

Zapping the Pyramid

The history of an anti-authoritarian symbol (excerpt)

Don LaCoss

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The design shows a pyramid surmounted by an eye being blasted by a bolt of lightning. Bannered beneath the collapsing pyramid is the motto, "NON SERVIAM."

If English, Spanish, Italian, or French is your native tongue, then you can probably guess the Latin translation: "I will not serve." The phrase is taken from *Paradise Lost* (1674) by the radical poet of the English Revolution, John Milton, wherein the archangel Lucifer refuses to obey God and is cast into the frozen lake of Hell for his rebelliousness.

I had seen the strong, simple, anti-authoritarian emblem of the zapped pyramid for about two decades in 1986 or '87, so when I saw it used as the (anti-)logo of *Fifth Estate*, I assumed that the editorial collective had adopted it after seeing it around the scene for years.

I was surprised to learn that the pyramid hadn't been appropriated from someplace else—it had originated with FE, and what I saw all those years were take-offs of an image done specifically for an FE cover by graphic artist (and percussionist-vocalist for the radical Detroit agit-pop band, the Layabouts) Stephen Goodfellow in the mid-1970s.

Goodfellow writes regarding the origins of his design: "The year 1976 was a very poignant year for me. I was rubbing elbows with the local [Detroit] writers and thinkers, some of who wrote for *Fifth Estate*. When *Fifth Estate* asked if I could do a logo, I jumped at it."

Goodfellow's choice of iconography is immediately recognizable to anyone who has ever seen the backside of a US \$1 bill, where a radiant eye hovers above an unfinished pyramid of thirteen steps.

The English-born Goodfellow writes, "I was intrigued by why someone would place such a strange symbol on currency: a pyramid with an eye embedded, suspended at the top."

The pyramid symbol is the reverse side of what is officially known as the Great Seal of the United States. Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams had drafted sketches for a national logo since 1776, but it was the Continental Congress secretary, Charles Thomson, who drew up the final version that was accepted by the Congress in 1782. It first appeared on the dollar by order of President Franklin Roosevelt in 1935.

The Great Seal is a favorite case study for conspiracy theorists who insist that the U.S. was founded (and continues to be run) by a shadowy secret society of power brokers and string-pullers, primarily the Freemasons. There is some verifiable truth to their claim that the American Revolution was engineered by Masonic forces.

In the North Atlantic world of the late 18th century, association with Freemasonry was a fashionable trend among the merchant and plantation elites of the thirteen colonies of North America because of the Masons' exclusivity, their belief in their role as protectors of middle-class values, and their efforts to popularize the instrumental reason of the Enlightenment as a more modern management style.



By some counts, about a dozen Masons signed the Declaration of Independence, but like other private right-wing fraternities of well-connected white men—like today’s Order of the Skull and Bones, the Bilderberg Group, and the Bohemian Grove Club—this was less a case of conspiracy than a romanticized and ritualized expression of the colonial elites’ unified class interests.

Still, the Masonic connection has enough of a whiff of esoterica about it to convince many anti-Masonic writers that the American Revolution was a Freemason-coup d’état. Among these folk, the imagery of the Great Seal is a visual secret handshake among the initiated that acknowledges the dark truth about who really runs this country.

Curious, tolerant readers are welcome to wade out into the wide Sargasso Sea of the internet to find out for themselves how to crack the code of the Great Seal. But in those benighted days before the internet, sci-fi writers Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson mapped all this out (and much, much more) in *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* (1975), a complex, sprawling fairy tale about meaning, knowledge, and the hidden hands of power (the first volume of this work is titled *The Eye in the Pyramid*).

Shea and Wilson spoof the obsessive wheels-within-wheels political paranoia of conspiratologists by cutting-and-pasting together a fractured narrative of hypotheses, coincidences, historical events, and completely fictionalized bibliographic citations surrounding the occult activities of the Illuminati of Bavaria.

In the end, the books’ wacky narratives and counter-narratives comprise a sustained interrogation of the arbitrariness and the illegitimacy of the methods and institutions of politics, governance, and authority, a feat that arguably qualifies it as one of the most important works of anarchist fiction in the last forty-five years.

Goodfellow remembers reading *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* “the year before creating the logo” for *Fifth Estate*. The book was an FE bookstore bestseller,

The zapped pyramid remains as relevant a badge of anti-authoritarian disobedience as it did when it first appeared in FE in the mid-1970s. Even if you were not aware of its intimate connection to the ideas of Robert Anton Wilson, you could recognize its significance simply as a demolition of the Great Seal as it appears on the dollar.

Beyond the anti-capitalist connotations, though, the zapped pyramid can be pushed open to cover a broader, more general rejection of U.S. political and cultural hegemony. Goodfellow’s image can be interpreted as a defiant refusal to serve this settler nation of racial segregation, crackpot Puritanism, violent Manifest Destiny fantasies, and shameless plutocratic rule.

The early twentieth-century Irish writer, James Joyce, remixed the “non serviam” of Milton’s Lucifer in his 1914 novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church.”

This credo is leavened into the FE’s zapped pyramid, and that its image will continue to serve as a talisman for anyone who has decided to refuse and rebel.

Our dear friend and comrade, Don LaCoss (1964–2011), died suddenly following a respiratory illness during a terrible winter. It was an immeasurable loss to all of us who worked with and loved him.

Don was editing the Spring 2011 *Fifth Estate* at the time when he fell ill. It was completed by his friends in La Cross, Wisconsin where he lived. A tribute to Don is in that issue at FifthEstate.org/archive; go to issue #384.



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