Duty, Honor, Country

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I was born at West Point, where my father played clarinet professionally in the Army band, and lived there until his retirement when I was seven. I credit this experience with instilling a greater sense of patriotism in me than many Americans my age seem to have. In my elementary school, two children were selected each day to lead the Pledge on the morning announcements. I vaguely remember when my turn came in kindergarten. My partner and I were called up to the teacher's desk and tested to make sure we had adequately memorized our lines before the next morning. I cannot recall actually making the announcements, but I assume that everything ran smoothly since my mother worked in the school district at the time and would have been told about any catastrophic failure on my part. It was in sixth grade that I first began to see a problem with how the Pledge was used in schools. I had at some point come to understand the commitment I was making every morning, but most of the other students seemed apathetic, slouching and halfheartedly mumbling the familiar words under their breaths. By my freshman year in high school, I had begun complaining to my friends about how useless it was to make a pledge that the majority of students did not seem to mean. I was further offended that since I was sincere, the only reason for requiring me to repeat my oath was an apparent assumption that I had been lying the first time. Four years later, I still believe that reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in schools is an insufficient way to promote patriotism in young Americans. Furthermore, any oath of loyalty to the United States should instead be voluntary and sincere.

The original version of the Pledge of Allegiance used today was written by Francis Bellamy in 1892 as part of a movement designed to combat both what some citizens saw as the

un-American individualism displayed by the post-Civil War generation and an influx of immigrants wholly ignorant of American values and ideals (Martin 128). The public school system, which one contemporary described as "the only thing that represents the nation to millions," seemed to be the best place to direct their efforts (Ellis 15). To this end, the flag was chosen as a tangible symbol of the United States through which schoolchildren could pledge their loyalty to the nation and its ideals in an easily memorized twenty-three word pledge (Ellis 19, 30, 31). With the commencement of the Spanish-American War in 1898, some states began requiring some form of flag exercise in public schools to promote patriotism, a trend that became more pronounced during World War I and the subsequent rise of Communism; in 1942, Congress validated its status as a national institution while approving a flag code. With the exception of the addition of the words "under God" in 1954 "to combat cold war fears of godless communism," the Pledge of Allegiance has remained the same since that point (May 110-113).

Ironically, such a daily recitation was not the intention of the original proponents of a flag pledge. George Balch, who had written a different version of the pledge, went so far as to say that no patriotic activity should be performed "in obedience to arbitrary law;" the Pledge had to be voluntary and meaningful to be worth anything, and one should "abolish it altogether" if it started to become a rote exercise (Ellis 53). Unfortunately, as my school experiences show, this is indeed what has occurred unchecked over the decades. However, the Pledge is not only meaningless to most students because of repetition. Many simply do not understand what the Pledge is saying. Young children are unable to read it for themselves, and can easily misunderstand the words, interpreting, for example, "the republic for which it stands" as "the republic for witches stands" (May 200). Even those who manage to pronounce the words correctly are unlikely to know what they are actually saying. After all, how many kindergarteners

can actually define the word indivisible, let alone understand what hinges on the unity of a nation? The exercise becomes even more ridiculous in light of the fact that children under the age of eleven or twelve do not actually understand that the flag represents the country. The Pledge is thus reduced to the sort of indoctrination more suited to a totalitarian state than a republic of willing citizens (May 201).

If democracy and the United States are truly superior to such systems, it stands to reason that educating students about the advantages and disadvantages of both will lead them to come to that conclusion independently. After all, the "core mission" of American schools, in the words of the ACLU, is "to turn out students who can think for themselves" (Ellis 202, 221). Governor Jesse Ventura of Minnesota put it best in 2002, calling patriotism "a feeling of loyalty and allegiance that is the result of knowledge and belief;" he continued by describing a patriotic citizen as someone who goes beyond displays like the Pledge to actions such as political activism, serving the country, and teaching children about citizenship (Ellis 194). Repeating a few lines daily over the course of twelve years will instill only a shadow of the true allegiance that educating children about the history and ideals of the United States through a required civics class can help them reach. Unfortunately, many schools use the Pledge of Allegiance to fulfill their obligation to teach students about citizenship (May 205).

Using the Pledge of Allegiance to create a shallow version of true patriotism in children is more than a disservice to them; it also desecrates the meaning of the Pledge itself. In 1941, President Roosevelt declared that "when we repeat the great pledge to our country and to our flag, it must be our deep conviction that we pledge as well our work, our will and, if it be necessary, our very lives" (Ellis 116). No matter how mature, that is not a commitment that children are ready to make. No responsible adult would seriously consider letting a sixth grader

vote, and swearing one's life to a country is certainly a larger commitment than that. Furthermore, according to historian Elmer May, "[t]he founding fathers never dreamed of asking citizens, let alone children, to swear their allegiance" (May 114). If people choose, upon their majority, to make an oath of allegiance to the United States, that can only be a good thing. However, that is not a decision that half-educated schoolchildren are in a position to make.

In such a new system of adults making a voluntary oath due to honest feelings of patriotism, I think the current Pledge of Allegiance is insufficient. It was, after all, designed to be short and based around a symbol of the nation for children. Furthermore, a differently worded pledge might avoid some of the objections that have come up about the Pledge in the last century. While I am personally a Christian who does believe in an omnipotent God under whose sovereignty the United States, along with the rest of the world, does fall, I understand that many Americans are not. I would vastly prefer that people honestly take an oath that does not mention God to their professing something they do not believe in the name of patriotism. This encourages, of course, people to make up their own oaths, and it would be sad to lose the cohesiveness and solidarity the current Pledge of Allegiance. However, more than anything else, it would also represent the right of Americans to express themselves freely. Ideally, at least from my point of view, an adult version of the Pledge of Allegiance would be an honest commitment to active citizenship that the person taking it agreed to every part of and sincerely meant.

For me, such a pledge would go like this: *As a citizen of the United States, I understand that I am under no obligation to promise anything, to the nation or anyone else. However, patriotism moves me to do so of my own volition. This country functions on the assumption that its citizens can be trusted to actively work toward what they truly believe to be its best interests. To this end, I wish to make a vow of active citizenship. I pledge to vote whenever possible, but*

always and only in an educated manner, for the candidates and policies I believe best serve the nation. If I am bothered by a law or government policy, I pledge to act, within the bounds of the law, to change it. I pledge to respect the rights of others to do the same, even if I am vehemently opposed to what they believe. I pledge to respect employees of the government as people, even if I disagree with the policies or orders they propose or carry out. I pledge to uphold the law, and to accept the consequences for any knowing violations of it gracefully. This commitment is much more real than one made by schoolchildren to a symbol of the nation. It embodies what I consider true patriotism, which extends beyond blindly following the government to actions such as espousing the virtues of abolishing a national institution like the Pledge of Allegiance.

Works Cited:

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