# *Patriotism*

by Herb Silverman

I could not have had a more patriotic beginning, or so I was taught to believe. I was born on Flag Day (June 14) in 1942, during World War II, at Liberty Hospital in Philadelphia, birthplace of both the nation and the flag purportedly designed by **Betsy Ross**. I wanted to believe family members who told me that flags were hung in honor of my birthday. My first public speech was at a fourth-grade Flag Day ceremony. I was chosen to read my essay "What the American Flag Means to Me." In that essay, I wrote about looking at the flag when *The Star-Spangled Banner* was sung at major league baseball games, hoping I would one day be a player on that field. I'm pretty sure my essay was picked because I happened to mention Flag Day was my birthday. Or maybe the other essays were even worse.

My views on patriotism in general, and Flag Day in particular, have changed considerably over the years. Suffice it to say that the anniversary of my birth has become a day when opportunistic politicians regularly attempt to take away freedoms for which our flag is supposed to stand. On my twelfth birthday, President **Dwight D. Eisenhower** signed into law the addition of "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance, saying, "From this day forward, the millions of our schoolchildren will daily proclaim in every city and town, every village and rural schoolhouse, the dedication of our nation and our people to the Almighty." President Eisenhower made no mention of the Constitution during this Flag Day ceremony in 1954 because the Constitution prohibits religious tests for public office and says nothing about any Almighty's.

The words "under God" were inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance at the height of the McCarthy Era to distinguish patriotic Americans from "godless Communists." This melding of God and Country turned a secular pledge into a religious one, and caused me to feel less patriotic when I no longer believed we were under any gods.

In addition to my problem conflating the Pledge of Allegiance and patriotism, I'm also bothered by linking patriotism with standing and singing *The Star-Spangled Banner* and deifying the American flag. I applauded football players who exercised their free-speech right to kneel during *The Star-Spangled Banner* in protest of racism, despite disapproval of many fans and President **Donald J. Trump**. Those who object call such a protest "unpatriotic" because this song is supposed to unite us. But there's a little-known reason why we only sing the first stanza of the song: Composer **Francis Scott Key** was a pro-slavery racist. The third stanza decries the runaway slaves working for the British army and openly celebrates the murder of such former slaves.

I rarely agreed with former Supreme Court **Justice Antonin Scalia**, but he did the right thing in his key vote in the decision that flag burning is constitutionally-protected speech under the First Amendment. Criminalizing flag burning, however unpatriotic most Americans consider it to be, is an unconstitutional attack on our cherished freedom of speech.

Standing and singing *The Star-Spangled Banner*, deifying the American flag, and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance are examples of symbolic patriotism. What we need more of is substantive patriotism to improve our country in tangible ways. This could include serving on local school boards, volunteering at soup kitchens, staying informed on issues, voting, doing what we can about climate change, and criticizing our government in the hope of improving it. Symbolic patriotism is easy, and often mindless. Substantive patriotism is what can make a country great.

Our public schools train students to salute the flag and say the Pledge of Allegiance whether they understand it or not, because simply regurgitating the Pledge daily is supposed to make them more patriotic. That strategy succeeds if patriotism just means obediently following orders of those in power. Discussions about the Pledge would be a significant improvement over mindless repetition.

Here's how I would like to see public school teachers turn the Pledge of Allegiance into a meaningful patriotic exercise. First, assign each student to write a short essay on one of ten segments in the Pledge. For example:

1. I pledge allegiance (What does it mean to pledge, and what is allegiance?)

2. To the flag (Why to a flag? Should it be to someone or something else?)

3. Of the United States of America (How united are we, and what is America?)

4. And to the republic for which it stands (What's a republic, and why are we one?)

5. One nation (In what sense are we one nation?)

6. Under God (Are we all under God, under the same God, and the only such nation?)

7. Indivisible (How are we indivisible, and what might divide us?)

8. With liberty (What does it mean to have liberty?)

9. And justice (Do we all have equal access to it, and does it ever conflict with liberty?)

10. For all (Does that mean all people or only American citizens?)

Next, have students read their essays, followed by class discussions. Then encourage each student to rewrite the Pledge in a way that is more meaningful to him or her. Instead of group recitation then listen to and discuss their original pledges.

The "under God" discussions would undoubtedly be the most heated, because our "indivisible" nation is divided about God. Some students might choose to eliminate "under God," while others might change it to "under Jesus," "under Allah," "under the Constitution," or even "under Canada."

Many who engage in this exercise might conclude that the government should not tell us we are one nation under God any more than it should tell us we are one nation under no gods. Regardless of personal religious beliefs, students ought to learn about the importance of religious liberty and why it is threatened when the government endorses any religious view.

Teachers could parse the Pledge of Allegiance in other ways or ask different questions. But one thing for sure is that their students would learn and understand the Pledge of Allegiance better than previous generations have, whether

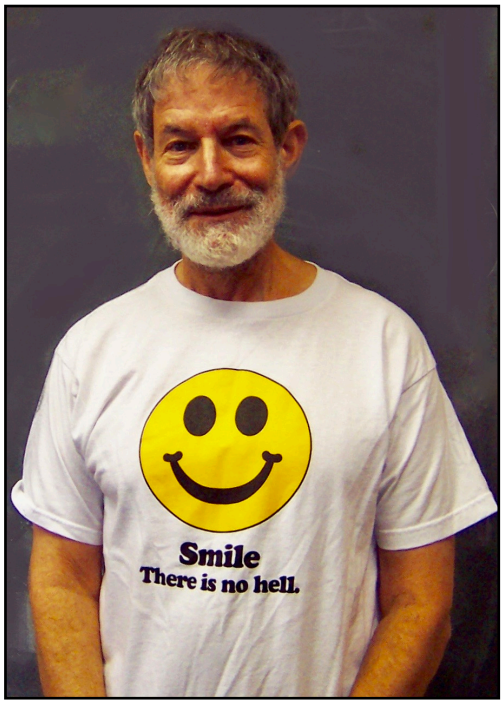
"under God" or not. Starting the school day with discussions about our Bill of Rights would also be educational and might lead to informed, active citizenship. Understanding our Constitution and working to make our country better is patriotic.

Although we tend to deify our founders and hold them up as role models, we act more like them when we question the old order and try to improve it. Our founders wrote the world's first secular constitution, and they also established a method for future generations to amend it when needed. Thinking, questioning, and trying to improve our country is definitely patriotic — a lot more so than merely reciting pledges and prayers or waving flags.

I'm often reminded of the movie *Head of State*, in which **Chris Rock** is running for president against a candidate who ends all his speeches with "God bless America, and nowhere else!" I can no longer hear "God bless America" from a politician without thinking of that three-word ending. Along with this notion comes "American Exceptionalism," equating the country with the biblical city on the hill. Why do some Americans want all countries to emulate America but create so many barriers for those desperately seeking a better life in America?

I recognize how fortunate I am to have been born in a country and family where I have had ample opportunities to attain a decent education and standard of living. What should we do about those to whom much is not given, whether born in this or another country? Though there are no easy answers, I wish Americans would be more charitable in understanding the plight of illegal immigrants and our least fortunate citizens. It is through pure chance of birth that many of us, myself included, are not sneaking into other countries to find safety or work so that we can feed our families.

In recent years, our Statue of Liberty seems to have lost its former role as an inspiration for the United States. To me, it's patriotic to act on the statue's words: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"




**Herb Silverman** is the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*.

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