

## **'Under God' Is the Firm Link To U.S. Security**

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How appropriate that the U.S. Supreme Court's non-decision allowing the words "under God" to live awhile longer in the Pledge of Allegiance should come just days after Ronald Reagan's funeral. The days of Reagan remembrance struck many strong notes but none more so than when the Armed Forces Chorus sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

Julia Ward Howe's great song was sung as well at the funerals of Winston Churchill and Robert Kennedy. It is the music of choice when one's goal is to match the grandeur of the nation to a public life. But it goes without saying that should any school district in America establish, if one may use that word, the singing of Ms. Howe's hymn each Friday afternoon at a week-ending convocation, the Supreme Court would banish it.

Julia Howe's "Battle Hymn," written at a Union Army camp on the Potomac, is way, waaay over the Court's quota of capitalized "h" words -- He is trampling, His sword, His day, the Hero born of woman, and His truth.

But still -- even the most devout atheist can't tamp down the tearful wellings of national pride that erupt in most of us when a strong chorus sings "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord . . . His truth is marching on."

The long historical truth is that God, whether He exists or not, is good for summoning national pride, communal bonds and the martial spirit -- the qualities most necessary to ensuring the survival of the United States at its current level of pre-eminence. (If the U.S.'s current level of pre-eminence is what galls you most, stop reading.)

When in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance schoolchildren stand and say together that their one, indivisible, just and liberty-loving nation exists *under God*, they are admitting an organizing force in life other than their cute, little selves.

Arguably, the role of God or religion in the nation's life wouldn't matter very much if the relations among all nations resembled the Garden of Eden. Since that famous, unfortunate Fall, however, men and women have been called upon to die defending their country. That is asking a lot. The willingness to fight for one's nation has been a function of the patriotic impulse, and we summon that impulse, in part, with appeals to a higher purpose.

Through the ages this at times has led to quite awful undertakings in the name of national pride, God or religion. *But that's not us and likely never will be.* The Founders designed our system to prevent factions from abusing state power; it is what they sought to prevent. America isn't merely a lucky collection of admirable traditions. It was thought out. If you want out of Iraq, you may vote for it in November. If George Bush loses, no matter what his personal beliefs, he will vacate the office.

Wholly secularizing America's public life, as the Pledge banners wish, is dangerous. The clear danger of pulling all God's threads from the national fabric was recognized here from day one. Several days ago on this page, Samuel Huntington quoted George Washington: "Reason and

experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principles."

Visiting America years later, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote an astonishingly acute psychological rationale for what he called "the great usefulness of religions." Belief in God, he reasoned, is a socially unifying force that prevents democratized men from falling back solely on themselves -- a politically enervating status, he argued, which "prepares a people for bondage."

In 1992, the 7th Circuit Court of Appeals, in *Sherman v. Community Consolidated School District* -- an "under God" Pledge of Allegiance case from Illinois -- upheld the Pledge and made the national security argument in the plainest possible terms: "Patriotism is an effort by the state to promote its own survival, and along the way to teach those virtues that justify its survival. Public schools help to transmit those virtues and values."

They do indeed. If today public schools can transmit environmental pantheism, as they do on behalf of whales and the air, they can transmit save-the-nation with a two-word reference to God. As a matter of fact, one of the briefs filed in the 2004 *Newdow* case against the Pledge came from Associated Pantheist Groups. As well as Atheists for Human Rights, Seattle Atheists et al. and of course the ACLU.

It is unwise to make light of their views; at least five Supreme Court justices are closer to the political thought of the Atheist Law Center than any expressed here. The Court ruled 5-4 in 1992, in *Lee v. Weisman*, that a rabbi's graduation prayer ("O God, we are grateful for the learning we have celebrated") was an "attempt to employ the machinery of the State to enforce a religious orthodoxy." This has come to be known as the "psychological coercion" test, and because of it the U.S. government, to satisfy the Court, must now argue that the Pledge has nothing to do with religion. "Describing the republic as a nation 'under God,'" the Justice Department argued in the Pledge case, "is not the functional equivalent of prayer." Heaven forbid.

This innocuous little Pledge and its two words, "under God," has become for school children the last link joining national purpose to God -- a union that is this country's best, proven hope for ensuring national strength. When that link is finally broken, the U.S. will start to become, well, France -- smart, sophisticated, agnostic and save for nuclear bombs, inexorably weak. That is one test case I'd as soon not try.