

The Pledge of Allegiance: the Emperor's New Cloth?

1. What Happened? [*1]

The three-member 9th Circuit panel of San Francisco Supreme Court of the appeals court ruled on June 26, 2002 in a 2-1 decision that reciting the Pledge of Allegiance is unconstitutional because of the addition of the phrase "under God".

Here is the full context: "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

Citing a concurring opinion in a Supreme Court decision, the 9th Circuit panel said, "The Pledge, as currently codified, is an impermissible government endorsement of religion because it sends a message to unbelievers 'that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.'" The 1954 insertion of the "under God" phrase by Congress, the panel said, was made "to recognize a Supreme Being" and advance religion at a time "when the government was publicly inveighing against atheistic communism."

Dr. Michael Newdow, a Sacramento, California, physician with a law degree who represented himself and whose daughter attends public school in Elk Grove, said he brought the lawsuit that led to the ruling "because I am an atheist and this offends me." Newdow said that since the ruling he has received death threats, including one left on his answering machine that said, "You're a dead man walking."

He defended his actions, saying he is fighting for the Constitution. "The issue is whether or not government should be placing religion in the public schools or anywhere else," he said.

The ruling created a firestorm across most of the nation and especially on White House and Capitol Hill, with "ridiculous" (President Bush) and "nuts" being used as the buzzwords to describe the court's opinion. The Senate was so outraged that it passed a resolution 99-0 expressing full support for the Pledge of Allegiance and on June 27, 2002 voted 99-0 to recodify the "under God" language in the pledge.

Attorney General John Ashcroft said on June 27, 2002 the Justice Department will ask the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to reconsider a three-judge panel's ruling declaring the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools unconstitutional. "The Justice Department will defend the ability of our nation's children to pledge allegiance to the American flag by requesting a rehearing en banc [full bench] by the full 9th Circuit," Ashcroft said in a statement.

California Gov. Gray Davis said his state was "going to take decisive action to overturn this decision." He said the state was in touch throughout the day with the Justice Department and local school boards named in the suit. "This decision was wrongheaded and it should not be allowed to stand," Davis said. "With troops overseas, this is the wrong decision at the worst possible time."

2. A Short History of the Pledge [*2]

Francis Bellamy (1855 - 1931), a Baptist minister, wrote the original Pledge in August 1892. He was a Christian Socialist. In his Pledge, he is expressing the ideas of his first cousin, Edward Bellamy, author of the American socialist utopian novels, *Looking Backward* (1888) and *Equality* (1897).

Francis Bellamy in his sermons and lectures and Edward Bellamy in his novels and articles described in detail how the middle class could create a planned economy with political, social and economic equality for all. The government would run a peace time economy similar to our present military industrial complex.

The Pledge was published in the September 8th issue of *The Youth's Companion*, the leading family magazine and the *Reader's Digest* of its day. Its owner and editor, Daniel Ford, had hired Francis in 1891 as his assistant when Francis was pressured into leaving his Baptist church in Boston because of his socialist

sermons. As a member of his congregation, Ford had enjoyed Francis's sermons. Ford later founded the liberal and often controversial Ford Hall Forum, located in downtown Boston.

In 1892 Francis Bellamy was also a chairman of a committee of state superintendents of education in the National Education Association. As its chairman, he prepared the program for the public schools' quadricentennial celebration for Columbus Day in 1892. He structured this public school program around a flag raising ceremony and a flag salute - his 'Pledge of Allegiance.'

His original Pledge read as follows: 'I pledge allegiance to my Flag and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.' He considered placing the word, 'equality,' in his Pledge, but knew that the state superintendents of education on his committee were against equality for women and African Americans.

Dr. Mortimer Adler, American philosopher and last living founder of the Great Books program at Saint John's College, has analyzed these ideas in his book, *The Six Great Ideas*. He argues that the three great ideas of the American political tradition are 'equality, liberty and justice for all.' 'Justice' mediates between the often conflicting goals of 'liberty' and 'equality.'

In 1923 and 1924 the National Flag Conference, under the 'leadership of the American Legion and the Daughters of the American Revolution, changed the Pledge's words, 'my Flag,' to 'the Flag of the United States of America.' Bellamy disliked this change, but his protest was ignored.

In 1954, Congress after a campaign by the Knights of Columbus, added the words, 'under God,' to the Pledge. The Pledge was now both a patriotic oath and a public prayer.

Bellamy's granddaughter said he also would have resented this second change. He had been pressured into leaving his church in 1891 because of his socialist sermons. In his retirement in Florida, he stopped attending church because he disliked the racial bigotry he found there.

What follows is Bellamy's own account of some of the thoughts that went through his mind in August, 1892, as he picked the words of his Pledge: "It began as an intensive communing with salient points of our national history, from the Declaration of Independence onwards; with the makings of the Constitution...with the meaning of the Civil War; with the aspiration of the people..."

The true reason for allegiance to the Flag is the 'republic for which it stands.' ...And what does that vast thing, the Republic mean? It is the concise political word for the Nation - the One Nation which the Civil War was fought to prove. To make that One Nation idea clear, we must specify that it is indivisible, as Webster and Lincoln used to repeat in their great speeches.

Just here arose the temptation of the historic slogan of the French Revolution which meant so much to Jefferson and his friends, 'Liberty, equality, fraternity.' No, that would be too fanciful, too many thousands of years off in realization. But we as a nation do stand square on the doctrine of liberty and justice for all...

If the Pledge's historical pattern repeats, its words will be modified during this decade. A few liberals recite a slightly revised version of Bellamy's original Pledge: 'I pledge allegiance to my Flag, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with equality, liberty and justice for all.'

The above short history clearly indicates that the very true "Americanism" of the Pledge is without using God because the author himself was a Baptist minister. Jesus Christ differentiated what belong to God from what belong to Caesar. As Thomas Paine, a true father of the American Revolution, the Pledge's author also knew precisely that God should not, cannot, and will not be used by human.

3. Theological Politics

America's ruling class are outraged, because they precisely know that the 9th Circuit panel's rule is right and they precisely know that the Pledge is unconstitutional. Unconstitutional is unconstitutional. You

cannot cite another unconstitutional mistake (even if it is from the Declaration of Independence) to clarify the Pledge.

However, as they needed the Pledge with the insertion “under God” in 1954 publicly inveighing against atheistic communism, they need it right now to their global war against “terrorism.” God is humanized; God is utilized for human political purposes; God is used to serve America’s “national interest.”

We also observed how faraway is our current International Politics from reason in Japanese Politics after the Cold War. Japan is rushing enforcing its “National Anthem” Kimigayo [*4] and National Flag Hinomaru to all schools and its Premier Mori once stated Japan a “Nation of God.” God is crying!

Dr. Michael Newdow did a splendid job for America. I admit that I don’t have the courage to challenge my school district teaching my son to codify the Pledge. My best try is to explain him that “God” is perceived differently from different peoples: Christianity with its so many factions, Judaism as a national religion, Islam, (the perished) Sufism, Spinoza’s “Nature God” within reason [*3], Conte’s “Humanism” religion, Confucianism’s Heaven, Indian Thousand gods, and so on. Oh, my (cultural) God! Why do I have to explain such a complicated theological political issue to a Kindergarten kid when I myself have not reached a clear conclusion?

Notes

[*1] The following descriptions are edited from CNN:
<http://www.cnn.com/2002/LAW/06/27/pledge.allegiance/index.html>.

[*2] The following description part is cited from *The Pledge of Allegiance - A Short History*, by Dr. John W. Baer, <http://www.vineyard.net/vineyard/history/pledge.htm>.

[*3] Refer to Jing Zhao, *A Note Spinoza*, <http://cpri.tripod.com/cpr2001/spinoza.html> (Chinese GB).

[*4] Basil H. Chamberlain translated Kimigayo as follows:
“Thousands of years of happy reign be thine;
Rule on, my lord, till what are pebbles now
By age united to mighty rocks shall grow
Whose venerable sides the moss doth line.”

Provided by Tom Dowling, Sheffield University, Australia, posted on H-Japan, July 30, 1999.

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