What Do We Pledge?

In 1892, Francis Bellamy a former Baptist minister driven from the pulpit for preaching against capitalism, wrote, at the behest of the National Education Association, a pledge, designed as an exercise to highlight the unity of children from many lands enrolled in American public schools. The pledge was intended as a statement of the American school system's commitment to assimilating all immigrants.

Originally, the Congress codified rules that included a rigid one-armed salute, which was replaced in the 1940's with the hand-on-heart posture because of the former's association with the German Nazi salute. Then, in 1954, influenced by McCarthyism, the words "under God" were added, to emphasize America's religiosity so as to distinguish itself from the Soviet Union's godlessness.

Most American children have grown up reciting the Pledge of Allegiance each morning at the beginning of school. Many of us grow up and do not give much thought to the import of this statement that takes only fifteen seconds to recite, but which represents a lifetime of dedication. Once we reach adulthood, and have ostensibly come to appreciate the freedoms we have come to enjoy, it would seem unnecessary to remind ourselves of a statement we likely have memorized, and which is not so much a pledge to the flag itself, but to "the Republic for which it stands", and so, to the U.S. Constitution.

There has been a trend, in recent years, to have the Pledge of Allegiance recited before the opening of public meetings. It is, of course, the right and privilege of individual boards, commissions, and other groups, to decide whether or not to include the recitation, presumably after having discussed the necessity or appropriateness of including it prior to each meeting, and then voting on the matter.

In light of the political climate in recent years, with the patriotism of individuals being challenged based upon their actions or affiliations, and measuring loyalty by ostentatious displays rather than active participation, it seems important to discuss the significance of this pledge. Call them what you want: pledges, oaths, affirmations, promises. They all mean pretty much the same thing: a commitment. To make a pledge to the American flag, which is to say, to uphold the U.S. Constitution, is to uphold the rule of law. We should not forget that.

The original pledge: *I pledge allegiance to my flag and to the Republic for which it stands—one nation indivisible —with liberty and justice for all.*

The current pledge: *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.*