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The pledge of allegiance has undergone many changes since it was first written. What does it mean to Americans today?

Junior Scholastic/Current Events. (Jan. 30, 2017) Reading Level (Lexile): 1120.

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Full Text:

THEY MAY BE THE FIRST WORDS you learn by heart:

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.

These 31 words make up the Pledge of Allegiance, which turns 125 this year. For many Americans, saying it is as natural as breathing. You might even think the Pledge was part of the very foundation of America, like the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution.

But it actually wasn't written until more than a century after the United States became a country. At the time, few people thought it would become an enduring tradition. The Pledge was only gradually embraced by the states, and not formally adopted nationally until 1942. That it exists at all, historians Jeffrey Owen Jones and Peter Meyer have written, is "an accident of history."

BUILDING PATRIOTISM

It started with Francis Bellamy, who worked for a magazine called Youth's Companion in Boston, Massachusetts. In 1892, he was asked to write a salute to the flag to mark the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas. His salute differs from the one we know: I pledge allegiance to my flag and the Republic for which it stands, one Nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Bellamy later wrote that he was concerned the U.S. was forgetting the sacrifice of the Civil War (1861-65). Americans were losing their sense of being "indivisible"--unable to be separated--he said. He came to believe that if children said the Pledge every day, it would instill an almost unconscious patriotism in them.

NATIONAL ANXIETIES

Yet scholars note another concern of late 19th-century America, then dominated by white Protestants. Many were worried about an influx of Catholic and Jewish immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe.

"Bellamy's pledge was designed [in part] to 'Americanize' the foreigner," according to historian Richard Ellis of Willamette University in Oregon.

The Pledge has never been only about the ideals of "liberty and justice," Ellis says. It has also been "an expression of an anxiety that American identity is at risk."

That fear was in full force in 1923, when the words "my flag" were changed to "the flag of the United States of America." The people pushing for the change again wanted to make certain that the country's new immigrants were leaving behind old loyalties. They had a new flag now.

PLEDGE PUSHBACK

Beginning in 1919, states started making recital of the Pledge mandatory in public schools. Students could be punished or expelled for not complying. In time, Americans who objected to what they saw as enforced patriotism pushed back.

The Jehovah's Witnesses, a small Protestant denomination, objected to reciting it, leading to two cases before the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1943, the Court ruled for the Witnesses, saying that no student could be forced to say the Pledge. This freedom of judgment remains the law of the land.

"UNDER GOD" DEBATE

Then, in 1954, Congress added the words "under God" to the Pledge. Scholars say that this was a way, during the early years of the Cold War, to distinguish American ideals from the "godless Communism" of the Soviet Union.

Many Americans have objected to the phrase. In 2004, the Supreme Court heard an argument from an activist named Michael Newdow that "under God" violates the First Amendment's freedom from government-sponsored religion. But the Court unanimously rejected his suit.

David Hudson, a First Amendment scholar, says that the decision recognized a widespread acceptance of the Pledge--including "under God"--across the country. The Court, along with most Americans, "viewed the Pledge as more of a patriotic exercise than an advancement of religion," he says.

A NATIONAL IDENTITY

But the Pledge can still serve as a lightning rod for protest. Last month, a New Jersey seventh-grader named Manny Martinez made headlines by refusing to recite it--an action frowned upon in many communities. Manny said that the election of Donald Trump, whom many see as disrespectful to women and minorities, made it impossible for him to participate in the salute to the flag.

Yet in other circumstances, the special symbolism of the Pledge is used to reaffirm America's qualities. When former President Barack Obama visited a mosque in Baltimore, Maryland, last year, Muslim men in skullcaps and women in hijabs stood to recite it.

Obama mentioned their reciting the Pledge as part of the proof that Muslims belong in the U.S. "You're part of America too," he told them.

One hundred twenty-five years after its birth, the Pledge endures. "No salute is so deeply rooted in the national experience or intertwined in daily life," Jones and Meyer wrote in their book *The Pledge*. For many people of the United States, its words capture a "fundamental sense of national identity"--what it means to be an American.

CORE QUESTION What are some arguments for and against saying the Pledge of Allegiance in school?

Caption: The original salute to the American flag, an extended arm, came to eerily resemble the salute of Nazi Germany during World War II. It was changed in 1942.

Caption: New American citizens recite the Pledge of Allegiance during a naturalization ceremony in South Carolina, in 2010.

LIVING HISTORY PAGES 20-21

The Pledge at 125

Lexile score: 1050L

OBJECTIVE

Students will analyze the relationship between primary and secondary sources on the same topic.

KEY STANDARDS

RH.6-8.1, RH.6-8.2, RH.6-8.3, RI.6-8.3, SL.6-8.1, WHST.6-8.8

ARTICLE SUMMARY

The Pledge of Allegiance turns 125 this year. Although it has been altered and challenged along the way, it continues to be part of Americans' national identity.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

- * Integrate this article into a discussion about how world and national events can reflect and influence patriotism.
- * Use this lesson to help students understand the difference between primary and secondary sources.

STEP-BY-STEP LESSON PLAN

Before Reading

1 STUDENT ENGAGEMENT (10 MINUTES) Have students respond to these prompts: What is the purpose of the Pledge of Allegiance? Should students be required to recite the Pledge in schools? Why or why not? Read & Analyze

2 INDEPENDENT READING (15 MINUTES) Have students read the article on their own, writing down any comments or questions.

3 FULL-CLASS DISCUSSION (15 MINUTES) Use these questions to guide a discussion.

* Why do two historians refer to the Pledge of Allegiance as "an accident of history"? (It was created for a specific occasion, but reciting it has become an enduring tradition for American schoolchildren.)

* How and why has the Pledge of Allegiance been altered since it was created? (In 1923, the words *my flag* were changed to "the flag of the United States of America" to try to ensure that new immigrants were leaving behind old loyalties and taking ownership of a new flag. In 1954, Congress added the words *under God* to distinguish American ideals from the Communism of the Soviet Union.)

Extend & Assess

4 PRIMARY SOURCES

Have students complete the skills sheet *Analyzing Primary Sources: "The Wholeness of the Nation"* (p. T-12).

5 SYMBOLISM

Divide students into groups to research other symbols and rituals of America and patriotism, such as the flag and the national anthem. How do they fit into our society? How have they been challenged? Have each group share its findings with the class.

DIFFERENTIATING

Lower Level Provide students with a list of symbols and rituals to choose from for their group work.

Higher Level Ask students to find other examples of primary and secondary sources related to the Pledge.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

* Skills Sheets

** Analyzing Primary Sources: "The Wholeness of the Nation" (p. T-12)

** Quiz Wizard (p. T-16)

** Test Prep: Know the News--The Pledge at 125 (online)

NAME:--

ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

"The Wholeness of the Nation"

When Francis Bellamy sat down to write the first version of what we know as the Pledge of Allegiance in 1892, he couldn't have known that he was drafting a piece of history. (See pp. 20-21.) As Jeffrey Owen Jones and Peter Meyer tell the story in their book *The Pledge*, it was a hot August evening in Boston, Massachusetts, where a magazine called *Youth's Companion* was based. Bellamy's boss had just given him the assignment to write a salute to the flag—which was due at the printer the next morning! He grabbed a scrap of paper and got to work.

More than 30 years later, Bellamy would write of the "two sweating hours" of "arduous mental labor" that produced the Pledge, and what he was thinking as he composed its words.

Study the text of the Pledge as Bellamy wrote it and his reflections in later years, as quoted in Jones and Meyer's book. Then answer the questions that follow.

Bellamy's original Pledge:

I pledge allegiance to my flag and the Republic for which it stands, one Nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Bellamy's later thoughts on writing the Pledge:

Allegiance to the Flag--Why? Because it stands for something concrete behind it. What is that concrete background?

"The Republic."... What then is this Republic? It is the whole Nation. We are still near the earlier days when the wholeness of the Nation had been disputed. So the words one and indivisible came to mind--words made familiar by [Daniel] Webster and [Abraham] Lincoln* and made vital by the Civil War. That was the [origin] of the phrase "and the Republic for which it stands, one Nation indivisible."

And what is the purpose and aim of this indivisible Nation? The first thought was of the phrase which [Thomas] Jefferson had brought back from the French Revolution, "liberty, equality, fraternity."** But that was discarded as too remote and too impossible of realization.

What then? Liberty and justice came as the answer, with a final for all.

* Daniel Webster (1782-1852) was a statesman and orator who made fiery defenses of a strong Union in the years before the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln was president during the Civil War.

** These three words make up France's motto. Thomas Jefferson, later the third U.S. president, was the country's minister (ambassador) to France right before the French Revolution of 1789.

Questions

1. What "concrete" thing does Bellamy say the flag stands for?--
2. What conflict does Bellamy refer to as "the earlier days when the wholeness of the Nation had been disputed"? What one long phrase in the Pledge was inspired by thoughts of that conflict?--
3. What does Bellamy say is the "purpose and aim" of the nation? What other purposes and aims might a nation have?--

4. Why are the concepts of being a whole Nation and indivisible important to Bellamy's pledge?

5. What concept would you have added to this Pledge if you'd written it? Write a paragraph explaining your answer.--

TEACHER'S GUIDE

"THE WHOLENESS OF THE NATION," P. T-12

1. The flag stands for the republic, meaning the nation of the United States.

2. Bellamy is referring to the Civil War. Thoughts of the war inspired the phrase "the Republic for which it stands, one Nation indivisible."

3. "Liberty and justice for all" is the nation's purpose. Answers to the second question may include the concept of freedom for Its people from an oppressor, of prosperity, even of power among nations.

4. Answers may include that the "whole nation" is more important than the Individual states, which might have purposes and aims different from those of the country at large. People taking the Pledge are dedicated to the concept of the states being undivided, or indivisible, as they might have been if the North had lost the Civil War.

5. Answers will vary.

Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)

Brown, Bryan. "The pledge of allegiance has undergone many changes since it was first written. What does it mean to Americans today?" *Junior Scholastic/Current Events*, 30 Jan. 2017, p. 20+. *Global Issues in Context*, <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A480993204/GIC?u=aur58810&sid=GIC&xid=2bdd78dc>. Accessed 1 Oct. 2018.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A480993204