

# God Knows What the Court Was Thinking

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I learned the Pledge of Allegiance before the words under God were inserted into it. We did not know anything was missing. Even without God, it was a Norman Rockwell scene: little white boys and girls with their hands over their hearts, facing a flag in the corner of a classroom in northwest Washington, D.C., struggling with the tough five syllables of "indivisible," while children across the racial divide in all-black schools in northeast and southwest Washington ghettos recited the same patriotic words to begin the school day. The black children grasped the details of the affirmation as little as we white children did, I'd guess. At the same hour on Capitol Hill, Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers raised their right hands to be sworn in before the House Un-American Activities Committee. And so the cold war's First Battle of Bull Run began, eventually producing divisions in America almost as dramatic as the racial ones. That word indivisible is a handsome thought, which we rally to in wartime and generally preserve as an ultimate ideal, but it has rarely described American history as it is enacted on the ground. America is more interesting than the pietisms it lavishes upon itself.

Oppose Godless Communism with Godful Americanism. By then I had converted to Catholicism and left public school for a Jesuit school where we began class not with the pledge but with a Hail Mary, a mood setter that, like the pledge, lost its force through unthinking repetition. After 1954, whenever I heard the pledge recited (in the ritual stream-of-consciousness way that one says, it sounded somehow tampered with and wrong. The original version had been grooved into my brain. I mistrusted the addition of under God first of all on unconscious aesthetic grounds. The new

phrase, set off by tendentious commas, was a hiccup in the flow of the drone, the mumbled civic music, the school kids' Om. Even as a callow youth, I sensed that someone had intruded an alien and politicized bromide into the pledge. Again, the adjacent word indivisible banged up against a new divisive irrelevance, a phrase that seemed to demand, somewhere below the surface, "What God, if any, do you worship? Is he the God of America? He damn well better be!"

The pledge became one of those gestures of an innocent and anodyne "ceremonial deism," like "In God We Trust." It's no big deal, not an organized religious agenda or otherwise a threat to the Constitution but rather a vague reassurance of collective goodwill. If you challenge the pledge, however, it becomes a big deal indeed, sacred, indispensable and not to be messed with. The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco, ruling last week that schoolchildren should not recite the pledge because the phrase under God violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, certainly chose a ridiculously inappropriate moment to mess with it. The decision at a time when America's post-9/11 flags are still truculently out and its nerves frayed by a now-you-see-it-now-you-don't war against terrorists and by a doubtful economy, seemed stupid: fetishistic about the First Amendment and almost wanton in its cluelessness about the American mood. Howls arose. The Senate and House, fearlessly doing the difficult, unpopular thing, came out four square in favor of the Pledge of Allegiance. So did President Bush. Profiles in courage. The Ninth Circuit, obviously abashed, said it would reconsider.

The pledge has the comfort of custom about it, and should certainly be preserved. It's too bad the highly dispensable "under God" language cannot be quietly dropped. Fat chance, of course. Still, the ideal solution, I think, would be to render unto Caesar an affirmation of flag and country but to keep God in our hearts, where he belongs, and out of politics. Christ himself was scathing about pharisaical display. Don't try to nationalize the deity; it's a little cheap. The Almighty likes to work on a case-by-case basis

anyway. I'm all for patriotism and all for religion. But they need to be watched. Sometimes patriotism becomes the next-to-last refuge of a scoundrel. And sometimes, as Osama bin Laden and certain pederast priests should have proved to us by now, religion becomes the last refuge.