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Congress Back Then: America's Spiritual Heyday



by K. Daniel Glover
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Earlier this year, policymakers, pundits and people on the street reopened a uniquely American (and seemingly infinite) debate. In the wake of another incident of school violence, this time a mass murder at a high school in Littleton, Colo., they pondered a familiar question: Just how far should our nation go in trying to maintain a clear separation between church and state?

Congress debated the question in mid-June and decided that perhaps we had gone too far. More specifically, House lawmakers saw a need for a greater religious presence in the public schools, so they cast a series of votes designed to give new spiritual direction to the nation's youth. The most-publicized decision: They sanctioned the posting of the Bible's Ten Commandments on school walls.



How divided are church and state?

The primarily symbolic votes topped the news of the week, not at all surprising in an era when Americans are sharply divided on the relationship between religion and government. But four decades back, the votes might have gone unnoticed, an unremarkable act at a time when Congress added the phrase "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance, and made the phrase "In God We Trust" the national motto and a mandatory slogan on all U.S. coins and currency.

All of that religious posturing, and more, happened during the presidency of Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower and in the early days of a Cold War that most patriotic Americans apparently saw as a battle between Christian America and the godless, communist Soviet Union.

The 1950s religious revival

Americans already had begun to show signs of a spiritual awakening after World War II, but Eisenhower's election in 1952 set the stage for a rapid religious transformation. A campaign rife with religious overtones -- Eisenhower invited Americans to join him in a "crusade" -- preceded an administration determined to lead the nation in a religious revival.

The Republican National Committee declared Eisenhower "the spiritual leader of our times," and Eisenhower, who had never made a practice of attending church as an adult, joined the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., and became a fixture there most Sundays. The president's inaugural parade included a "float to

God," according to the 1977 book *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*, and Eisenhower led a prayer at his inauguration.

The president's newfound religiosity inspired an anxious nation to rediscover its religious roots; spirituality saturated the American culture. Its influence was evident in movie theaters (Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*), on the radio ("I Believe" and "The Man Upstairs") and in bookstores (Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*).

The National Council of Churches of Christ in America published the new, and controversial, *Revised Standard Version* of the Bible in 1952, and it quickly became a best seller. Bible sales in general increased phenomenally -- by 140% from 1949 to 1953 -- and polls showed that the percentage of church membership among Americans jumped from 49% in 1949 to a record-high 69% a decade later.

Billy Graham, still popular today, found his niche in the 1950s. He launched the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, which blossomed from a one-room, one-secretary operation in 1950 to a religious empire requiring a staff of 200 and a four-story building in Minneapolis by 1958, according to James T. Patterson's 1996 book *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974*.

Religious leaders in general became the most influential of men. Pollster Elmo Roper tracked the influence of various categories of leaders through the 1940s and 1950s. By 1957, 46% of Americans said religious leaders were doing the most good for the country, prompting Roper to write this: "No other group -- whether government, congressional, business or labor -- came anywhere near matching the prestige and pulling power of the men who are the ministers of God."

Piety, patriotism and policy

Amidst all that cultural change and political piety in a tumultuous time, religious-based policy initiatives were inevitable. Politicians dared not oppose them for fear of being deemed unpatriotic.

The first significant legislative action came in 1954, after Eisenhower heard George M. Docherty, a New York Presbyterian evangelist, preach about the need for adding the words "under God" to the pledge. The suggestion was not new -- resolutions to that effect had been introduced in Congress, and the Knights of Columbus had been using the "under God" version of the pledge in its meetings for a while -- but its adoption was a foregone conclusion after Eisenhower lent his name to the cause.


AP Photo
Did Eisenhower inspire us to rediscover our religious roots?

A House Judiciary subcommittee unanimously approved a pledge-related measure May 5, three months after Eisenhower heard the sermon. The Senate Judiciary Committee approved a similar resolution May 10, and the full Senate passed it the next day. On May 28, the full House committee approved its measure.

By the time the issue reached the House floor June 7, the only point of contention was one of pride. Rep. Louis C. Rabaut (D-MI) wanted credit for raising the issue and insisted that Congress clear the resolution he had sponsored rather than the one introduced by Sen. Homer Ferguson (R-MI). Ultimately, Congress let Rabaut have his way so it could clear the measure in time for Eisenhower to sign it on Flag Day (June 14).

A year later, after the American Legion had launched its "Back to God" campaign, lawmakers again cast a symbolic religious vote, this time to add the phrase "In God We Trust" to all coins and currency.

At the behest of President Abraham Lincoln, Congress first added the phrase to some coins in 1864 in an attempt to unite a nation embroiled in civil war. Lawmakers expanded its use to more coins in 1865 and 1908. But its use was not mandatory on coins, nor was it used on any paper money, until Congress acted in 1955. The House passed its bill June 7, and the Senate cleared the legislation June 29. Eisenhower signed the measure July 11.

Neither chamber debated the legislation for long, and a vote whose impact is apparent in the pockets and purses of Americans even today caused barely a ripple of notice in the press. Likewise, the media ignored Congress' decision in 1956 to replace *E pluribus unum*, or "out of many, one," with "In God We Trust" as the national motto. Eisenhower approved that change July 30, after Congress passed a measure without *any* debate.

The government made other religious gestures in the 1950s, too. Lawmakers constructed a "Prayer Room for Congressmen" in the Rotunda, replete with a stained-glass image of a kneeling George Washington, and authorized "Pray for Peace" cancellation dies for postage stamps. The Postal Service, meanwhile, issued an eight-cent, red-white-and-blue stamp with the "In God We Trust" logo.

Symbols without substance

The superficial nature of America's religious revival was apparent almost from the start. In his 1955 book *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, Will Herberg called the religion of the 1950s "a religiousness without serious commitment, without real inner conviction, without genuine existential decision."

Eisenhower, who once ridiculously proclaimed, "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith -- and I don't care what it is," typified the thinking of the day. The Cold War anxiety, encouraged by the rants of anti-communist demagogues like Joseph R. McCarthy, had triggered a religious transformation that had less to do with worshipping God than a selfish quest for comfort from a "Supreme Being."

Ironically, people who at the time, whether sincerely or not, said they were doing God's will may have done more harm than good to His cause. Their "ceremonial deism" has survived legal challenges based on the separation of church and state, Supreme Court Justice William

Brennan wrote in a 1984 opinion, precisely "because [the symbols they created] have lost through rote repetition any significant religious content."

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The Jefferson 21st Century Institute bills itself as an organization "dedicated to the separation of religion and government." Americans United for Separation of Church and State also is involved in that perennial American debate. A lawsuit objecting to use of the phrase "In God We Trust" on U.S. coins and currency, filed by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, among others, proved unsuccessful. Read the history of the Pledge of Allegiance at a site dedicated to removing the phrase "under God" from the pledge.

Which motto do you think should represent the United States, *E Pluribus Unum* or "In God We Trust"? What are the chances that recent violence among youth will mean the end of separation of church and state in public schools? Why are Americans so divided on the issue of education, government and the involvement of religion?

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8/4/99 10:44:44 PM S Hemlock
The FIFTIES:...This was the decade of the LITTLE ROCK NINE, black students, folkheroes of 1957...religious fundamentalism and bigotry were so entrenched in the culture of the times...church/state so entwined that breaking with tradition was both painful and violent...but this act by four young students marked one beginning of a long slow journey toward Equality ...but a journey that still goes on and has a mighty long way to go...I honor those nine black youth of Little Rock High: Ernest Green; Elizabeth Eckford; Jefferson Thomas; Dr. Terrance Roberts; Carlotta Walls Lanier; Minniejean Brown Trickey; Gloria Karlmark; Thelma Mothershed-Wair; Melba Patillo Beals. Thanks again...

8/4/99 10:47:31 PM S Hemlock
correction, "four" typo...should be" nine" a few lines down last posting...sorry...

8/5/99 4:06:29 AM MP
DZ: Thanks for the link. I tried it, but could not access it. I'll try again later. I wonder why it has taken so long for a legal challenge.

8/5/99 8:48:10 AM Tom Gillespie tomgillespie@hotmail.com
More fuel for the fire:
http://www.salonmagazine.com/news/feature/1999/08/04/taxpayers/index.html

8/5/99 9:42:21 AM Tom O
Jason Y: God exists in many religions: All the Judean religions, all the Christial religions, all the Islamic religions, and many others. It is very short sighted to say that using the term God is specific to Christianity.

8/5/99 9:57:30 AM Near Sighted
Tell me something I don't know.