

The Pledge of Allegiance

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Introduction

Since its creation in 1892, the Pledge of Allegiance has been spoken by hundreds of millions of American citizens. Along the way this simple pledge has undergone several important changes and sparked a number of controversies. At this very moment, somewhere in the United States, a group of schoolchildren are standing—right hand over heart—and participating in a time-honored civic ritual.

Origins of the Pledge

In 1891, the owner of a popular children's magazine called the *The Youth's Companion* hired Francis Julius Bellamy to (among other things) work on an effort to increase subscriptions by promoting the sale of American flags to schools. Together with the owner's nephew, James Upham, Bellamy and the rest of the magazine's premium department sold flags to more than 25,000 schools. Upham also planned on using the impending 400th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America to further bolster flag sales and the magazine's circulation. ⁽¹⁾⁽²⁾

Although Francis Bellamy had been hired to perform essentially a marketing job, he was actually a Baptist minister and dedicated Christian Socialist. As an adherent to this ideology, which maintains that capitalism is linked to avarice and is thus inherently immoral, Bellamy strove for "the rights of working people and the equal distribution of economic resources, which he believed was inherent in the teachings of Jesus." ⁽²⁾ Bellamy had even been forced the year before to leave his ministry in Boston because of the socialist messages of his sermons.

In August 1892, Bellamy, searching for words suitable for the Columbus anniversary event, began writing the pledge. His thoughts at that time illustrate both his patriotism and his underlying socialistic views.

[The Pledge] 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. And its future?

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...⁽³⁾

Just as Thomas Jefferson more than one hundred years before, here was a writer looking for the right words for the right job. In the true American marketing spirit (which is ironic, given his anti-capitalistic feelings), Bellamy honed his message down to just 22 words. Note that, consistent with his laments in the previous paragraph, he purposefully omitted the potentially controversial words *equality* and *fraternity*.

I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands: one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.⁽³⁾

When the September 8, 1892 issue of *The Youth’s Companion* offered a full-page spread of the magazine’s official program for the National School Celebration of Columbus Day, Bellamy’s brand new pledge ran under the heading, “Salute to the Flag.” Here is the entire paragraph (with the original line lengths).⁽⁴⁾

At a signal from the Principal the pupils, in ordered ranks, hands to the side, face the Flag. another signal is given; every pupil gives the Flag the military salute—right hand lifted, palm downward, to a line with the forehead and close to it. Standing thus, all repeat together, slowly: “I pledge allegiance to my flag and the Republic for which it stands; one Nation indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for all.” At the words, “to my Flag,” the right hand is extended gracefully, palm upward, towards the Flag, and remains in this gesture till the end of the affirmation; whereupon all hands immediately drop to the side. Then, still standing, as the instruments strike a chord, all will sing AMERICA—“My Country, ‘tis of Thee.”

Thus, in an attempt to sell magazines and flags while at the same time promoting patriotic values, Francis Bellamy created the Pledge of Allegiance.

An Evolving Pledge

The pledge currently being recited in classrooms and lodge halls around the United States is actually the fifth version. The reasons for changing the pledge range from grammatical nitpickiness to legitimate political and social concerns.

1892	I pledge allegiance to my flag and the republic for which it stands: one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.
Later that same year	I pledge allegiance to my flag and <u>to</u> the republic for which it stands: one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.
1923	I pledge allegiance to <u>the</u> flag <u>of the United States</u> and to the republic for which it stands: one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.
1924	I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States <u>of America</u> , and to the republic for which it stands; one nation indivisible with liberty and justice for all.
1954	I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation <u>under God</u> , indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Timeline of Major Events

1892	(August)	Bellamy writes the Pledge of Allegiance
1892	(Sep. 8)	Pledge appears in <i>The Youth's Companion</i>
1892	(Oct. 12)	Pledge is recited nationwide in public schools
1923		“My flag” is changed to “the Flag of the United States” so that immigrants understand they are not referring to the flag of their native countries
1940		U.S. Supreme Court rules that students may be compelled to say the pledge
1942		Congress officially recognizes the Pledge, along with changing the salute
1943		U.S. Supreme Court reverses the 1940 decision
1948		Louis Bowman originates the concept of adding “Under God”
1951		Knights of Columbus begin including “Under God” in their recitations of the Pledge
1954		Moved in part by a sermon he hears, President Eisenhower signs the law officially adding “Under God”
2002		U.S. Supreme Court refuses to hear case in which Michael Newdow challenges the legality of “Under God”
2006		U.S. Senate refuses to take up the issue of the so-called “Stripping Law” (which would make it illegal for Supreme Court to issue rulings about the Pledge)

The Power of Words

Although the Pledge of Allegiance contains only several dozen words, some of them are emotionally charged and profound. A look at each word's synonyms (and near-synonyms) can be interesting. Did Bellamy choose the right word?

- Pledge (verb)
 - ~ Vow
 - ~ Avow
 - ~ Swear
 - ~ Promise
 - ~ Assure
 - ~ Guarantee
- Allegiance (noun)
 - ~ Loyalty
 - ~ Fealty
 - ~ Obedience
 - ~ Faithfulness
 - ~ Commitment
- Republic (noun)
 - ~ Democracy
 - ~ Nation
 - ~ Federation
 - ~ Country
- Indivisible (adjective)
 - ~ Unbreakable
 - ~ Inseparable
 - ~ United
 - ~ Undividable
 - ~ Indissoluble
- Liberty (noun)
 - ~ Freedom
 - ~ Independence
 - ~ Rights
 - ~ Choice
- Justice (noun)
 - ~ Fairness
 - ~ Impartiality
 - ~ Evenhandedness

Legal Language

Below is an excerpt from United States law regarding the Pledge of Allegiance.

Title 4, Chapter 1 of United States Code (currently in effect)

The Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag: “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,” should be rendered by standing at attention facing the flag with the right hand over the heart. When not in uniform men should remove any non-religious headdress with their right hand and hold it at the left shoulder, the hand being over the heart. Persons in uniform should remain silent, face the flag, and render the military salute.

43 states currently have laws respecting the Pledge of Allegiance; seven have no such laws. Among the 43 that have such laws, at least 14 explicitly state that students may choose not to participate in reciting the Pledge. In some states the school districts must display placards explaining this “opt out;” in other states the law explicitly states that non-participants may not disrupt the recitation. These requirements vary greatly among states.⁽⁵⁾

Sources

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3. Baer, John W. The Pledge of Allegiance, A Revised History and Analysis. Annapolis, MD. Free State Press, 2007.
4. "The Youth's Companion." September 8, 1892.
5. "Under God in the Pledge." ProCon.org.
<http://undergod.procon.org/view.resource.php?resourceID=000074>