

The Incompatibility of a Daily School Pledge with a Democratic and Multicultural Education

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Abstract

The Pledge of Allegiance has become a tradition in schools throughout the United States. The debate on this practice has often been limited due to the ideas of national pride that surround the pledge. This article addresses both the problematic history of the pledge, the protected precedence of teachers and students refusing to state the pledge, the pledge's international abnormality, and the practical and philosophical concerns of a daily pledge in the public school setting. The article's contention is that the pledge introduces a shallow view of national loyalty, while simultaneously endangering religious liberty, overlooking the views of marginalized and immigrant students, and promoting nationalism and a more subtle militarism. The article concludes with beneficial alternatives schools could use in place of a daily pledge and the societal benefits of reconsidering this tradition.

Keywords: Pledge of Allegiance, nationalism, democratic education, multiculturalism

1. Introduction

This article contends that the Pledge of Allegiance should not only be optional for both students and teachers, but that it should be removed from the school setting altogether. Though the courts have ruled that the pledge is non-compulsory for both students and teachers (*West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, 1943; *Hanover v. Northup*, 1970), the reality is that the pledge is often mandatory due to social pressure and unofficial policies and practices. The pledge ultimately places nationalism and often a more subtle militarism above a critical and honest assessment of government policy. In an attempt to garner loyalty among students, we could be undermining the very ideals of a democratic and multicultural society.

2. The Problematic History of the Pledge

The pledge has a complicated history. It has a clear background in the anti-immigrant backlash of the late 19th Century (Wright & Citrin, 2011). The more diversity that appeared in ethnicities, nationalities, and languages, the more the United States government worked to establish uniformity. It was at this time that "policies designed to assimilate children from burgeoning immigrant communities proliferated" (Buckley, 2015, p. 256).

However, the pledge also arguably has socialist foundations. Its creator, Edward Bellamy, was a Christian socialist and desired for the pledge to reflect those values (Dreier, 2016). The pledge on one hand speaks to the indivisibility, liberty, and justice that the United States is supposed to stand upon. However, it also gives support to a nationalism which has often undermined those values. Bellamy wrote the pledge in 1892 as part of 400th anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus to the Americas. In addition to writing the pledge, Bellamy helped convince President Benjamin Harrison to make Columbus Day a national holiday (Jones, 2003).

The original pledge stated, “I pledge allegiance to my flag and the Republic for which it stands—one Nation indivisible—with liberty and justice for all.” The words “my flag” were eventually replaced with the “flag of the United States of America” in 1923 out of fear that some immigrants may not know which flag was being referenced (Jones, 2003). Bellamy reportedly disapproved of this change, which was promoted by the Daughters of the American Revolution (Dreier, 2016). In 1942, it was adopted as part of the national flag code, and Dwight Eisenhower signed a bill in 1954 which added the words “under God” after strong national pressure (Rosenbaum, 2002). This addition has faced numerous legal challenges on the grounds of the pledge promoting a monotheistic religion (Kao & Copulsky, 2007).

The original rationale for the pledge is less well known. Bellamy wrote the pledge as a response to both 19th century capitalism as well as in a response to “every alien immigrant of inferior race” (para. 3). He believed that the pledge would guarantee “that the distinctive principles of true Americanism will not perish as long as free, public education endures” (Bellamy cited by Crawford, 2015). One Jewish outlet (Romm, 2017) has described the pledge as:

A reflection of a deep fear, rooted in anti-Semitism and racism, of changing demographics. That the historically racist Daughters of the American Revolution were ardent proponents of the pledge seems to be a clue here as to the pledge adopters’ motivations (para. 7).

Marshall (2015) describes the problematic early salute, which involved students raising their right hand raised towards the flag. This salute accompanied the pledge and was personally created by Bellamy. Given the troubling similarities to the Nazi salute, the salute was removed from the pledge and replaced with right the hand over one’s heart (Greene, 2013).

Dreier (2016) sees the pledge from a slightly different perspective. He details how Bellamy had initially intended to use the word “Fraternity, Liberty, and Equality,” but decided it would be too radical. He argues that the pledge would be “a means to express his more egalitarian vision of America, and a secular patriotism aimed at helping unite a divided nation” (para. 11). He (Bellamy) also saw the pledge as a way to “promote a moral vision to counter the individualism embodied in capitalism and expressed in the climate of the Gilded Age” (para. 14).

The reality is that the pledge could have a background in both socialism and xenophobia, which confuses modern political constructs, but would have been compatible with Bellamy’s worldview. Ultimately, whether the original rationale for the pledge was based in anti-immigrant sentiments, a desire for economic and social equality, or both, it is secondary to what the pledge has come to represent today, which is loyalty to the country and the nation. Its constant use as part of military ceremonies also ties it directly to support for the U.S. military and even U.S. wars.

3. The Pledge in School

3.1 History

The pledge started with strong enthusiasm as millions of children throughout the nation took part in Columbus Day celebrations where the pledge was featured (Jones, 2003). In 1898, New York became the first state to make the pledge mandatory in all schools right after the United States declared war in Spain. In the following decades other states and municipalities made the pledge mandatory and at times punished students who refused to take part in the ceremony. The strength of the pledge grew even stronger due to the Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent Red Scare (Jones & Meyer, 2010). Currently, 46 states require the pledge to be recited at public schools with the state of Wisconsin also extending this requirement to private schools (First Amendment Center, 2006).

3.2 Students’ Right to Abstain from the Pledge

Refusing to state the pledge in school has been declared by the courts to be a constitutional right. Both students and teachers have sought this exemption. In 1940, a West Virginia school required a student of the Jehovah Witness faith to state the pledge even though doing so went against the family’s beliefs. In the case of *Minersville School District v. Gobitis* (1940), the court stated that religious belief was not a valid exemption from saying the pledge. Justice Frankfurter declared that the pledge was important in schools due to the students being part of a “formative period in the development of citizenship.” However, just three years later in the case, *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* (1943), the court reversed its ruling and ruled that refusing to say the pledge was permitted and was a right of the student.

Justice Jackson stated in the case, “Freedom to differ is not limited to things that do not matter much. That would be a mere shadow of freedom. The test of its substance is the right to differ as to things that touch the heart of the existing order” (p. 642).

3.3 Teachers’ Right to Abstain from the Pledge

The courts have also ruled that teachers have the right to refuse to say the pledge. In the case of *Hanover v Northup* (1970), the court reinstated a teacher who had been fired for refusing to state the pledge. The judge in the case argued that not only did the teacher have the private right to refuse the pledge, but that the right extend even if “some of her students, who also refrained from recitation of the Pledge, were persuaded to do so because of the plaintiff’s conduct” (para. 11). A similar case occurred in 1972 where the court re-instated a teacher who had refused to say the pledge in the case of *Russo v. Central School District No. 1* (1972). In this case, the judge stated:

Patriotism that is forced is a false patriotism just as loyalty that is coerced is the very antithesis of loyalty. We ought not impugn the loyalty of a citizen-especially one whose convictions appear to be as genuine and conscientious as Mrs. Russo’s—merely for refusing to pledge allegiance (Sec. VI).

3.4 The Right vs. the Reality for Students

However, despite the court rulings, it is often socially difficult for either student or teacher to avoid participation in the recitation of the pledge. If a student refuses to cite the pledge, they may be labeled as anti-American or estranged from their peers. This risk is the case especially in areas of the country where strong nationalism is present. Students can also be accused of being against the military when they refuse to say the pledge, and some teachers and students may interpret this refusal as an attack on veterans and soldiers.

In some aspects, this pressure may even be more apparent at the elementary level. At the high school level, more students may be apathetic toward saying the pledge. At the elementary level, taking some type of stand against the pledge is even less likely. The recitation of the pledge at this young age is especially troubling. We are essentially asking students to be involved in a daily loyalty pledge when they have little to no choice in the matter. They are simply doing what their teachers tell them to do.

There have been national examples of students who have received backlash for not participating in the pledge. One Native American student in California described how her teacher lowered her grade for refusing to say the pledge. The student proceeded to record a conversation with the teacher on the matter as evidence (Rocha, 2016). Another student in Chicago stated that a teacher tried to pull him out of his chair for refusing to say the pledge. The student claimed that the refusal was part of a protest for the national treatment of African-Americans (Koeske, 2016). A student from Washington described the repercussions for not stating the pledge, “My homeroom teacher would yell ‘stand up!’ If I refused, he would then single me out in front of the entire class and rant about how selfish and unpatriotic my actions were” (Niose, 2014, para. 15).

3.5 The Right vs. the Reality for Teachers

The situation is even more difficult for teachers. Though the courts may technically state that a teacher can refuse to say the pledge, there will often be a strong reprimand and censorship from any schools and administrator if a teacher chooses to do so. Though the school district may not blatantly fire someone for refusing to say the pledge, it could be an unofficial motivation to fire someone or to review the promotion of an individual. For a teacher who has a strong moral objection to saying the pledge, making such a stand early in the year can also create a degree of alienation from the students and conflict within the classroom setting. Even talking about the pledge in a less than supportive manner can sometimes cause problems for teachers. A teacher in Indiana faced national controversy this past year when he told students that saying the pledge was optional (Herron, 2017).

Educators often focus strongly on critical thinking in the class, but when we have a de facto mandatory pledge in the morning, we are essentially surrendering critical thought. The pledge could be a form of programming that might be seen in military training, but should be separated from a critical and open educational setting. As Halliburton (2016) states:

Every morning across America young children recite a pledge of allegiance to a nation whose politics and history they can’t even begin to understand in state-funded schools... Our schools have them so indoctrinated by the time they’re in the 1st grade that the children, some of whom can’t even tie their shoes yet, know the pledge by heart.

Ask a six year old sometime the lyrics of their favorite song and nine times out of ten, it won't even be close but this certain grouping of words they know perfectly and to a cadence. Have you ever heard a class of bored, disinterested children reciting the pledge in the morning? Do they even know what "indivisible" and "republic" mean, as they slowly drone out the words in unison? (para. 3).

4. Reasons for Removing the Pledge in Schools

4.1 Forced and Shallow Patriotism

A forced recitation of the pledge lays the groundwork for a false and deeply shallow idea of patriotism. In American society, patriotism has often been seen in terms of flying a flag, stating American greatness, and supporting American militarism. The more difficult but important work of patriotism that requires caring for one's society and for one's neighbors is often absent from the chauvinistic forms of nationalism. A forced recitation of the pledge creates the mental idea that patriotism is about falling in line and pledging unwavering and uncritical loyalty to the nation instead of deeply considering for oneself what the strengths and weaknesses of the nation are and pushing for just reforms. We do not need students to just fall in line, but to question the current social and political order. As Howard Zinn (1970) states:

Civil disobedience is not our problem. Our problem is civil obedience. Our problem is that people all over the world have obeyed the dictates of leaders...and millions have been killed because of this obedience...Our problem is that people are obedient all over the world in the face of poverty and starvation and stupidity, and war, and cruelty.

4.2 Immigrant and Marginalized Students

The pledge is also problematic in a diverse and multicultural society. In many places in the United States, there are young people at our schools whose first nation is not the United States and who are not U.S. citizens. Why are schools asking them to pledge allegiance to a nation of which they are not citizens? Perhaps even more importantly in the case of undocumented immigrants, why are schools forcing students to say a pledge to a nation that often does not want to accept them and treats them in a dismissive fashion? In U.S. history, we can see the examples of Native American children or Japanese children in internment camps being forced to say the pledge. From a historical perspective, this seems rightfully shameful; however, there are modern similarities taking place to this day.

One such modern example is the September, 2017 clash of President Trump and children protected under the DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) policy. It was announced that the DACA program would be terminated, and only salvaged if increased border security were funded (Berman, 2017). The implication is clear. If we work to keep out the relatives of these DACA children from Mexico and other Central or South American countries, then the children may be allowed to stay. Yet these children and young adults, in the meantime, continue to say the daily pledge.

As immigrant students are placed in the awkward and uncomfortable position to pledge loyalty to a country that cannot decide if they are truly welcome, so, too, are American citizens placed in the same position of pledging loyalty to a country that cannot decide if social and racial justice is a stance worthy of exploration. Indeed, why should individuals who are treated like second-class citizens by our government pledge their unwavering allegiance to that government every single morning? This was certainly part of the rationale that Collin Kaepernick put forth with his refusal to stand for the national anthem which generated so much controversy (Babb, 2017). There is something awry about being forced to pledge to one's nation while being treated in an unjust and unequal manner by that same nation.

4.3 The Threat of Nationalism

The danger of the pledge is seen even more clearly with the rise of nationalism in the United States over the last few years, particularly with the rise of the far-right and individuals like Donald Trump. It amazes many people how such an individual could arise in a democratic and free society. However, we must consider that perhaps one of the culprits is an unwavering and unquestioning nationalism that is instilled in children at a young age. The greatest danger our nation may face may not be a lack of patriotism, but too strong of a nationalism. As the author Jonathan Scott French (1926) stated, "it is easy to see the absurdity of intense nationalism in the people of other countries, but very difficult in the case of our own" (p.15).

Lynch (2017) argues that nationalism is one of the reasons for the disengagement of students at the K-12 level. As he states, “Are we building a spirit of national camaraderie at the expense of intellectualist thought?” (para. 7).

4.4 Freedom of Religion

The school sanctioned pledge is also problematic from a religious perspective. On one hand, much of the debate of the pledge has focused on the words “under God” which non-religious or non-monotheistic students and teachers may find problematic. It is also troubling because much of the dissent from saying the pledge is from religious groups who feel that saying a nationalist pledge defies their religious beliefs. In fact, the first major court case brought against the forced recitation of the pledge involved Jehovah’s Witnesses. It is also the case for other Christian groups such as those from the Mennonites and Anabaptist tradition who claim that stating a pledge to the nation-state defies their allegiance to Christ. As the Mennonite Church of the U.S. and Canada (2017) states in regard to the pledge:

Mennonites believe that the church is “God’s holy nation,” called to give full allegiance to Christ its head and to witness to all nations about God’s saving love. We believe that the church is the spiritual, social, and political body that gives its allegiance to God alone (para 1).

4.5 Abnormality of the Pledge

The U.S. Pledge of Allegiance is also an anomaly among democratic societies. Though many nations have a national anthem that is sung at special occasions such as sports events or military ceremonies, a daily pledge is not part of the daily rituals for the majority of other democratic societies. Though there are a few democratic nations that have some form of the pledge such as the Philippines (Koh, 2015), Mexico (Chine-Lehmann, 2012), and India (India Ministry of Home Affairs, 2002), the majority of nations do not. As one British teacher (Swainson, 2017) put it, “As a British teacher I can categorically assure you that British kids would just laugh if you asked them to do anything as preposterous (as the pledge).” Harris (2017) echoes this sentiment and says, “As a Canadian I am continually bemused at how Americans feel about their country. I mean I like being Canadian, but I’ve never pledged or sworn allegiance in my life.”

Perhaps we should question why so few democratic societies have a pledge. Is there something about pledging allegiance to a nation-state on a daily basis that is more in line with totalitarian thinking than that of a free nation? There are more authoritarian states which do say a pledge such as in North Korea to their leader (Tomlison, 2013) or in Cuba to the ideals of the revolution (Cotner, 2012). In these nations, a pledge seems more natural. However, there is a certain sense of irony in a forced pledge to liberty. Perhaps we have become so accustomed to the pledge that we are unable to see this irony anymore.

4.6 Justice and Liberty

There are of course some redeeming qualities of the pledge. There is the focus on the idea of a republic and the ideals of liberty and justice for all. These are values that should be stressed in our schools. However, liberty and justice are not values which have always been synonymous with our nation. They are ideals that the people have to intentionally embrace, and that embrace often means a confrontation with nationalist interests.

While the ideals of freedom and justice themselves may not be controversial, they are problematic if students automatically assume that this is a definitive reality in the United States, that everyone is truly free, and there is justice for all. The evidence does not support that assumption. For one, the United States has the largest prison population in the world (Hee Lee, 2015). There is also widespread poverty and growing inequality that prevent true economic freedom for many. In fact, nearly one in five children in K-12 schools currently live below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

Justice for all is also far from apparent. The U.S. currently has a system that disproportionately incarcerates black and Hispanic males by a large margin (Nellis, 2016). Those who are poor are also less likely to receive fair treatment in the criminal justice system. It has been said that it is better to be rich and guilty than poor and innocent in the United States (Stevenson cited by Guerrero, 2016). We also live in a time of growing inequality where a small sliver of the population has gained the majority of the wealth while the rest of the population's wages have stagnated (Wisman, 2013). By simply stating that the United States represents liberty and justice, students are being exposed to untrue assumptions about the current state of the nation. This conditioning is problematic if students somehow automatically associate the United States with these values, especially when the lived experiences of many students do not reflect economic equality or social justice at all.

It could be beneficial for teachers to stress these ideals of freedom and justice in other ways in the classroom. They could have a discussion about the ways the United States is living up to these values and the ways they are still falling short. More importantly, there can be critical discussions about how these values of freedom and justice can actually be integrated and realized in the society. The values of republicanism, freedom, and justice must be stressed in the public school setting, not by pledging allegiance to a flag that supposedly represents them, but by critically examining these ideals and making them central throughout the curriculum.

4.7 Mandatory Allegiance to Liberty

The pledge is also problematic because though the nation stresses the idea of political liberty and freedom of speech, nationalistic concerns have often overridden those ideals. Even at the beginning of the nation, during the Revolutionary War, individuals were forced to fight on the side of the colonists (Zinn & Arno, 2004). There is a deep irony in this policy. The same pattern has been present out throughout US history. Unlike other nations which may openly claim that soldiers are fighting for the crown or for nationalist advancement, the U.S. has traditionally framed its wars in terms of freedom and democracy, which makes the mandatory military service more troubling. There have also been episodes in U.S. history where in the name of fighting for democracy and freedom, the freedom of speech and the freedom to resist militarism and nationalism were silenced and made illegal. One of the most striking examples of this was during World War I where political opposition to the war was a criminal offense (Strauss, 2014).

There is a strong tie to the concept of a mandatory pledge and ideologies like McCarthyism. During the Cold War, many teachers were required to sign loyalty pledges to the United States and disavow any ties to Communism (Howlett & Cohan, 2008). Today, the insistence on a mandatory pledge creates a more subtle type of unwavering loyalty statement to the nation-state. Hall (2015) points out the incongruence of the pledge with the ideals of freedom. As he states:

The cultivation of devotion to the flag and the U.S. government creates anything but responsible citizens. In fact, the Pledge is a complete slap in the face to the principles it supposedly espouses. It encourages, not a love of liberty and justice, but blind obedience to an “indivisible” government (para. 9).

4.8 Promotion of Militarism

It could also be argued that the pledge gives a foundation for the militarism that is often on display in American society. The pledge and the national anthem have become closely tied together with the military and even the defense of national wars. This embrace of militarism can be seen in the U.S. public's embrace of certain policies. For instance, in regard to preemptive war, particularly the 2003 invasion of Iraq, 72% of Americans supported the war while only 27% of Germans and 20% of individuals in France supported such a position (Pew Research Center, 2008; Renshon & Suedfeld, 2007). Additionally, 58% of Americans state that torture could be justified if it helps deliver important information regarding terrorism. These numbers are much lower around the world with only 45% of those in the Middle East, 25% in Latin America, and 36% in Europe holding a similar perspective (Winke, 2016). On the question of civilians being attacked in war, 49% of Americans believed it sometimes justified compared to 20% of Sub-Saharan Africans, 16% of Asians, and 19% of Europeans (Gallup Abu Dhabi Center, 2011). With these high levels of militarism, the pledge becomes especially problematic as students are taught to pledge loyalty to the nation without critiquing its current global policies.

5. Alternatives to the Pledge

If the pledge were to be removed from school, the ideas of patriotism can still be discussed as part of the curriculum. In fact, they can be discussed in a more open and healthy way without a mandatory ritual every morning. Perhaps, it can help leave a space for teachers to discuss what a healthy patriotism looks like instead of following a path of destructive and ethnocentric nationalism. As Martin (2012) puts it, “We cannot assume that rote memorization will lead to understanding in the area of citizenship” (p. 61).

Removing the pledge can also be a chance for teachers to expand the conversation beyond loyalty to one's nation and instead look upon the ideas of global citizenship. John Dewey (1923) discusses the need for this more global outlook. As he stated, the classroom should deflect students from “a very narrow nationalistic spirit that will make a fetish out of patriotism” and instead cultivate “feelings of respect and friendliness for the other nations and people of the world” (p. 516).

Teachers could also turn the attention more locally and discuss how students can make improvements to their communities. Without the strong nationalism and unquestioning militarism that often accompanies the pledge, a space could be created for what it truly means to improve one's society. Perhaps, there could be a discussion about the need for greater loyalty to one's community and humanizing the conditions for those in it. The idea for removing the pledge is not to remove any idea of collective devotion or unity, but rather to broaden and deepen what these ideas mean.

6. Conclusion

One of the greatest dangers the U.S. currently faces is not a lack of allegiance to the country, but avirulent nationalism that has been expanding in recent years. It is more important for our society that students question the role that the government, and by extension, military, plays in framing our national policies than to pledge absolute, unwavering devotion to it. We will never overcome the injustices of our country if our education system is built primarily on loyalty to the country while not being accompanied with a healthy critique towards the nation.

Perhaps an even more foundational question is whether the pledge is incompatible with American ideals, which were defined in the Declaration of Independence. The ideals of the American Revolution and Constitution did not center on an absolute loyalty to a new nation-state but the rights of the individuals and freedom from government overreach. Unlike many other nations, the United States is not defined by one ethnicity or even one culture, rather it is built on a set of ideals. Do we undermine those ideals every time we force allegiance to them through the pledge? As Niose (2016) states:

The impact of a daily ritual that conditions kids to blind national loyalty is worth reconsidering. If there are concerns about anti-intellectualism and even fascistic tendencies in American society nowadays, the practice of daily national exaltation has relevance. If you truly love America and the values "for which it stands," there's only one thing to do: scrap the Pledge of Allegiance (para. 14).

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