

US "Pledge" ruling exposes political scoundrels

Bill Vann
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The ruling by a three-judge federal appeals court panel in San Francisco that compelling the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance to "one nation under God" in public schools is unconstitutional has afforded yet another opportunity for America's politicians to make fools of themselves.

The decision did no more than reaffirm the essential right to freedom from government "establishment of religion" and the principle of separation of church and state enshrined in the First Amendment of the US Constitution.

"The statement that the United States is a nation 'under God' is an endorsement of religion," the court's majority wrote. It added that the pledge "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.'"

As written, the court said, the pledge is no less a violation of the constitutional protection against establishment of religion than if it described the US as "a nation 'under Jesus,' a nation 'under Vishnu,' a nation 'under Zeus,' or a nation 'under no god.'" The First Amendment, it continued, "prohibits the government's endorsement or advancement not only of one religion at the expense of other religions, but also of religion at the expense of atheism."

From both a legal and a democratic standpoint, all of this is unassailable. Yet the ruling has ignited a nationwide furor, with congressmen and television "personalities" tripping over each other to be the loudest in braying out their protest against the court's action.

Meanwhile, fascistic thugs, taking their cue from these political "leaders," have made death threats

against both the California man who brought the lawsuit against the pledge and his daughter, a child in the second grade.

The Senate organized a hasty 99-to-0 vote denouncing the court's reaffirmation of one of the most fundamental democratic rights upon which the country was founded. Over 100 Congressmen poured out onto the Capitol steps to recite the pledge and sing "God Bless America."

The frenzied reaction was bipartisan. President Bush called the ruling "ridiculous." Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, a Democrat, said it was "just nuts." House Democratic Leader Richard Gephardt of Missouri railed against any attempt to change "the time-tested, venerable pledge that is such a central part of our country's life and our nation's heritage."

These scoundrels know little and care less about the "nation's heritage." The House of Representatives began its "tradition" of saying the pledge each morning only in 1988, as the result of a dirty tricks campaign by the Republican Party and George Bush Sr. against Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis. The Massachusetts governor had vetoed a law requiring the Pledge of Allegiance in all public schools, correctly calling it a violation of the First Amendment. The Republicans sought on that basis to brand him as "un-American." For its part, the Senate began the practice only two years ago.

The origins of the 31-word oath lie in the relatively recent history of America, a history that does not bear much probing as far as the pledge's modern-day defenders are concerned.

Its author was Francis Bellamy, a Baptist minister who was pressured into giving up his Boston pulpit because of the church's opposition to his Christian-socialist sermons. He was a first cousin of Edward

Bellamy, author of the well-known socialist-utopian novel, "Looking Backward."

He wrote the pledge in 1892 for the magazine *The Youth's Companion*. It included no reference to God, which would only be tacked on 62 years later.

He chose the words, he later wrote, with his mind on "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..."

In short, the democratic ideals of the American Revolution, the Civil War and the abolition of slavery animated the original pledge. Bellamy acknowledged, however, that he had wanted to include the words "liberty, justice and *equality* for all," but left out equality because he knew that it would be opposed by fellow members of the National Education Association, who stood against equal rights for blacks and women.

Even so, the pledge as written rankled the reactionaries of that period, and it was not long before they set about changing it. What had begun as an idealistic tribute to the universal democratic principles of the country's founding, was soon transformed into a vow of obedience to a rising imperialist power that was to exert its military might around the globe.

The drive to make recitation of the pledge compulsory began only in the early 1920s, amid the wave of reaction that followed the Russian Revolution and gave rise to the anticommunist Palmer Raids and a nationwide anti-immigrant witch-hunt. Spearheading the campaign for the pledge were the American Legion and the Ku Klux Klan, both notorious for their role in the wave of lynchings that swept the country during the same period.

This campaign also involved a critical change to the text drafted by Bellamy, substituting for the original, "my flag," the words, "the flag of the United States of America." Bellamy protested this nationalistic revision, aimed against foreigners and "reds." He had intended the oath not as one of American jingoism, he said, but an international pledge of peace, adaptable to all nations. His opinion, however, was drowned out by the patriotic ranting of the American Legion and the KKK.

After the US entry into World War II, the manner in which the pledge was delivered underwent an alteration as well. Until then, students were instructed to recite it with their right arms rigidly extended, shoulder high.

The resemblance to Nazi youth swearing fealty to Hitler was too close for comfort. Americans were instructed to place their hands over their hearts instead.

The second major change in the text, introducing the words now defended so vociferously by both major parties, was carried out in another period of deep reaction, at the height of the McCarthyite witch-hunt of the 1950s. Congress, responding to a campaign by the Knights of Columbus, the Catholic men's organization, added "under God." The clear aim was to mobilize religion in the campaign against "godless communism" abroad, and to further the persecution of socialists, communists and atheists at home.

Bellamy had died decades earlier, but his granddaughter said that he would have opposed the introduction of religion. In the end, the mutilation of his original text recalls nothing so much as Orwell's "Animal Farm," in which the principle that "all animals are created equal," was twisted into "some animals are more equal than others."

It is hardly an accident that a challenge to the introduction of "God" into the pledge evokes such a visceral reaction from ruling circles today. The "heritage" of McCarthyism, police-state repression and anti-immigrant crackdowns is being revived with a vengeance, and with the backing of both political parties.

In the wake of September 11, there has been a concerted campaign to promote cheap patriotism and inject ever-larger doses of religion into national life as a means of diverting the American people from any critical examination of the roots of the present crisis.

Doubtless the correct decision of the Ninth Circuit will be overturned by the black-robed reactionaries on the US Supreme Court, if it is not struck down first by the full appeals court. Nonetheless, the event has had the singular value of providing a self-exposure of a Congress, presidency and media that are permeated with stupidity and cowardice and united in virulent opposition to the most elementary democratic principles.



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