

# The Man Who Wrote the Pledge of Allegiance

The schoolroom staple didn't originally include "under God," even though it was created by an ordained minister

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I first struggled with "under God" in my fourth-grade class in Westport, Connecticut. It was the spring of 1954, and Congress had voted, after some controversy, to insert the phrase into the Pledge of Allegiance, partly as a cold war rejoinder to "godless" communism. We kept stumbling on the words—it's not easy to *unlearn* something as ingrained and metrical as the Pledge of Allegiance—while we rehearsed for Flag Day, June 14, when the revision would take effect.

Now, nearly five decades later, "under God" is at the center of a legal wrangle that has stirred passions and landed at the door of the U.S. Supreme Court. The case follows a U.S. appeals court ruling in June 2002 that "under God" turns the pledge into an unconstitutional government endorsement of religion when recited in public schools. Outraged by the ruling, Washington, D.C. lawmakers of both parties recited the pledge on the Capitol steps.

Amid the furor, the judge who wrote the ruling by the Ninth Circuit Court, based in San Francisco, stayed it from being put into effect. In April 2003, after the Ninth Circuit declined to review its decision, the federal government petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn it. (*Editor's Note: In June 2004, the Court ruled unanimously to keep "under God" in the Pledge.*) At the core of the issue, scholars say, is a debate over the separation of church and state.

I wonder what the man who composed the original pledge 111 years ago would make of the hubbub.

Francis Bellamy was a Baptist minister's son from upstate New York. Educated in public schools, he distinguished himself in oratory at the University of Rochester before following his father to the pulpit, preaching at churches in New York and Boston. But he was restive in the ministry and, in 1891, accepted a job from one of his Boston congregants, Daniel S. Ford, principal owner and editor of the *Youth's Companion*, a family magazine with half a million subscribers.

Assigned to the magazine's promotions department, the 37-year-old Bellamy set to work arranging a patriotic program for schools around the country to coincide with opening ceremonies for the Columbian Exposition in October 1892, the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' arrival in the New World. Bellamy successfully lobbied Congress for a resolution endorsing the school ceremony, and he helped convince President Benjamin Harrison to issue a proclamation declaring a Columbus Day holiday.

A key element of the commemorative program was to be a new salute to the flag for schoolchildren to recite in unison. But as the deadline for writing the salute approached, it remained undone. "You write it," Bellamy recalled his boss saying. "You have a knack at words." In Bellamy's later accounts of the sultry August evening he composed the pledge, he said that he believed all along it should invoke allegiance. The idea was in part a response to the Civil War, a crisis of loyalty still fresh in the national memory. As Bellamy sat down at his desk, the opening words—"I pledge allegiance to my flag"—tumbled onto paper. Then, after two hours of "arduous mental labor," as he described it, he produced a succinct and rhythmic tribute very close to the one we know today: *I pledge allegiance to my flag and the Republic for which it stands—one Nation indivisible—with liberty and justice for all.* (Bellamy later added the "to" before "the Republic" for better cadence.)

Millions of schoolchildren nationwide took part in the 1892 Columbus Day ceremony, according to the *Youth's Companion*. Bellamy said he heard the pledge for the first time that day, October 21, when "4,000 high school boys in Boston roared it out together."

But no sooner had the pledge taken root in schools than the fiddling with it began. In 1923, a National Flag Conference, presided over by the American Legion and the

Daughters of the American Revolution, ordained that "my flag" should be changed to "the flag of the United States," lest immigrant children be unclear just which flag they were saluting. The following year, the Flag Conference refined the phrase further, adding "of America."

In 1942, the pledge's 50th anniversary, Congress adopted it as part of a national flag code. By then, the salute had already acquired a powerful institutional role, with some state legislatures obligating public school students to recite it each school day. But individuals and groups challenged the laws. Notably, Jehovah's Witnesses maintained that reciting the pledge violated their prohibition against venerating a graven image. In 1943, the Supreme Court ruled in the Witnesses' favor, undergirding the free-speech principle that no schoolchild should be compelled to recite the pledge.

A decade later, following a lobbying campaign by the Knights of Columbus—a Catholic fraternal organization—and others, Congress approved the addition of the words "under God" within the phrase "one nation indivisible." On June 14, 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower signed the bill into law.

The bill's sponsors, anticipating that the reference to God would be challenged as a breach of the Constitutionally mandated separation of church and state, had argued that the new language wasn't really religious. "A distinction must be made between the existence of a religion as an institution and a belief in the sovereignty of God," they wrote. "The phrase 'under God' recognizes only the guidance of God in our national affairs." The disclaimer did not deter a succession of litigants in several state courts from contesting the new wording over the years, but complainants never got very far—until last year's ruling by the Ninth Circuit.

The case originated when Michael Newdow, an atheist, claimed that his daughter (a minor whose name has not been released) was harmed by reciting the pledge at her public school in Elk Grove, California. If she refused to join in because of the "under God" phrase, the suit argued, she was liable to be branded an outsider and thereby harmed. The appellate court agreed. Complicating the picture, the girl's mother, who has custody of the child, has said she does not oppose her daughter's reciting the pledge; the youngster does so every school day along with her classmates, according to the superintendent of the school district where the child is enrolled.

Proponents of the idea that the pledge's mention of God reflects historical tradition and not religious doctrine include Supreme Court justices past and present. "They see that kind of language—'under God' and 'in God we trust'—with no special religious significance," says political scientist Gary Jacobsohn, who teaches Constitutional law at Williams College.

Atheists are not the only ones to take issue with that line of thought. Advocates of religious tolerance point out that the reference to a single deity might not sit well with followers of some established religions. After all, Buddhists don't conceive of God as a single discrete entity, Zoroastrians believe in two deities and Hindus believe in many. Both the Ninth Circuit ruling and a number of Supreme Court decisions acknowledge this. But Jacobsohn predicts that a majority of the justices will hold that government may support religion in general as long as public policy does not pursue an obviously sectarian, specific religious purpose.

Bellamy, who went on to become an advertising executive, wrote extensively about the pledge in later years. I haven't found any evidence in the historical record—including Bellamy's papers at the University of Rochester—to indicate whether he ever considered adding a divine reference to the pledge. So we can't know where he would stand in today's dispute. But it's ironic that the debate centers on a reference to God that an ordained minister left out. And we can be sure that Bellamy, if he was like most writers, would have balked at anyone tinkering with his prose.

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