

The Flag and the Republic for Which It Stands

Contributed by Wes Riddle
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The Flag was defined by the Second Continental Congress 14 June 1777 meeting in Philadelphia. The Flag of the United States would have thirteen stripes alternating red and white, and the "union" in the upper left would contain thirteen white stars in a blue field representing the new constellation. Congress subsequently determined that upon the admission of a new State, its own star would be added to the union on the next Fourth of July succeeding admission. Thirteen stripes continue to signify the thirteen original colonies, which became the first states of an independent federal Republic. As you can imagine, the 100th birthday of the Flag in 1877 was quite an occasion considering the nation united had barely survived War Between the States. Indeed, the year 1877 would mark the end of military occupation and Reconstruction; in the South. To commemorate the Flag's centennial, the U.S. Government requested that it be flown from all public buildings and from that time, unofficial Flag Day celebrations continued each year. In the 1890s it was popular in Philadelphia for schoolchildren to gather at Independence Square or near the Betsy Ross House to celebrate the Flag's birthday. To this day, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is the only state where Flag Day is a public holiday, although the day is observed to honor the Flag in all 50 states.

October 12, 1892 was the 400th Anniversary of the discovery of America, so that particular Columbus Day celebration was very much anticipated and planned for. In September that year, a Boston-based youth magazine called The Youth's Companion published the first rendition of what would become the Pledge of Allegiance. When Columbus Day rolled around the following month, some 12 million school children across the nation recited the words. Originally the pledge was to "my Flag," but so many immigrants had come and were coming to the country by the late nineteenth/early twentieth century there was justifiable concern that some might mistake the meaning! In 1923 "my Flag" became "the Flag of the United States," and the following year it became "the Flag of the United States of America." Also in 1923 citizens who gathered for the first National Flag Conference in Washington, D.C. not only amended language of the Pledge, but also codified guidelines for "unofficial" proper display and respect for the Flag. Their National Flag Code served as basis for what became public law, adopted by Congress in 1942 and contained in Title 36 of the United States Code. The Pledge was included in that code and so gained official sanction. A year later the Supreme Court ruled that school children could not actually be forced to recite the Pledge, although virtually every schoolchild did.

The last change in the Pledge of Allegiance occurred on Flag Day 1954, when the words "under God" were added. President Dwight D. Eisenhower remarked, "In this way we are reaffirming the transcendence of religious faith in America's heritage and future; in this way we shall constantly strengthen those spiritual weapons which forever will be our country's most powerful resource in peace and war." The resultant thirty-one words comprise an individual profession of loyalty and devotion, not only to the Flag but to an American ideal and way of life: 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.

The insertion of the words "under God" was particularly key and fundamental—and a proper change, although most advocates argued the words were implied from the beginning and generally understood in much the same way as "my Flag" had always meant "the Flag of the United States of America." Notice, however, that while many people will recite the Pledge with a pause after Nation, there is in fact no comma there. The words "under God" modify Nation and qualify the word indivisible. To Boston educators who wrote the word "indivisible" into the first draft appearing in The Youth's Companion, it may have meant something more than the words "under God," either implicitly or explicitly. To Southerners, however, the words "under God" mean and have always meant the most. Indeed, it is only if and as the Nation remains a moral compact—sanctioned, blessed, protected, in accordance with Him as it were—that any manmade Union or governmental construct can or should be considered indivisible.

Wesley Allen Riddle is a retired military officer with degrees and honors from West Point and Oxford. Widely published in the academic and opinion press, he serves as State Director of Republican Freedom Coalition (RFC) and is in the Republican Primary Run-Off Election for U. S. Congress TX-District 25 on July 31st. He is author of two books: Horse Sense for the New Millennium (2011); and The Nexus of Faith and Freedom (2012). See www.WesRiddle.com, e-mail: Wes@WesRiddle.com.