

Conversations

On Law & Liberty in Times of Crisis

Pathway: Pledging Allegiance

Many Americans grew up reciting the Pledge of Allegiance each day at school. Many new American citizens recited an Oath of Allegiance to the United States as part of their naturalization ceremony. The starters in this pathway explore the role of pledges and oaths of allegiance in forging national identity and defining national values.

Starter 1: What is the history of our Pledge of Allegiance, and how have its words and meaning changed?

Starter 2: Should we ask our students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance each day in school?

Starter 3: What are the values we should ask new citizens to affirm in the Oath of Allegiance?

Starter 4: Should all American citizens be required to take an Oath of Allegiance?

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Pathway: Pledging Allegiance

Starter 1

Issue

What is the history of the Pledge of Allegiance and how have its words and meaning changed?

Starter

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

Original Pledge of Allegiance, written by [Francis Bellamy](#), 1892

"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."

Current text of the Pledge of Allegiance



Focus Questions

- What does the Pledge of Allegiance mean to you as an American?
- Francis Bellamy, the author of the original Pledge, considered adding the word "equality," but decided against doing so. What do you think of including "equality" in the text of the Pledge? Where might it be placed? How would including "equality" in the Pledge change its meaning?
- The phrase "under God" was added by Congress in 1954. The Knights of Columbus, a Catholic Order, were influential in urging this change. How do you think this addition changes the meaning of the Pledge? What is its significance?
- John Baer has written: "Perhaps the time has come to see that this [American pledge of] allegiance should be to the U.S. Constitution and not to a piece of cloth." What do you think of this statement?

Pathway: Pledging Allegiance Starter 2

Issue

Should we ask our students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance each day in school?

Starter

[Writer Mark Singer traveled to Madison, Wisconsin, to report on the city's debate over a new state law mandating that all public and private schools recite the Pledge of Allegiance or sing the national anthem each day. The law was passed before September 11, but Madison's debate over implementing the law did not begin until after the terrorist attacks. As reported by Singer, the community's debate was extremely vigorous and heated. The Madison school board's final resolution of the issue was to let individual principals decide whether to offer the pledge or the national anthem, and to precede the daily ceremony with this preamble: "We live in a nation of freedom. Participation in the Pledge or Anthem is voluntary. Those who wish to participate may stand; others may remain seated." Singer visited a high school classroom in Madison to observe the morning ceremony. Of twenty-five students in the room, only one stood while the national anthem was played. Four boys made a point of leaving the room before the anthem began. The following are quotes from Singer's conversation with students that followed the playing of the anthem.]

"I believe in the Pledge of Allegiance and the national anthem, but if we have to do it day in, day out, it loses its value."

"It's promoting militarism and nationalism in the classroom, and I'm strongly against that."

"What's the difference between standing and sitting? Does standing mean that you appreciate it more?"

"If we were required to recite the pledge each day instead of listening to the national anthem, I would have found a stronger form of expression than leaving the room."

"Sitting isn't going against the government. When I sit during the national anthem, I'm probably thinking more about my country than those who stand. I'm thinking that I'm grateful to live in a nation where I have the ability to sit or stand. But I still disagree with many of the things our government is doing right now, and by sitting I'm making a statement to that effect."



Mark Singer

"I know of another school in Wisconsin where they've tried hard to come up with a more musically interesting version of the anthem. There's a Whitney Houston version, I think, and a Marvin Gaye version, and a Jimi Hendrix version."

"I'd stand up for Jimi Hendrix."

Excerpt from Mark Singer, "I Pledge Allegiance," in [*The New Yorker*](#) (November 26, 2001)

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Focus Questions

- What do you think of the arguments these students make regarding their decision not to stand during the playing of the national anthem?
- Is there value in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance or playing the national anthem each day?
- Do you agree with the Madison school board's decision to emphasize that participation in the pledge or anthem is voluntary?

Pathway: Pledging Allegiance

Starter 3

Issue

What are the values we should ask new citizens to affirm in the Oath of Allegiance?

Starter

Part I:

The Oath of Allegiance to the United States of America

"I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God."



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Part II:

Current "Oath or Affirmation of Citizenship" of Canada

"I swear (or affirm) that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, Queen of Canada, Her Heirs and Successors, and that I will faithfully observe the laws of Canada and fulfill my duties as a Canadian citizen."

Part III:

Proposed Oath of Citizenship of Canada (Citizenship of Canada Act)

"From this day forward, I pledge my loyalty and allegiance to Canada and Her Majesty Elizabeth the Second, Queen of Canada. I promise to respect our country's rights and freedoms, to defend our democratic values, to faithfully observe our laws and fulfill my duties and obligations as a Canadian citizen."

Focus Questions

- How do you think the current Oaths of Canada and of the United States are similar? Different? Why?
- How do you think the current and proposed Oaths of Canada are similar? Different? Why?
- What civic values are expressed by each of these oaths? How are they similar? Different?

Pathway: Pledging Allegiance

Starter 4

Issue

Should all American citizens be required to take an Oath of Allegiance?

Starter

The Oath of Allegiance to the United States of America



Naturalization Ceremony © Copyright 2002 Corbis

"I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God."

Official text of naturalization oath required under federal law to be taken by new citizens of the United States. Prescribed under federal law since 1929.

Focus Questions

- What do you think is the most important part of the Oath? Why?
- Do you think prospective American citizens should be required to declare an oath of allegiance to the United States? Why or why not?
- Some have argued that *all* American citizens, not just prospective ones, should take the Oath of Allegiance? Do you agree? Why or why not?