

# States of the Union

## FEUDING OVER THE FLAG

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

*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.*

**M**RS. ROBERT Jaconette, a member of the board of education in Monroe, Connecticut, was getting furious and fiercer. First, the high school janitor kept forgetting to take down the American flag before dusk; it was waving out there all night, sometimes in the rain. Second, six high school classrooms were bereft of flags, clearly a violation of state law.

But the nastiest insult came on September 10, when the new principal, William Murphy, announced over the public address system that henceforth students would not be required to recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag every morning. Once a week would suffice, he proclaimed.

"You wouldn't believe the angry phone calls I got that night from parents," Mrs. Jaconette told me recently. "People in this town can

be very patriotic." Monroe, a blue-collar suburb of dreary Bridgeport, had just finished celebrating its sesquicentennial. The town was named for the fifth President of the United States, the man who taught us that "National honor is national property of the highest value. . . ."

After those phone calls, national honor was much on Mrs. Jaconette's mind. She fired off a letter to the local newspaper, in which she accused the school administration of withholding honor from America's dead soldiers, since "the Pledge pays homage to all Americans who died for freedom. . . ." She warned parents that they might be bringing up "an orphaned generation, children with no heroes, no examples and no country."

The letter touched off an angry debate about education and patriotism, and as of this writing the fight still rages. On one side stand Mrs. Jaconette and her followers, who view schools as the last refuge of patriotism, the only place remaining where children are fed heavy doses of national pride. And they suspect that even this *sanctum*

*sanctorum* is being violated daily by permissive teachers and wrong-headed administrators.

"Last year," she says, "the school showed kids a film about Hiroshima. Well, that's O.K., I guess, although I never quite acclimated myself to the atomic bomb. But listen, there was such a thing as Pearl Harbor and Bataan, too, you know. To show the children Hiroshima without showing them Pearl Harbor, that's bad."

On the other side of the argument stand the school administrators and most of the students. Murphy considers education more a process to be experienced than a set of doctrines to be memorized. "All I did," he says, "was tell the students we could start the week off right with the Pledge, and after that it was up to them. They could think up another activity to begin the day, like a moment of silence, or a song or a poem. It didn't matter what, so long as it was their idea and not mine.

"I believe we ought to give kids the message that this is a damn good country to be living in, pal,"

Murphy continues. "But you can't mandate that sort of love of country. It doesn't help to have the loud-speaker every morning blaring the Pledge of Allegiance while nobody's paying attention."

So the old issues are again joined: choice vs. catechism, individualism vs. group discipline, freedom vs. ritual. Which shall we call the American way?

The Pledge of Allegiance was not engraved on tablets and carried down to us from atop Bunker Hill; it was written as a promotion stunt in 1892 by Francis Bellamy, an editor of the *Youth's Home Companion* magazine. The idea was to get schoolchildren to recite an oath in commemoration of the 400th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of America. The National Education Association immediately advocated that the Pledge become a daily schoolroom exercise; the Congress suggested its adoption as "a mass tribute to the flag"; President Harrison issued a similar proclamation. Overnight it became a domestic Lord's Prayer. The circulation of Bellamy's magazine subsequently soared.

At first, pledging allegiance to the flag remained a voluntary act, but as its mystique spread, state legislatures began to pass laws requiring daily recitation in the schools. Each postwar period brought new patriotic strictures, many of them recommended by the American Legion (its motto: "For God and country") and by the Veterans of Foreign Wars ("One flag, one language, one country").

Certain prescribed gestures were added: The child was to stand with his hand over his heart and at the mention of "the flag" was to extend his arm toward Old Glory in a stiff-arm salute. That part of the ceremony was dropped by Congress in 1942. According to Leonard Stevens in his excellent book, *Salute*, the stiff arm reminded too many legislators of Nazi demonstrations in Germany.

SOME PEOPLE questioned the efficacy of the Pledge. Herbert T. Olander, a professor of education at the University of Pittsburgh, conducted a study during the late '30s which suggested that schoolchildren imitated the sounds of the Pledge without understanding it. When asked to write out the words, they gave answers like: "I pledge a legion. . . ." ". . . one nation in the vestibule. . ." and ". . . with liberty and just a straw. . . ." (Likewise, in New York City classrooms not long ago, one could hear versions of the Lord's



Prayer that entreated God to "Lead us not into Penn Station . . .").

At the same time, the children of Jehovah's Witnesses were quietly refusing to recite the pledge on the grounds that it violated the Bible's proscription against worshiping graven images: "Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them, for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God." This dispute ended in the courtroom, and after a series of judicial setbacks, the Witnesses ultimately gained a landmark decision from the U.S. Supreme Court in 1943. "If there is any fixed star in our Constitutional constellation,"

noted Justice Robert H. Jackson, speaking for the majority, "it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion, or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein."

Therefore, in theory at least, no one need recite the Pledge if he is not so inclined. But pressures to conform are often stronger than the law. At the high school in Monroe a few years back, a student who had declined to get up for the Pledge was yanked out of his chair by fellow students, with a warning to stand or suffer the consequences. A few miles away, in Roxbury, a teacher was fired for refusing to lead her class in the oath to the flag. (She was eventually reinstated by court order.)

Apparently the Pledge has a power that surpasses its paltry history. It is part of our national liturgy, and although it says not a word about Corregidor or Gettysburg or Chateau-Thierry, in the hearts of many Americans these are the bloody glories it celebrates. To deny the ritual, then, is to deny a million white crosses. (Why is it that patriotism is nearly always associated with war? No peacemaker, to my knowledge, has ever been given the Congressional Medal of Honor.)

We have traditionally been a nation in search of symbols, a frontier settlement welcoming the future yet yearning for ancient escutcheons and holy grails. Thus, in Stephen Crane's words, "this despairing love for the flag." Thus, too, this burgeoning of stars and stripes on lapels, walls and car bumpers; this wistful insistence upon daily flag-worship in our schools.

"I was in the Air Force for four years and in the Naval Reserve for three more," says Murphy, the Monroe principal "and not once during that time did I hear anyone recite the Pledge. I guess there are better ways to be patriotic."