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*A Turn of the Head***Hit the target and WIN A FREE GIFT!**

Claim: During wartime, the seal of the President of the United States is modified so that the eagle's head faces the opposite direction.

Status: *False.*

Example: *[Collected on the Internet, 2001]*

Almost a year ago, the "West Wing" aired an episode where the United States was at war. An observation was made about the Presidential Seal during war time. The Presidential Seal, has a shield bearing bald eagle clutching olive branches in its right talons and arrows in its left. The eagles head is turned toward the olive branches. The "West Wing" mentioned that in times of war, the Presidential Seals are replaced with an eagle whose head is turned toward the arrows.

Origins: The Great Seal of the President of the United States was fixed in its current form -- featuring a coat of arms similar to the one found on The Great Seal of the United States, with an eagle clutching thirteen arrows in one talon and an olive branch in the other -- well over fifty years ago, so most of us do not recall a time when it looked any different. Prior to 1945, however, the coat of arms of the presidential seal bore a marked difference to the coat of arms of the Great Seal -- the eagle on the presidential seal faced to the viewer's right, towards the talon with the arrows, while the eagle on the Great Seal faced the opposite direction:



The presidential seal changed on 25 October 1945 when President Truman issued Executive Order 9646. This order made several alterations to the presidential flag and seal, among which was the reversal of the eagle's head so that it pointed in the same direction as the one on the Great Seal:

One morning, standing at his desk, [President Truman] presented to the press a new presidential flag . . . "This new flag faces the eagle toward the staff," Truman explained, "which is looking to the front all the time when you are on the march, and also has him looking at the olive branch for peace, instead of the arrows for war . . ." Both the flag and presidential seal had been redesigned for the first time since the Wilson years, and Truman meant the shift in the eagle's gaze to be seen as symbolic of a nation both on the march and dedicated to peace.¹



How the legend arose that the eagle's head on the presidential seal changes direction during wartime (mentioned, as noted above, in an episode of NBC's *The West Wing*) is unknown. It probably came about because people noticed that previous changes to the presidential flag had occurred just before America's entry into World War I; that the

presidential seal's coat of arms used to be different than the Great Seal's, with an eagle facing the opposite direction; and that the direction of the eagle's head and other details changed again just after the end of World War II. One might surmise from these observations (if unaware that the presidential seal had not changed at the end of World War I or the beginning of World War II) that the eagle on the presidential seal had *always* faced towards the olive branch and its occasional reversal was a wartime aberration.

(To the modern audiences who believe in this legend, the fact that the Congress of the United States has not issued a declaration of war since World War II could be offered as an explanation as to why the eagle's head has not changed direction since 1945, even though the U.S. has taken part in several wars since then.)

The notion of an official seal's using as its centerpiece an eagle whose gaze changed direction based upon the state of belligerency in the world was the subject of a wry comment by Prime Minister Winston Churchill of Great Britain during his 1946 visit to the United States:

Pointing to the President's seal on the wall of the [train] car, Truman explained that he had had the eagle's head turned to face the olive branch. Churchill said he thought the eagle's head should be on a swivel.¹

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American History



Next legend

