

BAY AREA // SAN FRANCISCO

S.F. removes controversial 'Appeal to Heaven' flag from Civic Center Plaza, saying it has been co-opted

By **Rachel Swan**, Reporter

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The “Appeal to Heaven” flag, second from the left, flies over San Francisco’s Civic Center Plaza in 2018. After displaying the flag for decades, city officials recently took it down after its recent appropriation by far-right groups.

Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle 2018

Eighteen flags have billowed over the neat rows of plane trees in San Francisco's Civic Center Plaza, among them a yellow "Don't Tread on Me" flag, a Texas Lone Star flag and — until Saturday — an ["Appeal to Heaven"](#) flag like the one that has pitched Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito into controversy due to its association with the Jan. 6 insurrection.

The Appeal to Heaven flag, which bears a pine tree on a white background with its titular slogan, was among the original 18 raised by the city on June 14 — Flag Day — in 1964, each commemorating "a key moment in or symbol in American history," according to a statement from the Recreation and Park Department, which manages the Pavilion of American Flags across from City Hall.

But the meaning of the pine tree emblem, originally flown from George Washington's ships during the Revolutionary War, has shifted in recent years. It's among several images appropriated by conservative movements and appeared conspicuously in riots at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, carried by people seeking to stop the certification of Joe Biden's election as president.

This month, the flag ignited a national debate [following reports that](#) the banner had flown outside Alito's New Jersey vacation home last year. Observers had also spotted an upside-down American flag at Alito's house near Washington [less than two weeks after the Jan. 6 revolt](#); Alito said his wife had inverted the flag after a spat with neighbors.

Despite simmering tension over the pine tree and the "Appeal to Heaven" epigraph, the flag still had prominent placement in deep-blue San Francisco as recently as last week. Not only could elected officials see it waving through City Hall windows that overlook the plaza, but it was also displayed atop the Canessa Printing Co. building in posh Jackson Square, to the shock of passersby and at least one merchant who successfully pressed for its removal.

City parks officials quietly took down the Civic Center “Appeal to Heaven” flag over the weekend, saying in a statement to the Chronicle that although it originally signified the “quest for American independence,” it has “since been adopted by a different group — one that doesn’t represent the city’s values.”

So, the department swapped it for an American flag.

It was not the first time city leaders withdrew a flag from the pavilion to preempt conflict, the statement said, citing another provocative example: The [Confederate battle standard](#), known for its blue cross and white stars against a scarlet backdrop, became a point of contention after it went up in 1964. Protesters [cut it down](#) months later.

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