

THE PLEDGE

A DEFINING MOMENT FOR THE MADISON LEFT

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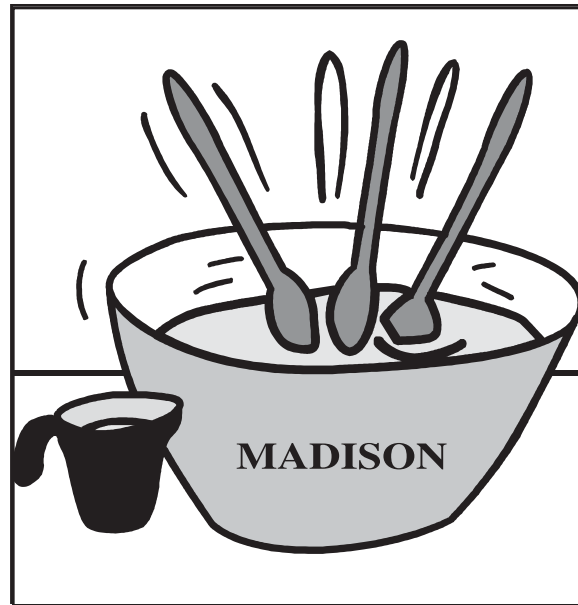
The extraordinary thing about the Madison School Board's vote to ban the pledge of allegiance was that its members didn't think they were doing anything controversial.

As outraged reaction poured in, the Board's president quickly backtracked, admitting, "We did not consider all the ways it could have been interpreted or misinterpreted."

It just never occurred to any of them that banishing the pledge of allegiance from the city's schools less than a month after the September 11 terrorist attack would set off a firestorm of disgust and derision in a city that had long chafed at being described as "52 miles surrounded by reality."

This was, after all, Madison, where culture wars were a part of the community fabric and generally one-sided. This was the same Madison where the City Council would spend hours before voting to delete the words "thoughts and prayers" from a resolution of condolence for the victims of the September 11 terrorist attacks and replace them with "thoughts and sympathies."

The 3-to-2 vote to shelve the pledge and allow only instrumental versions of the nation-



al anthem (all the bombs bursting in air sounded too militaristic) came after two public hearings at which no one had defended the pledge. Even the two Board members, who voted against the resolution, didn't do so because they harbored any latent sympathy for the pledge; rather they didn't think it went far enough in protecting the sensibilities of dissenting stu-

dents. Board member Ruth Robarts, a dean at the UW Law School, fretted: "I'm just very uncomfortable with anything that does not remove the coerciveness of the classroom." She suggested banishing the pledge and the national anthem to the gymnasium or auditorium, where it would be offered at a specified time each day. Deeming that too cumbersome, the board went along with member Bill Key's no pledge/no lyrics policy.

Historic moments fast-forward the pace of social change, and can surprise even the most hidebound and insular institutions. In the past, the antics of Academic Madison were usually

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dismissed with a despairing shrug. What Madison's School Board didn't understand was how September 11 had changed all of that.

Word of the ban quickly made national news; the Board was inundated with thousands of e-mails and calls. "We're the laughingstock of the Midwest," one Madison resident complained. But not everyone was laughing. Veterans groups were quickly mobilized. "People are really, really ticked off about this thing," said Mike Furgal, state adjutant quartermaster for the 47,000-member Wisconsin Veterans of Foreign Wars. Both of the School Board members who had been absent from the meeting where the pledge was banned derided the vote; one of them, Ray Allen, called the decision "truly unfortunate, stupid and embarrassing to the city, the school district and the state." The October 15 special meeting the Board called to reconsider its decision was a dramatic turnaround from the two previous hearings that had been dominated by pledge opponents. More than 1200 people showed up for the meeting, which lasted from 5:00 p.m. to 2:30 in the morning. One-hundred sixty-six people spoke on the issue, while another 683 submitted written questions. The number of e-mails received by the Board mounted into the tens of thousands (resulting in the district's legally questionable decision to delete them all.) Madison had never seen anything quite like it, and the Board majority quickly capitulated.

By a vote of 6 to 1 — the only dissenter being the Board's only white male member — the Board reversed itself. But even the humiliating flip-flop didn't end the controversy. More than ten thousand city residents would sign petitions seeking to recall Board member Bill Keys, who was obdurate in his opposition to the pledge. Although that fell far short of the number of signatures required, it represented more votes than Keys had received in his last election. Reflecting lingering anger over the vote, Board President Calvin Williams announced earlier this year that he would not seek re-election.

But the worst damage may have been to Madison's self-image. The Madison Left was exposed as both arrogant and out-of-date. Even this might have been tolerable . . . but it also looked *silly*. There was something oddly irrelevant about Madison's debate, as if a seminar in the semiotics of oppression had sprung up in the middle of the Invasion of Normandy.

Perhaps the cruelest blow was delivered by *The New Yorker*, the cultural arbiter of all things *infra dig*, which described Madison's debate over the pledge as self-indulgent carping. For the Left, the new image was disquieting. They had imagined themselves as courageous, idealistic dissenters reprising their hallowed roles as romantic activists in the Sixties, but in the new spotlight, they were revealed as ideological versions of the character played by Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard* — desperate for one last close-up, Mr. DeMille.

A Very Madison Debate

The state law requiring public schools to offer either the pledge or the national anthem daily was originally set to go into effect on September 1, 2001, but word was slow getting out to school districts around the state. The measure had long been a pet project of Republican Assembly Speaker Scott Jensen. When it was first voted on in the state Assembly, the pledge requirement passed overwhelmingly, 95 to 2. It languished in the Senate, however, where Democrats quietly killed the bill, without going on record actually voting against the pledge of allegiance. Jensen succeeded, however, in inserting the measure in the state budget.

The law was explicit that the saying of the pledge was strictly voluntary. No pupil, it said, "may be compelled against the pupil's objections or those of the pupil's parents or guardian, to recite the pledge or sing the anthem." That seemed to make the legislation legally bulletproof and relatively uncontroversial.

The only objections to the pledge came from the Madison-based Freedom From

Religion Foundation (FFRF), which reported that it had received anguished calls from some parents who objected to the pledge's use of the phrase "one nation, *under God*." In a press release in late September, the FFRF urged school districts to avoid the pledge, using the national anthem instead. Outside of Madison, the suggestion was ignored, dismissed as a *reductio ad absurdum* of efforts to keep church and state separate.

Indeed, the FFRF could never be mistaken as even a remote suburb of the mainstream. FFRF founder Anne Gaylor (and daughter Annie Laurie Gaylor) are by no means neutral on religious faith; they loathe it. The group's webpage features heavy-breathing essays like "Was Jesus a Horse Thief?" (Yes, he was.) In FFRF literature Gaylor senior quotes a critic who says that Jesus was "a mediocre preacher who had mistaken ideas about practically everything." Adds Gaylor, "the most cursory reading of the New Testament will confirm that evaluation." Her indictment of The Lord includes complaints that Jesus had "an uneasy vanity," destroyed a fig tree "out of peevishness" and "unnecessarily killed animals, i.e. Pigs." Another FFRF publication describes the Ten Commandments as "sleazy."

Outside the beltway, the Gaylors could be laughed off as generally harmless cranks-with-lawyers. In Madison, they helped shape public policy.

What followed was a debate that was quintessentially Madison. One parent (a faculty member from UW) told the board:

While it may seem that the words "under God" do not endorse a particular religion, they in fact do. Those words imply a certain type of God, a male god, a singular

god. There are families in Madison that do not believe in a supreme being, there are families that believe in a Goddess rather than a God, and there are families that believe in a spirit world populated with multiple deities.

But was this really an argument for eliminating the "Pledge of Allegiance"? The board faced no threat of litigation. Not even the FFRF suggested that they could find a judge anywhere who would rule that saying the pledge in schools was unconstitutional. For decades the pledge had been recited in classrooms across the country without controversy or legal challenge. Despite the best efforts of the

Gaylors and the ACLU, references to the Supreme Being were common in civic rituals and history — from the Declaration of Independence (all that stuff about divine providence and endowed by their Creator) and the Wisconsin Constitution (which attributes our freedoms to "Almighty God") to dollar bills. No one suggested that the pledge constituted prayer; and there was no requirement that anyone be coerced into reciting the pledge. Indeed, there was some-

thing almost artificial about the debate over the phrase "under God," as if it had become a proxy for the real objections to the pledge.

That there were other concerns became obvious when the Board decided that there was something objectionable even in the lyrics of the *Star Spangled Banner*. Explaining why his resolution allowed only instrumental versions of the *Star Spangled Banner*, Board Member Bill Keys said he was responding to "a number of people opposed to the militaristic tone and phraseology" of its lyrics.

Others also made it clear that their opposition was not based on the separation of church and state concerns raised by the Freedom

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From Religion Foundation. Suzy Grindod, a Madison elementary school teacher who spoke against the pledge at the October 1 meeting later wrote that, "the primary concern I heard being expressed was not about church/state separation, but about the indoctrination of children, and that mandating acts of *patriotism* is a dangerous idea." [Emphasis added.]

At hearings on the issue, other speakers went even further, suggesting that there was something almost fascistic about the pledge, and that reciting it was a blow to democratic values, as if the terrorists' greatest triumph would be the sight of a nation rising together and reciting the ritual of national identity.

Civic leaders are quick to point out that the demographics of Madison have been changing, that it is no longer simply a university/government town but rather a more diverse community. But the debate over the pledge — at least initially — indicated that Madison's political culture was still dominated by the Left or by those unwilling to challenge the Left. And it is hardly an overstatement to say that Academic Madison was uncomfortable with patriotism in almost any formal guise. When the *Wisconsin State Journal* profiled Bill Keys, he was asked whether he loved his country? "Well, he's glad he has the rights he does. Then he paused. 'I can't love anything that is so much in the abstract.' "

Of Bans And Bullies

The Board's vote took place on October 8 — twenty-seven days after the attacks on New York and Washington. The actual wording of the resolution required that every school would offer, every day, a wordless, instrumental version of the national anthem. Later, Keys and others denied that this "banned" the pledge because the resolution never mentioned the pledge at all. This was an important point because a "ban" made them look like they were on the wrong side of tolerance — it was the reactionary right that banned ideas, not progressive dissenters. Now, they felt themselves losing the moral battle because they looked like bullies — in this case bullies who were shocked when the scrawny kids on the

playground decided to fight back. So they tried for a time to deny that they had ever *technically* banned the pledge. They had merely declined to allow it.

But this was too clever by half, the kind of sophistry that merely annoyed critics and confused would-be allies (many of whom continued to defend the "ban" on the pledge as completely justified and rather high-minded). The explanation also begged the question why the Board had felt it necessary to eliminate the actual *lyrics* of the national anthem. If their point was not to protect students from certain *words*, what was the point of that particular decision?

And in any case, Academic Madison was no stranger to bans. Over the years it had developed an increasingly intolerant and sclerotic approach toward politically incorrect speech, an attitude that had resulted in speech codes, shout-downs of unpopular speakers on campus, and attacks on the editors of a student newspaper who published politically objectionable ads. But, in the past, none of those "bans" had generated either the attention or the passions of the pledge issue.

The Board's decision also seemed to suggest that it did not trust its schools to be patriotic, an especially ironic decision because the Board's own official policy says that both the Board and the staff "are dedicated completely to the principles which contribute to American democracy." They go even further, saying,

We know that democratic self-government demands citizens who . . . understand well the great heritage which is theirs. We believe that the public school is the bulwark of democracy and is essential to its existence and dynamic forward thrust.

Once challenged, the Board majority could not explain how offering the pledge or listening to the *Star Spangled Banner* would conflict with its own goals. Concerns about the sensitivities of students who would refuse to say the pledge were legitimate, but there are also times when the sensibilities of the majority also need to be taken into consideration. And compulsion was never the issue.

A Question of Patriotism

In the end, the Board's vote reflected an uneasiness not about the violation of church-state separation — but with what much of Madison saw as troubling displays of flag-waving, which conjured images not of national unity, but of jingoism and super-patriotism, tapping into the Left's tribal memory of black lists, McCarthyism, and American oppression.

While the rest of the country saw brave firefighters and rescue workers and a nation united in grief and national purpose, they saw flag-waving Babbitts.

For Academic Madison, anti-patriotism was more than a reflex. It was a worldview that dominated both political and cultural attitudes and which had survived the end of the Cold war.

Spend time on the UW campus or read the letters of the editor of local newspapers: America is not as a shining city on a hill (smirk, sneer, laugh). It is:

- Sexist
- Racist
- Homophobic
- An Oppressor of Native Indians
- Scourge of the Environment and the Ozone Layer
- Militaristic, arrogant, imperialistic
- Greedy, selfish, and indulgent.

Indeed, it was almost *de rigueur* in Academic Madison to regard America as the bad boy on the international block. In the days after the September 11 attack, UW professor Joel Rogers, one of the gurus of Academic Madison, opined that the murder of thousands of Americans was “inexcusable,” but went on to declare that “our own government, through

much of the past fifty years, has been the world's leading ‘rogue state.’”

Even as the rescue crews searched for survivors in the wreckage of the World Trade Centers, Rogers made the case for moral equivalency between the United States and its enemies — including the terrorists who had just attacked New York and Washington.

Merely listing the plainly illegal or unauthorized uses of force the U.S. was responsible for during the long period of cold war, and continued during the past decade of “purposeless peace” — assassinations, engineered coups, terrorizing police forces, military invasions, “force without war,” direct bombings, etc. — would literally

take volumes. And behind that list reside the bodies of literally hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of innocents, most of them children, whose lives we have taken without any pretense to justice.

Rogers approvingly cited Amnesty International's indictment of perfidious America:

Throughout the world, on any given day, a man, woman, or child is likely to be displaced,

tortured, killed, or “disappeared”, at the hands of governments or armed political groups. More often than not, the United States shares the blame.

Others on the Left reacted bitterly to other symbolic displays of resurgent patriotism. Writing in *The Nation*, Katha Pollitt described her reaction when her daughter, who attends a school only blocks from the World Trade Center, suggested that they fly a flag from their window.

Definitely not, I say: The flag stands for jingoism and vengeance and war. She tells me I'm wrong — the flag means standing together and honoring the dead and saying no to terrorism. In a way we're both right.

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... [The flag] has to bear a wide range of meanings, from simple, dignified sorrow to the violent anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bigotry that has already resulted in murder, vandalism and arson around the country and harassment on New York City streets and campuses.

Pre-September 11, this sort of thing would have been unlikely to draw much of a reaction. It would not have been especially controversial in the circles in which Rogers and Pollitt traveled and it would probably have been tolerated by the larger community as little more than the droning background noise of the Academic Left. It might not have even seemed unpatriotic, because pre-September 11 patriotism was a mild business, best left to muted expression several times a year by calendar. Turn-of-the-century America tended to be modest about American power, as given to self-doubt as self-congratulation. The usual denunciations (the United States as sexist, racist, reactionary) could also be brushed off because so many Americans imagined that they were somehow beyond history; the rhetorical attacks didn't challenge anything that *mattered*.

Academics like Rogers had grown complacent under this benign tolerance and indifference. And perhaps because they also had become accustomed to having their views unchallenged, many of the critics on the left were unprepared for the outpouring of criticism and the depths of the feelings their comments aroused. Rogers, in particular, seemed stunned at the reaction. A hugely successful self-promoter — Alexander Coburn calls Rogers a “tireless grant farmer” — Rogers suddenly found himself far outside the political mainstream and has since struggled mightily to re-establish his relevance (and grant-worthiness).

What Rogers, Pollitt — and the Madison School Board — failed to understand was the distinction between self-criticism and self-loathing; or the difference between dissenting from a specific policy ... and visceral anti-Americanism reflected in assaults aimed not at ideas, but at the very symbols of national unity.

Less than a month before the Madison School Board vote, terrorists had murdered thousands of people; the dead were of every race, religion, and political persuasion. They were attacked because they were Americans and because they symbolized America to those who hated it. At certain times, to cope with tragedy people turn to prayer or seek loved ones; nations turn to their rituals of citizenship. The pledge became the words that Americans sought to try to understand and respond to the terror attacks. The courage of the New York rescue workers added resonance to words that defined our unity, our identity, and our shared belief in liberty and justice for all. In their circumscribed, hermetically-sealed time warp, the Academic Left couldn't hear any of that.

During Madison's debate over the pledge of allegiance, one young man stood before hundreds of veterans and described the flag as a “stinking piece of cloth,” and equated the pledge with totalitarianism. What old battle was he still fighting? What is it that he hates? And what would he be willing to defend?

They are questions that Academic Madison was unprepared or unwilling to answer.

The enemy was not a workers paradise or an ideology that promises greater justice and equality. The murderers of September 11 treated women as property, refused to let them work or go to school or even leave the house; exulted in the extermination of Jews, loathed the very idea of religious liberty, destroyed art, feared books, killed gays and infidels. They had attacked Americans in their homes; they have killed innocents, and will kill more.

If not now, critics asked, when should we ever stand together as one nation under God? If not for this, then for what?

Verdicts

In November, *The New Yorker* devoted a lengthy article to Madison's debate over the pledge. The magazine's Mark Singer noted,

In Madison, more than in most places, the unbloody culture war — political correct-

ness and all that — has served as a curious catalyst.

But he was unwilling to accept Academic Madison's self-congratulatory praise of its own idealism. "Underlying the noble rhetoric about what a valuable civics lesson Madison has witnessed, there's a less noble quality," wrote Singer,

a failure to acknowledge the self-indulgence implicit in all the carping. The semiotics of the Pledge of Allegiance and the national anthem and the schoolhouse are abstractions that one has the luxury to dwell upon when the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and dense concentrations of grieving survivors happen to be several hundred miles away. "Democracy"

is one way to define the dialectic. Other terms apply as well.

Singer's piece got mostly negative reviews in the Madison press. Columnists for *The Capital Times* continue to insist that the Board's original vote on the pledge was courageous and principled. Critic Tom Laskin, in the weekly *Isthmus*, agreed that elements of Singer's argument are "stupid and elitist." But he also conceded "we'd do well to ponder some of his observations about our fair city. If we don't, we may soon deserve to be known as the fussy, out-of-date lefty stronghold he paints us."

It may already be too late.