

LEARN HOW TO BE HAPPIER AT WORK—TODAY

themuse

HUFF
POST

The Third Metric

Delivered straight
to your inboxSIGN UP
FOR A FREE CLASS

June 12, 2014

HUFF
POST

POLITICS

Bob Greene Ignores the Socialist Origins of the Pledge of Allegiance

Posted: 12/24/2013 9:17 am

Like 340 people like this. Sign Up to see what your friends like.

Francis Bellamy, a Christian socialist, wrote the Pledge of Allegiance in 1892 as a critique of the rampant greed, misguided materialism, and hyper-individualism of the Gilded Age. But you'd never know that by reading CNN contributor Bob Greene's column earlier this week called "The Peculiar History of the Pledge of Allegiance." He sort of air-brushed Bellamy's politics out of that history. This is typical of how pundits and politicians often rewrite and distort history to reflect their own peculiar views.

Greene's essay focused on what was called the "Bellamy Salute," an awkward gesture that for decades millions of schoolchildren and others used while reciting the Pledge. It involved stiffly extending the right arm upward and outward, fingers pointed ahead. By the 1930s, however, this gesture began to make many Americans uncomfortable -- not because it was physically difficult but because it closely resembled the "Heil Hilter" salute that Americans began to see depicted in newsreels and still photos of Nazi rallies in Europe.

So, as Greene recounts -- citing the authoritative history *To the Flag: The Unlikely History of the Pledge of Allegiance* by Richard Ellis -- on December 22, 1942, Congress amended the Flag Code, decreeing that the Pledge of Allegiance should "be rendered by standing with the right hand over the heart." You could argue that it took Congress too long to make the change -- almost a decade after Hitler came to power -- but that's how Americans brought down their right arms and put them over their hearts.

The Pledge of Allegiance remains a hallowed part of American culture, still regularly recited at schools and at public events as a demonstration of patriotism and love of country. Last year, during his presidential campaign, Mitt Romney reminisced about reciting the Pledge in his fourth grade class. Then he used each line of the Pledge to make a point about his own views -- about unifying the country, strengthening the military and the importance of keeping God in our public life -- and to criticize President Obama for falling short in these areas.

As the *New York Times* reported, Romney announced that "The promises that were made in that pledge are promises I plan on keeping if I am president, and I've kept them so far in my life." He continued: "That pledge says 'under God.' I will not take 'God' out of the name of our platform. I will not take 'God' off our coins, and I will not take God out of my heart. We're a nation bestowed by God."

Perhaps Romney didn't know the history of the Pledge, but Greene had no excuse, since he'd obviously read Ellis' book on the subject.

Bellamy wrote the Pledge in 1892 to express his outrage at the nation's widening economic divide. And, contrary to Romney, he did not include the phrase "under God" as part of the original Pledge.



Francis Bellamy

Bellamy, who lived from 1855 to 1931, was a Baptist minister and a leading Christian socialist. He was ousted from his Boston church for his sermons depicting Jesus as a socialist and for his work among the poor in the Boston slums.

It was the Gilded Age, an era of major political and social conflict. Reformers were outraged by the widening gap between rich and poor, and the behavior of corporate robber barons who were exploiting workers, gouging consumers, and corrupting politics with their money. Workers were organizing unions. Farmers joined forces in the Populist movement to leash the power of banks, railroads and utility companies. Progressive reformers fought for child labor laws, against slum housing and in favor of women's suffrage. Radicals were gaining new converts.

In foreign affairs, Americans were battling over the nation's role in the world. America was beginning to act like an imperial power, justifying its expansion with a combination of white supremacy, manifest destiny and spreading democracy. At the time, nativist groups in the North and Midwest, as well as the South, were pushing for restrictions on immigrants -- Catholics, Jews and Asians -- deemed to be polluting Protestant America. In the South, the outcome of the Civil War still inflamed regional passions. Many Southerners, including Civil War veterans, swore allegiance to the Confederate flag.

Bellamy (cousin of Edward Bellamy, author of two best-selling radical books, *Looking Backward* and *Equality*) believed that

unbridled capitalism, materialism and individualism betrayed America's promise. He hoped the Pledge of Allegiance would promote a different moral vision to counter the rampant greed he thought was undermining the nation.

Bellamy initially intended to use the phrase "liberty, fraternity and equality," but concluded that the radical rhetoric of the French Revolution wouldn't sit well with many Americans. So he coined the phrase, "one nation indivisible with liberty and justice for all," intending it to express a more egalitarian vision of America, a secular patriotism to help unite a divided nation.

Bellamy penned the Pledge of Allegiance for *Youth's Companion*, a magazine for young people published in Boston with a circulation of about 500,000. A few years earlier, the magazine had sponsored a largely successful campaign to sell American flags to public schools. In 1891 the magazine hired Bellamy to organize a public relations campaign to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's discovery of America by promoting use of the flag in public schools.

Bellamy gained the support of the National Education Association, along with President Benjamin Harrison and Congress, for a national ritual observance in the schools, and he wrote the Pledge of Allegiance as part of the program's flag salute ceremony.

Bellamy thought such an event would be a powerful expression on behalf of free public education. Moreover, he wanted all the schoolchildren of America to recite the pledge at the same moment. He hoped the pledge would promote a moral vision to counter the individualism embodied in capitalism and expressed in the climate of the Gilded Age.

In 1923, over the objections of the aging Bellamy, the National Flag Conference, led by the American Legion and the Daughters of the American Revolution, changed the opening, "I pledge allegiance to my flag" to "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America." In 1954, at the height of the Cold War -- when many political leaders believed that the nation was threatened by godless communism -- the Knights of Columbia led a successful campaign to get Congress to add the words "under God."

America now confronts a new version of the Gilded Age, brought upon by Wall Street greed and corporate malfeasance. The gap between rich and poor is still widening. Americans are feeling more economically insecure than at any time since the Depression. They are upset by the unbridled selfishness and political influence-peddling demonstrated by banks, oil companies, drug companies, insurance companies, and other large corporations. They are angry at the growing power of American-based global firms who show no loyalty to their country, outsource jobs to low-wage countries, avoid paying taxes, and pollute the environment.

Sam Walton, the founder of Walmart, America's largest corporation, promoted the motto "Buy American." But today the retail giant, now owned by his heirs, imports most of its merchandise from Asia, much of it made under dangerous sweatshop conditions. (Ironically, most American flags are made in China.)

We are, once again, battling over immigration and who belongs in America. Some right-wing groups and talk-show pundits, calling themselves patriots, have even challenged the citizenship of our president.

These trends have triggered a growing grassroots movement involving a diverse coalition of community groups, immigrant rights organizations, unions, consumer advocates, and human rights activists -- demanding stronger regulations to protect consumers, workers, and the environment from abusive corporations and to promote living wages, fairer trade, and higher taxes on the very rich to pay for better schools, safer roads, and student loans.

When we recite the Pledge of Allegiance, we should remind ourselves that it was written by a socialist who believed that "liberty and justice for all" meant more equality and a stronger democracy.

Peter Dreier teaches politics at Occidental College and is author of The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame, published by Nation Books.

Follow Peter Dreier on Twitter: www.twitter.com/peterdreier