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Here's why flags in Mass. have been lowered more often recently

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JOE PENNEY/REUTERS

An American flag flown at half-staff.

By Matt Rocheleau

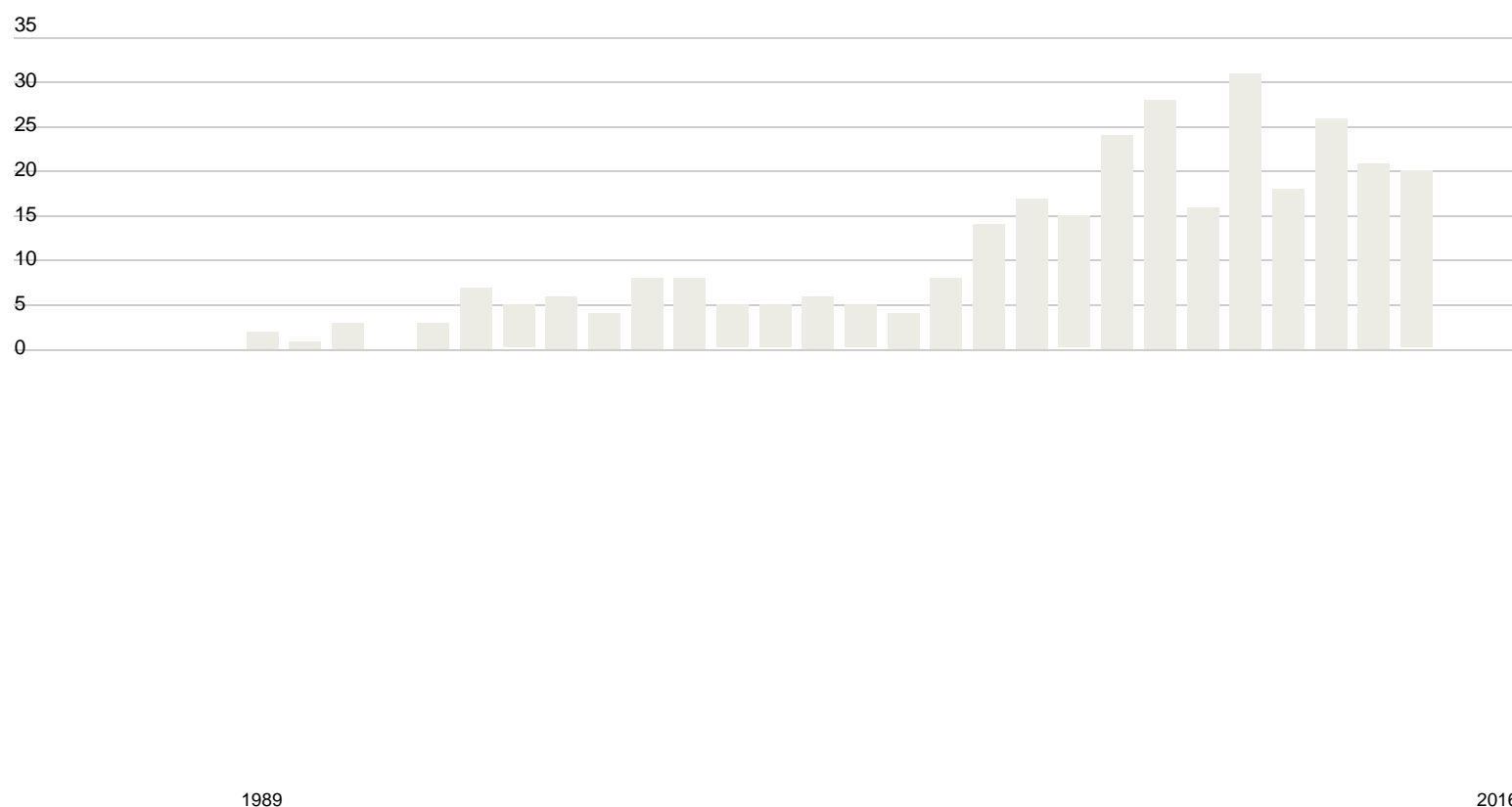
GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 11, 2016

American flags around Massachusetts have been lowered to half-staff in recent years far more often

than they used to be. The reason has particular resonance on this Veterans Day holiday, a day to honor military service and sacrifice.

Flags were lowered 21 times a year, on average, in the 10-year span ending in 2015, records show. That was 3 1/2 times more frequently than in the preceding decade, when flags were lowered about six times per year, on average.

The flag has been at half-staff 310 times since 1989



1989

2016

MATT ROCHELEAU, PATRICK GARVIN/GLOBE STAFF

Major tragedies — like mass shootings, terrorist attacks, and natural disasters — that tend to generate headlines have contributed to some of the increase in flag-lowering orders in recent years.

But such instances account for a relatively small part of the trend.

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Instead, the marked increase in flags flying at half-staff has been due primarily to the gradually rising toll of the country's wars.



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Flag experts say that the rising number of military deaths, including from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, has been coupled with a growing sense that displaying the flag at half-staff for the fallen, particularly in the states they were from, is fitting.

“It’s a way to say to families and friends who’ve lost someone, ‘You’re not alone, the state is grieving with you,’ and to show that the person they love who died in battle sacrificed for a cause greater than themselves,” said John Hartvigsen, president of the [North American Vexillological Association](#), a Boston-based nonprofit dedicated to the study of flags.

“That has been a comforting thing and I think it’s grown for that reason,” he added.

Deaths of first responders, like police officers and firefighters, have also contributed to some of the increase in flag-lowering orders in recent years, though to a lesser extent.

“All of this reflects our increased understanding of the sacrifices made by military, by police, by firefighters, and first responders. We’re more aware of it and more supportive of it,” said Hartvigsen. “Even in cases where people disagree with the reasons for going to war, they will still honor those who lost their lives in the war.”

In some cases in recent years, half-staff displays have been requested by family members and loved ones, advocacy groups, and local officials.

For example, “A lot of veterans’ groups have made it a point to communicate specifically with governors’ offices for tragedies that strike a particular state or to honor particular military members from a state,” said Tim Lankford, a flag protocol expert at the American Legion.

What the event was

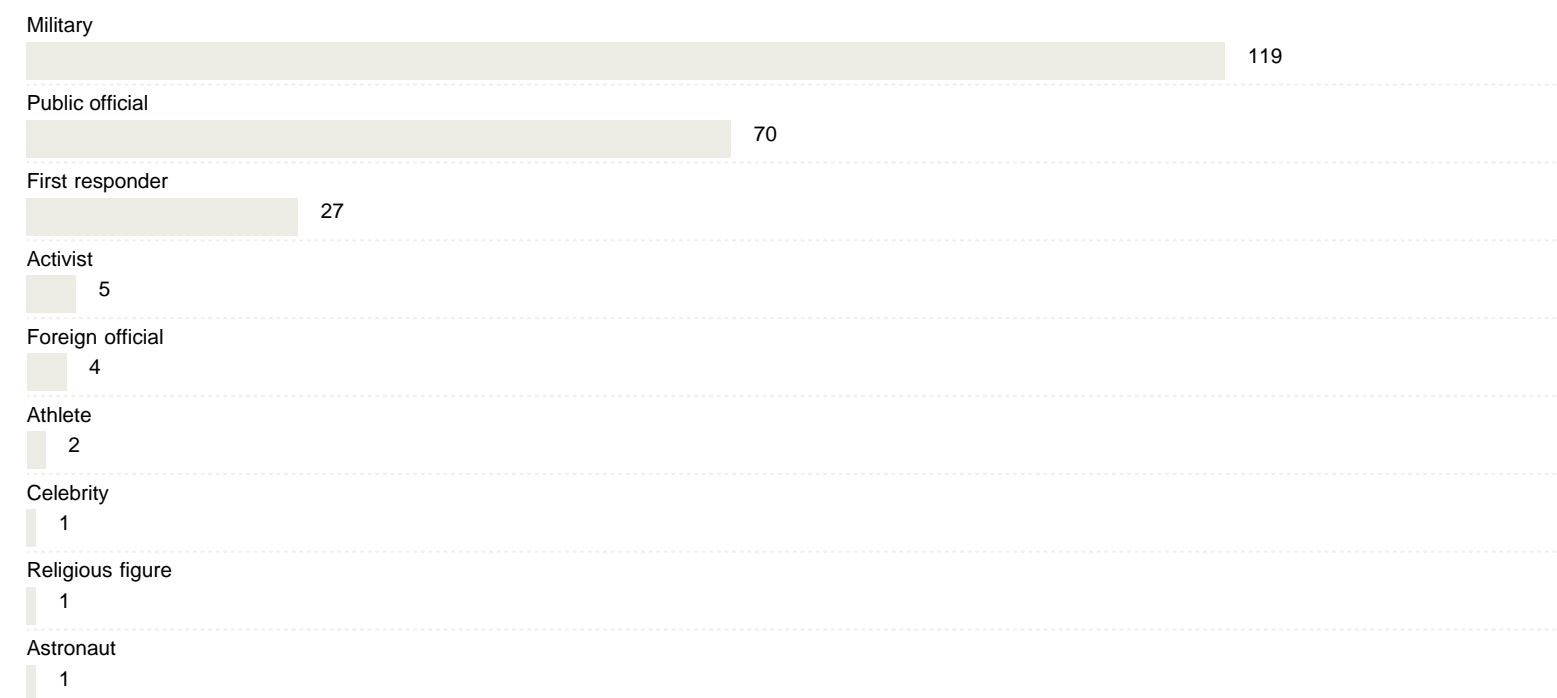
TRAGEDY DEATH HOLIDAY/REMEMBRANCE



MATT ROCHELEAU, PATRICK GARVIN/GLOBE STAFF

Types of deaths

How the 230 deaths break down:



MATT ROCHELEAU, PATRICK GARVIN/GLOBE STAFF

Flag experts said that there are both federal and state-specific rules outlining when the flags should be ordered lowered. For example, the rules list certain holidays and the deaths of certain former or current elected leaders as occasions when the orders should be issued.

In 2007, an amendment to the U.S. Flag Code spelled out that flags may be ordered lowered to honor military members who died while on active duty.

Ultimately, it is the president's call for nationwide orders to lower the flag, and up to each governor within their states, experts said.

Flag-lowering orders are up nationwide, and that has generated some concern over whether the gesture is being overused, potentially diluting its impact.

Some states in recent years have moved to tighten restrictions on when, and for how long, flags should be lowered, according to The Associated Press.

On the flip side, presidents and governors have faced [criticism](#) for not lowering the flag on certain occasions in recent years.

At the national level, President Barack Obama has ordered the flag lowered during his time in office more than any other president in US history, according to a recent analysis by [USA Today](#). The next most was by his predecessor George W. Bush.

Experts said that national tragedies — in particular, deadly acts of violence — have driven the increase in presidential half-staff orders in recent years.

An analysis by The [Associated Press](#) found that flags were lowered at least someplace in the country, either by the president or governors, on 328 days during 2015.

“The flag is at half-staff somewhere in the country virtually every day,” said Hartvigsen.

“Nowadays, there’s so many [lowerings] you walk outside and you see a flag at half-staff and you say ‘Why?’” he added. “If we have to ask who the flag is at half-staff for, perhaps we’re overdoing it a bit.”

He said the American flag is a powerful symbol.

“This is something that’s tied in with our emotions,” he said. “When you overdo it, it makes that particular display less impressive and it loses it’s meaning.”


Placing flags at half-staff was first done on ships (it’s called half-mast when done at sea, and half-staff on land), and it has historically been used, to signify widespread grieving.

In some cases in recent years, flag lowerings have generated controversy, like instances in which a half-staff order was given to mourn the death of a celebrity, as it was in February 2012 when New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie ordered flags lowered to honor the death of singer Whitney Houston.

“We have received reports of flags being lowered for celebrities and our response has been that’s really not appropriate,” said Lankford.

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