

TED TALK

ROMAN MARS

“WHY CITY FLAGS MAY BE THE WORST THING YOU’VE NEVER NOTICED”

MARCH 2015

00:01

I know what you're thinking: "Why does that guy get to sit down?" That's because this is radio.

00:09

(Music)

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I tell radio stories about design, and I report on all kinds of stories: buildings and toothbrushes, mascots and wayfinding and fonts. My mission is to get people to engage with the design that they care about so they begin to pay attention to all forms of design. When you decode the world with design intent in mind, the world becomes kind of magical. Instead of seeing the broken things, you see all the little bits of genius that anonymous designers have sweated over to make our lives better. And that's essentially the definition of design: making life better and providing joy. And few things give me greater joy than a well-designed flag.

00:56

(Laughter)

00:57

Yeah!

00:59

(Applause)

01:01

Happy 50th anniversary on your flag, Canada. It is beautiful, gold standard. Love it.

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I'm kind of obsessed with flags. Sometimes I bring up the topic of flags, and people are like, "I don't care about flags," and then we start talking about flags, and trust me, 100 percent of people care about flags. There's just something about them that works on our emotions.

01:25

My family wrapped my Christmas presents as flags this year, including the blue gift bag that's dressed up as the flag of Scotland. I put this picture online, and sure enough, within the first few minutes, someone left a comment that said, "You can take that Scottish Saltire and shove it up your ass."

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(Laughter)

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See, people are passionate about flags, you know? That's the way it is.

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What I love about flags is that once you understand the design of flags, what makes a good flag, what makes a bad flag, you can understand the design of almost anything. So what I'm going to do here is, I cracked open an episode of my radio show, "99% Invisible," and I'm going to reconstruct it here on stage, so when I press a button over here --Voice: S for Sound -- Roman Mars: It's going to make a sound, and so whenever you hear a sound or a voice or a piece of music, it's because I pressed a button.

02:18

Voice: Sound.

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RM: All right, got it? Here we go. Three, two.

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This is 99% Invisible. I'm Roman Mars.

02:34

(Music)

02:36

Narrator: The five basic principles of flag design.

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Roman Mars: According to the North American Vexillological Association. Vexillological.

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Ted Kaye: Vexillology is the study of flags.

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RM: It's that extra "lol" that makes it sound weird.

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Narrator: Number one, keep it simple. The flag should be so simple that a child can draw it from memory.

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RM: Before I moved to Chicago in 2005, I didn't even know cities had their own flags.

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TK: Most larger cities do have flags.

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RM: Well, I didn't know that, that's Ted Kaye, by the way.

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TK: Hello. RM: He's a flag expert, he's a totally awesome guy.

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TK: I'm Ted Kaye, I have edited a scholarly journal on flag studies, and I am currently involved with the Portland Flag Association and the North American Vexillological Association.

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RM: Ted literally wrote the book on flag design.

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Narrator: "Good Flag, Bad Flag."

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RM: It's more of a pamphlet, really, it's about 16 pages.

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TK: Yes, it's called "Good Flag, Bad Flag: How to Design a Great Flag."

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RM: And that first city flag I discovered in Chicago is a beaut: white field, two horizontal blue stripes, and four six-pointed red stars down the middle.

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(Sound)

03:41

Narrator: Number two, use meaningful symbolism.

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TK: The blue stripes represent the water, the river and the lake.

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Narrator: The flag's images, colors or pattern should relate to what it symbolizes.

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TK: The red stars represent significant events in Chicago's history.

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RM: Namely, the founding of Fort Dearborn on the future site of Chicago, the Great Chicago Fire, the World Columbian Exposition, which everyone remembers because of the White City, and the Century of Progress Exposition, which no one remembers at all.

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Narrator: Number three, use two to three basic colors.

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TK: The basic rule for colors is to use two to three colors from the standard color set: red, white, blue, green, yellow and black.

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RM: The design of the Chicago flag has complete buy-in with an entire cross-section of the city. It is everywhere; every municipal building flies the flag.

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Whet Moser: There's probably at least one store on every block near where I work that sells some sort of Chicago flag paraphernalia.

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RM: That's Whet Moser from Chicago magazine.

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WM: Today, just for example, I went to get a haircut, and when I sat down in the barber's chair, there was a Chicago flag on the box that the barber kept all his tools in, and then in the mirror, there was a Chicago flag on the wall behind me. When I left, a guy passed me who had a Chicago flag badge on his backpack.

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RM: It's adaptable and remixable. The six-pointed stars in particular show up in all kinds of places.

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WM: The coffee I bought the other day had a Chicago star on it.

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RM: It's a distinct symbol of Chicago pride.

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TK: When a police officer or a firefighter dies in Chicago, often it's not the flag of the United States on his casket. It can be the flag of the city of Chicago. That's how deeply the flag has gotten into the civic imagery of Chicago.

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RM: And it isn't just that people love Chicago and therefore love the flag. I also think that people love Chicago more because the flag is so cool.

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TK: A positive feedback loop there between great symbolism and civic pride.

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RM: OK, so when I moved back to San Francisco in 2008, I researched its flag, because I had never seen it in the previous eight years I lived there. And I found it, I am sorry to say, sadly lacking.

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(Laughter)

05:58

I know. It hurts me, too.

06:01

(Laughter)

06:04

TK: Well, let me start from the top.

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Narrator: Number one, keep it simple.

06:08

TK: Keeping it simple.

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Narrator: The flag should be so simple that a child can draw it from memory.

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TK: It's a relatively complex flag.

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RM: OK, here we go, OK. The main component of the San Francisco flag is a phoenix representing the city rising from the ashes after the devastating fires of the 1850s.

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TK: A powerful symbol for San Francisco.

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RM: I still don't really dig the phoenix. Design-wise, it manages to both be too crude and have too many details at the same time, which if you were trying for that, you wouldn't be able to do it, and it just looks bad at a distance, but having deep meaning puts that element in the plus column. Behind the phoenix, the background is mostly white, and then it has a substantial gold border around it.

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TK: Which is a very attractive design element.

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RM: I think it's OK, but --

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(Laughter) here come the big no-nos of flag design.

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Narrator: Number four, no lettering or seals. Never use writing of any kind.

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RM: Underneath the phoenix, there's a motto on a ribbon that translates to "Gold in peace, iron in war," plus -- and this is the big problem -- it says San Francisco across the bottom.

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TK: If you need to write the name of what you're representing on your flag, your symbolism has failed.

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(Laughter)

07:22

(Applause)

07:24

RM: The United States flag doesn't say "USA" across the front. In fact, country flags, they tend to behave. Like, hats off to South Africa and Turkey and Israel and Somalia and Japan and Gambia. There's a bunch of really great country flags, but they obey good design principles because the stakes are high. They're on the international stage. But city, state and regional flags are another story.

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(Laughter)

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There is a scourge of bad flags --

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(Laughter)

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and they must be stopped.

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(Laughter)

07:59

(Applause)

08:00

That is the truth and that is the dare. The first step is to recognize that we have a problem.

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(Laughter)

08:12

A lot of people tend to think that good design is just a matter of taste, and quite honestly, sometimes it is, actually, but sometimes it isn't, all right?

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(Laughter)

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Here's the full list of NAVA flag design principles.

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Narrator: The five basic principles of flag design.

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Narrator: Number one. TK: Keep it simple.

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Narrator: Number two. TK: Use meaningful symbolism.

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Narrator: Number three. TK: Use two to three basic colors.

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Narrator: Number four. TK: No lettering or seals.

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Narrator: Never use writing of any kind.

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TK: Because you can't read that at a distance.

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Narrator: Number five. TK: And be distinctive.

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RM: All the best flags tend to stick to these principles. And like I said before, most country flags are OK. But here's the thing: if you showed this list of principles to any designer of almost anything, they would say these principles -- simplicity, deep meaning, having few colors or being thoughtful about colors, uniqueness, don't have writing you can't read -- all those principles apply to them, too. But sadly, good design principles are rarely invoked in US city flags. Our biggest problem seems to be that fourth one. We just can't stop ourselves from putting our names on our flags, or little municipal seals with tiny writing on them. Here's the thing about municipal seals: They were designed to be on pieces of paper where you can read them, not on flags 100 feet away flapping in the breeze.

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So here's a bunch of flags again. Vexillologists call these SOB's: Seals on a bedsheet --

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(Laughter)

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and if you can't tell what city they go to, yeah, that's exactly the problem, except for Anaheim, apparently, they fixed it.

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(Laughter)

09:51

These flags are everywhere in the US. The European equivalent of the municipal seal is the city coat of arms ... and this is where we can learn a lesson for how to do things right. So this is the city coat of arms of Amsterdam. Now, if this were a United States city, the flag would probably look like this. You know, yeah.

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(Laughter)

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But instead, the flag of Amsterdam looks like this. Rather than plopping the whole coat of arms on a solid background and writing "Amsterdam" below it, they just take the key elements of the escutcheon, the shield, and they turn it into the most badass city flag in the world.

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(Laughter)

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(Applause)

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And because it's so badass, those flags and crosses are found throughout Amsterdam, just like Chicago, they're used.

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Even though seal-on-a-bedsheet flags are particularly painful and offensive to me, nothing can quite prepare you for one of the biggest train wrecks in vexillological history.

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(Laughter)

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Are you ready? It's the flag of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

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(Laughter)

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I mean, it's distinctive, I'll give them that.

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Steve Kodis: It was adopted in 1955.

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RM: The city ran a contest and gathered a bunch of submissions with all kinds of designs.

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SK: And an alderman by the name of Fred Steffan cobbled together parts of the submissions to make what is now the Milwaukee flag.

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RM: It's a kitchen sink flag. There's a gigantic gear representing industry, there's a ship recognizing the port, a giant stalk of wheat paying homage to the brewing industry. It's a hot mess, and Steve Kodis, a graphic designer from Milwaukee, wants to change it.

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SK: It's really awful. It's a misstep on the city's behalf, to say the least.

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RM: But what puts the Milwaukee flag over the top, almost to the point of self-parody, is on it is a picture of the Civil War battle flag of the Milwaukee regiment.

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SK: So that's the final element in it that just makes it that much more ridiculous, that there is a flag design within the Milwaukee flag.

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RM: On the flag. Yeah. Yeah.

12:17

(Laughter)

12:18

Yeah.

12:20

(Music)

12:21

Now, Milwaukee is a fantastic city. I've been there, I love it. The most depressing part of this flag, though, is that there have been two major redesign contests. The last one was held in 2001. 105 entries were received.

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TK: But in the end, the members of the Milwaukee Arts Board decided that none of the new entries were worthy of flying over the city.

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RM: They couldn't agree to change that thing!

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(Laughter)

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That's discouraging enough to make you think that good design and democracy just simply do not go together.

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(Laughter)

12:53

But Steve Kotas is going to try one more time to redesign the Milwaukee flag.

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SK: I believe Milwaukee is a great city. Every great city deserves a great flag.

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RM: Steve isn't ready to reveal his design yet. One of the things about proposing one of these things is you have to get people on board, and then you reveal your design. But here's the trick: If you want to design a great flag, a kick-ass flag like Chicago's or DC's, which also has a great flag, start by drawing a one-by-one-and-a-half-inch rectangle on a piece of paper. Your design has to fit within that tiny rectangle. Here's why.

13:27

TK: A three-by-five-foot flag on a pole 100 feet away looks about the same size as a one-by-one-and-a-half-inch rectangle seen about 15 inches from your eye. You'd be surprised by how compelling and simple the design can be when you hold yourself to that limitation.

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RM: Meanwhile, back in San Francisco. Is there anything we can do?

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TK: I like to say that in every bad flag there's a good flag trying to get out. The way to make San Francisco's flag a good flag is to take the motto off because you can't read that at a distance. Take the name off, and the border might even be made thicker, so it's more a part of the flag. And I would simply take the phoenix and make it a great big element in the middle of the flag.

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RM: But the current phoenix, that's got to go.

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TK: I would simplify or stylize the phoenix. Depict a big, wide-winged bird coming out of flames. Emphasize those flames.

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RM: So this San Francisco flag was designed by Frank Chimero based on Ted Kaye's suggestions. I don't know what he would do if we was completely unfettered and didn't follow those guidelines. Fans of my radio show and podcast, heard me complain about bad flags. They've sent me other suggested designs. This one's by Neil Mussett. Both are so much better.

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(Laughter)

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And I think if they were adopted, I would see them around the city.

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In my crusade to make flags of the world more beautiful, many listeners have taken it upon themselves to redesign their flags and look into the feasibility of getting them officially adopted.

15:03

(Music)

15:04

If you see your city flag and like it, fly it, even if it violates a design rule or two. I don't care. But if you don't see your city flag, maybe it doesn't exist, but maybe it does, and it just sucks, and I dare you to join the effort to try to change that.

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As we move more and more into cities, the city flag will become not just a symbol of that city as a place, but also, it could become a symbol of how that city considers design itself, especially today, as the populace is becoming more design-aware. And I think design awareness is at an all-time high. A well-designed flag could be seen as an indicator of how a city considers all of its design systems: its public transit, its parks, its signage. It might seem frivolous, but it's not.

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TK: Often when city leaders say, "We have more important things to do than worry about a city flag," my response is, "If you had a great city flag, you would have a banner for people to rally under to face those more important things."

16:13

(Music)

16:14

RM: I've seen firsthand what a good city flag can do in the case of Chicago. The marriage of good design and civic pride is something that we need in all places. The best part about municipal flags is that we own them. They are an open-source, publicly owned design language of the community. When they are done well, they are remixable, adaptable, and they are powerful. We could control the branding and graphical imagery of our cities with a good flag, but instead, by having bad flags we don't use, we cede that territory to sports teams and chambers of commerce and tourism boards. Sports teams can leave and break our hearts. And besides, some of us don't really care about sports. And tourism campaigns can just be cheesy. But a great city flag is something that represents a city to its people and its people to the world at large. And when that flag is a beautiful thing, that connection is a beautiful thing.

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So maybe all the city flags can be as inspiring as Hong Kong or Portland or Trondheim, and we can do away with all the bad flags like San Francisco, Milwaukee, Cedar Rapids, and finally, when we're all done, we can do something about Pocatello, Idaho, considered by the North American Vexillological Association as the worst city flag in North America.

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[Proud to be Pocatello]

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(Laughter)

17:39

(Applause)

17:43

Yeah.

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(Applause)

17:46

That thing has a trademark symbol on it, people.

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(Laughter)

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That hurts me just to look at.

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(Laughter)

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Thank you so much for listening.

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(Applause)

18:01

[Music by: Melodium (@melodiumbox) and Keegan DeWitt (@keegandewitt)]