

Revising the Pledge of Allegiance

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A 2004 court case challenging the use of the words “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance invites us to rethink the words and purpose of the Pledge. Most of us learned the familiar words as children and have had little incentive to give them much thought since.

Members of *my* generation retain a residual discomfort with the Pledge, having experienced the distress of its being changed during our school days. The words “under God” were inserted when I was in the third grade, and the current Pledge has never fallen trippingly from my tongue.

The change was championed by the Knights of Columbus during the dark days of the Cold War and was authorized by congressional action in 1954. It was the fourth modification of the Pledge since it was written in 1892 by socialist preacher Francis Bellamy (1855-1931). The first change was made by the author soon after the Pledge was written for use in a flag-raising ceremony for public schools to honor the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s landing in the New World. Bellamy added a second instance of the preposition “to,” converting a phrase with a compound object into two conjoined prepositional phrases. (The original beginning was: “I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands.”) The change, made weeks after the first publication in *The Youth’s Companion*, improved the cadence of the Pledge.

Revisions made in 1923 and 1924 replaced “my Flag,” first with “the Flag of the United States,” and then with “the Flag of the United States of America,” presumably to avoid any ambiguity in the minds of the immigrants who were then flooding into the country. The changes, which struck an institutional tone where there had been a more personal one, were made over the objections of Francis Bellamy.

The most recent change, still controversial, not only juxtaposes references to church and state in a manner uncomfortable to traditional American sensibilities, but, ironically, it also divides “one Nation” from “indivisible” by an unrelated phrase and a comma. In 1892, the Civil War was part of the not-too-distant past, and “one Nation indivisible” made a powerful, emotional statement. It would seem that “one Nation

indivisible, under God” or even “one indivisible Nation under God” would have been more logical and more respectful of the original text. Godless Communism was a more pressing concern at the time than was civil discord. Francis Bellamy’s granddaughter objected that he would have opposed this edit as well, and therein lies another irony. Bellamy had been run out of his pulpit in 1891 because of his socialist sermons, and, in semi-retirement in Florida, he ceased attending church altogether because of the racial bigotry he found there.

The Pledge has now been a fixture in American schools for more than a century. It is an expression of patriotism and a tool of socialization, though some would say of indoctrination. Despite his having been accused of impure motives, Bellamy exercised remarkable restraint in writing his Pledge, probably because he knew that its widespread use required that it express mainstream sentiments. Like the National Anthem, with its somewhat more oblique invocation of “the land of the free and the home of the brave,” the Pledge does allude to what truly makes us a nation, namely our unique form of government. In many other places—Russia comes most readily to mind—the land itself, or perhaps a particular government, is the focus of patriotism. Technically, the Pledge has the right emphasis, but both Pledge and Anthem use the flag as a concrete symbol of, and surrogate for, the Republic.

Unfortunately, symbols are sometimes confused with the thing symbolized. In the case of the flag, this phenomenon is exemplified in the repeated attempts to pass a constitutional amendment to prevent flag burning. While I am not too keen on the idea of burning the flag in protest, I feel no threat from flag burners *qua* flag burners. People who are quick to sacrifice civil liberties in the name of “homeland security,” on the other hand, are more worrisome. It is fine to instill reverence for the flag, but respect should not be allowed to become fetishism or idolatry. Perhaps a pledge should come right to the point and focus, not on the flag, but on the Constitution.

We have a model for such an approach in the presidential oath of office: “I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.” This oath is inappropriate for schoolchildren, but it suggests words that might help us “fix” the Pledge of Allegiance. If we are to be so bold as to

propose changes to it yet again, we may as well look for other defects, recognizing, of course, that this is an intellectual exercise unlikely to attract much political support.

We begin with the three defects that we have identified: a misleading emphasis on the flag and a corresponding failure to mention the Constitution explicitly, as well as an inappropriate and clumsy reference to God—let there be no doubt as to where I stand here. The legal community generally seems to believe that the inclusion of “under God” is unconstitutional, but that an attempt to dump it would cause a political firestorm. It is also worth noting that “liberty and justice for all” is an aspiration not always realized.

The beginning of the Pledge is problematic as well. Most children I encounter do not often use either the word “pledge” or the word “allegiance,” yet the Pledge of Allegiance was written for children. A simpler, more colloquial wording is called for. Besides, even though “allegiance” has become the standard technical term denoting one’s duty to the state, the word evokes the medieval relationship of liege and vassal and seems somewhat Orwellian in the classroom. I would rather that children pledge out of love for their country than out of a sense of duty to their country.

The President, members of the military, and citizens being naturalized all swear oaths to protect the Constitution, not the United States. There is a danger of becoming too abstract in following this lead in the rewriting of the Pledge, however, and, by taking small liberties, we can make substantial improvements while maintaining familiar phrases, avoiding disruption of the cadence, and even doing a little teaching. Here then is my suggested revision:

I promise to be faithful to the United States of America and to preserve, protect, and defend its Constitution, the foundation of our Republic: one nation indivisible, seeking liberty and justice for all.

This version is intended to address the problems noted here without making a complete break with the past. It is only two words longer than the current Pledge (33 vs. 31), though it is 10 *syllables* longer (59 vs. 49), the result of including words like “Constitution” and “foundation.” We

could continue to call this the “Pledge of Allegiance,” although, by analogy to the original, we could also call it the “Promise of Faithfulness” or some such. I do not know what Francis Bellamy would have preferred.

We are, alas, creatures of habit, and, if I was disturbed by a two-word change in the Pledge, how much trauma would a complete revision cause? Perhaps, when the Supreme Court finally summons up the courage to ban the words “under God” as a violation of the principle of separation of church and state—an unlikely development from the current court—my revision, or something like it, will provide the smokescreen necessary to remove those words under the pretext of fixing all the other problems of the Pledge.

I pray to God for that development.