

Pledging Allegiance

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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.*

Reciting the Pledge of Allegiance may be the core civic ritual in the United States and the most common—core because it extracts a personal promise of some sort, and most common because it is widely required in schools and concludes the naturalization ceremony for new citizens.

While many people have recited it and even memorized it, few have interpreted it with others. I've come to this conclusion after leading nearly fifty interpretive discussions or *seminars* on the Pledge. Some have been with high-school students, some with elementary students, and many with their teachers and parents. Participants typically say they've not done this before; they have been putting their hands to their hearts and promising something they have not thought much about.

To clarify, a seminar is a discussion of a text for the purpose of plumbing its depths. Discussion accomplishes this better than working alone because one's own understanding is fertilized by the views of others. If the seminar proceeds in a diverse group and a skilled facilitator, so much the better: one's own interpretation is more likely to be challenged in interesting ways.

Leading seminars on the Pledge, I'm struck by three arguments that often unfold. First, and most important to many participants, is the phrase "under God" and what it does to the text when it is present or (as before 1954) absent. The mix of nationalism and theism in the Pledge can evoke a torrent of opinion.

Second, to what or whom are we pledging allegiance when we recite it? To the flag, say some. To the nation, say others. No, to the republic, say others, pointing to "for which it stands." Does this argument matter? It does, because only one of these is an idea about how to live with one another. Nazis and Romans pledged allegiance to a man (Heil Hitler, Hail Caesar), countless others have pledged allegiance to a plot of land ("land where my fathers died"). But "to the republic" suggests fidelity to the principles of constitutional democracy.

Then there's the final phrase, "with liberty and justice for all." Here the argument turns on what sort of statement this is. Is it a *description* or an *aspiration*? A *reality* or an *ideal*? Participants can believe one or the other (or both). On this question disagreement runs deep, and for good reason: one side suggests that the citizen's job is to protect democracy (because it has been accomplished); the other, that the citizen's job is to achieve it (because it has not).

There are more arguments I would like to hear; but these are a good start. Listening to them, I've concluded that recitation without interpretation is like fishing in a dry lake. This is not a case for or against reciting the Pledge, but for engaging the ideas and issues it raises when you ask it questions, and for doing so with others.