

The Pledge of Allegiance:
A Reading

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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.

I. I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America

It is an oddity of the pledge of allegiance that, in it, our allegiance is pledged, not to any particular, actual, nation, but, first of all, “to the flag.” What can it mean to pledge allegiance to a flag? What is a ‘flag’ such that one can pledge one’s allegiance to it? Of course, if we take the flag to be no more than a piece of decorated cloth this makes no sense. Rather, the flag is a symbol. Our allegiance is pledged to a symbol and what it symbolizes. This symbol transcends the instantiated nation as it may exist at any moment in time. We do not pledge our allegiance to the United States of America as it exists now, or at any time. Rather our allegiance is pledged to its symbol and what it represents. To understand just what we are pledging our allegiance to, then, we have to ask what the symbol symbolizes.

II. And to the Republic for which it stands

The flag symbolizes, “stands for,” a *Republic*. The word ‘republic’ comes from the Latin, ‘*res publica*,’ meaning literally, ‘public entity.’ It refers to a society dedicated to the public good, the good of all its people, as opposed to the private interests of any of its people, and governed for and by its people toward that common end. Thus, in pledging our allegiance to the symbol of this Republic, and to the Republic symbolized by it, we are dedicating ourselves to a particular ideal: the ideal of a society itself dedicated to the common good.

III. One nation

The character of this ideal republic is now expressed, in abbreviated form, in the second half of the *Pledge*. First of all, we pledge our allegiance to “one nation.” That is, to the nation understood as the unified body of all its citizens. When I pledge my allegiance to the nation as ‘one’ I acknowledge my community with and responsibility to every member of this nation, rich or poor, white or of color, red state or blue, Jew, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Atheist, etc. We do not pledge allegiance to some part of the nation (our family, clan, corporation, region, religious group, etc.) but to that which transcends such partiality. Should a conflict arise between our more particular interests and the good of the community as one, we have committed ourselves to the latter. We may not put private, partisan, interests above our commitment to the good of the nation as a whole. The lobbyist who puts the special interests of his corporation

above the interests of the common good is violating his pledge of allegiance. The tax resistor who continually bemoans her civic responsibility to contribute her fair share to support the common good is violating the spirit of the pledge. The political partisan who is more concerned with the power of his party than the ideals of the nation is violating the pledge.

IV. *Under God*

This clause was not part of the original pledge, and some would wish to delete it. I consider it an important and appropriate addition. The nation to which we commit ourselves does not receive our ultimate, unconditional, loyalty. Rather we commit ourselves to this nation only insofar as it is itself committed to the universal good expressed in the idea of God. The ‘God’ referred to here is not the God of any particular religion (although it is not inconsistent with God as understood in the major world religions). Rather, it is God as referred to in the *Declaration of Independence*, which speaks of “The law of nature and of nature’s God.” This God is the God whose moral authority underwrites natural law and the natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The *Declaration of Independence* declares these to be the inalienable desert of *every* human being, regardless of national membership. Thus, when we say the pledge of allegiance we do not unconditionally commit ourselves to the nation considered as an absolute in itself, rather we commit ourselves to a nation that is itself committed to the higher ideal of respect for the moral integrity and dignity of *all* human beings, whether members of our nation or not. This is what the qualification “under God” makes clear.

V. *Indivisible*

We pledge our allegiance to a nation that is “indivisible.” Our commitment to the good of the whole must supersede our private commitments to our own group, however defined.

VI. *With Liberty and Justice for all*

Finally, our allegiance is pledged to a nation that provides liberty and justice for *all* of its citizens, and that, by implication, is committed to the universal principles of liberty and justice for all people everywhere. It is significant that the phrase “with liberty” is qualified by the phrase “and justice.” Rightful liberty is never simply freedom to do whatever one likes. It is the freedom to pursue one’s own happiness within the bounds of respect for the dignity and legitimate interests of all others; i.e., within the bounds of justice. Once again, what is expressed here is an ideal. “Liberty and justice for all” is an ideal that will never be perfectly actualized and, hence, must be constantly sought after. To the extent that our nation, as actualized at any moment, fails to embody this ideal, it is our patriotic duty as citizens to struggle to bring it into conformity with it. It is to this struggle we commit ourselves, again and again, when we recite the Pledge of Allegiance.