

Thinking About the History of the Pledge

by Sol Abrams

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From the World Book Encyclopedia: Public School children first recited the Pledge as they saluted the flag during the National School Celebration held in 1892. President Benjamin Harrison had called for patriotic exercises in schools to mark the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America. Francis Bellamy(1855-193 1)wrote the original Pledge. The National Flag Conferences of the American Legion expanded the original wording in 1923 and 1924. In 1942 Congress made the pledge part of its code for the use of the flag. In 1954 Congress added the words “under God.”

For sixty-two years, the pledge was strictly secular. It was a patriotic act of which **Thomas Jefferson**, who wrote the Declaration of Independence, and **James Madison**, who wrote most of the Constitution would have approved. Both Jefferson and Madison excluded the word “God” from these great documents deliberately. Their writings and letters make it clear that these Founding Fathers would have opposed the insertion of the words “under God.”

Jefferson, who was originally a Christian, abandoned the Judeo-Christian concept of God and became a Deist. He still revered the moral teachings of Jesus. However, he abandoned superstitious elements, such as the doctrine of the virgin birth and the Book of Revelations, and criticized those teachings in letters.

Jefferson wrote the “Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom” of 1786, which led to the adoption of the First Amendment. This document was an excellent example of “rendering unto Caesar,” totally separating the secular (Caesar) from the religious (God). Many of our high school students are ignorant of that magnificent document. Unfortunately, those who represent us in Congress appear to not know it either.

The exclusion of the text “under God” exemplifies the separation of church and state, a principle lauded by histories most influential thinkers. Even Jesus of Nazareth argued that God and Government should remain separate. He told his followers to render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and render unto God what is God’s. Jesus made it clear that behaviors such as paying taxes should be kept separate from religious activities such as tithing.

Abraham Lincoln stated that the principles of Jefferson were the axioms of democracy. **Alexis DeTocqueville**, a great French writer and statesman, said that Jefferson was the most powerful exponent of democracy there ever has been. Jefferson opposed all types of tyranny: tyranny of the executive: tyranny of a small group (junta); and worst of all, tyranny of a despotic majority.

When I was inducted into the U. S . Army in 1942, I recited the version of the Pledge of Allegiance that had been enacted in 1942 after having been around in unofficial form since 1892. It had been written for all Americans-nonbelievers like **Thomas Edison**, **Steve Allen**, **Isaac Asimov** - as well as believers. Also at that time the paper currency contained only the words *E Pluribus Unum*. “In God We Trust,” was not the original motto for the United States, as the spin artists of the Religious Right would have us believe.

Jefferson and Madison knew their Latin and Greek. Our Founding Fathers set up a republic based on the secular republics of Ancient Greece and Rome-not on the Judeo-Christian tradition nor on the Bible. Anyone who tells you that our country is based on the latter either needs a refresher course in American history or is attempting to rewrite it.

Jefferson and Madison believed in a reason-based government-not a faith-based one. The current Congress should pass a law deleting the words “under God” and go back to the original pledge that was used through two World wars.

Edison, who said that all religion was bunk, never prayed, invented more things than anyone else who ever lived, and did more than anyone else to improve the quality of our lives. He was a far better patriot than any of the Religious Right, those 21st century Pharisees who think that Atheists cannot be good citizens. Edison, Asimov, **Luther Burbank**, and most of our top scientists prove that they are totally wrong. Were he alive today Edison would be treated as a second-class citizen because of his criticism of religion, and probably could not get elected to any public office.

Jefferson would also have difficulty securing public office in today’s religious revivalist climate. He was fortunate that few Americans were church members in those days, so that the remarks of New York Calvinist minister **Rev. William Linn**, who stated from his pulpit in 1800 “A vote for Jefferson is a vote against God” had little effect.

Pat Robertson and **Jerry Falwell** would be saying the same thing about Thomas Jefferson if he were running for election today.

About the author:

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