitol must be sewn, not silk-screened.

As the supply of flags has been replenished, the number of flags flown has risen steadily, even though the war has dropped off the front pages.

In May, the most recent month for which the architect's office has data, 13,045 flags were flown over the Capitol. It's unclear, though, how many of those flag orders are new and how many are backlogged orders finally being filled.

"We're still working on a backlog of flags because we did not fully resume until spring," Milhans said. "Inclement winter weather held things up. Now we have tens of dozens of flags here right now waiting to be flown."

Flag orders through the office of Chicago-area Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., have been steady since Sept. 11, according to press secretary Nadeam Elshami.

"We've been getting about four or five requests every month, month after month," Elshami said. Before Sept. 11, requests for an entire year were in the single digits.

Every morning, laborers from the Capitol superintendents' office scale the roof on the south side of the Capitol, near the south edge of the dome on the House side. Three 12-foot tall flagpoles stand there, awaiting another day of activity.

Depending on demand, workers may start as early as 7 a.m., raising flags over the Capitol. Each flag is flown for two minutes, and then lowered. Work ends at 5:30 p.m. or when the allotment of flags for the day is finished, Milhans said, though under extraordinary circumstances work may continue until dusk.

"This is a labor-intensive process, and we're not going to put our laborers at risk," Milhans said. "If weather conditions are such that it's hazardous, we don't allow them to work." That is another reason, Milhans said, why the number of flags flown may have increased in the spring as the weather has improved.

Once the flag is flown, the House flag office prepares certificates authenticating the date when the flag was flown over the Capitol and inscribing any special message requested, Milhans said.

The single-day record for most flags flown was July 4, 1976, the nation's bicentennial. Twelve temporary flagpoles were erected on the Capitol and 10,471 flags were flown that day.

Flag prices range from \$17.49 to \$31.91, depending on the size and the kind of material the flag is made of, cotton or nylon.

Families of Sept. 11 victims may obtain, at no cost, a flag flown over the Capitol and delivered in a special box with a certificate signed by their House representative and by House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert.