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How Did “In God We Trust” Become Our National Motto?

Contrary to the baseless assertions of angry atheists and some on the Left, “E Pluribus Unum” is not our national motto. This myth derives from the fact that on June 20, 1782, the Continental Congress adopted the Great Seal of the United States, which contained, among other symbols, a banner inscribed with the phrase “E Pluribus Unum” held in an American Bald Eagle’s beak.¹

While “E Pluribus Unum” also expresses an important truth about America, it is not the national motto. The national motto of the United States is “In God we trust.”² It is enshrined in law and its presence is ubiquitous – on U.S. currency, engraved on buildings, and imprinted on seals.³ Every challenge to its constitutionality has rightly failed.⁴ These four words are the foundation on which this great country stands, and it is only fitting that Congress passed a law declaring it as such and the judiciary has upheld Congress’s enactment. With its place in American law clear, this essay explores how these simple but profound words became our national motto – where the motto originated, how it became enshrined into law, and why “In God we trust” poses no threat to the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

The phrase “In God we trust” originated in the final stanza of Francis Scott Key’s poem, “The Star Spangled Banner.” Key was inspired to write the poem during the War of 1812, when he witnessed the Nation’s flag flying triumphantly over one of the nation’s forts after America won a key battle with England.

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¹ BUREAU OF PUB. AFFAIRS, U.S. DEP’T OF STATE, THE GREAT SEAL OF THE UNITED STATES, (July 2003), *available at* <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/27807.pdf>.

² 36 U.S.C. §302 (“‘In God we trust’ is the national motto.”).

³ *Id.*; 31 U.S.C. §5114(b) (“United States currency has the inscription ‘In God We Trust’ in a place the Secretary decides is appropriate...”). Note the difference between the actual motto as “In God we trust,” and its capitalization on all U.S. currency.

⁴ See *Gaylor v. U.S.*, 74 F.3d 214 (10th Cir. 1996); *O’Hair v. Blumenthal*, 462 F.Supp. 19 (W.D.Tex. 1978); *Aronow v. U.S.*, 432 F.2d 242 (9th Cir. 1970).

The fourth stanza of Key's poem reads in part "Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just, And this be our motto – 'In God is our trust.'"⁵ Francis Scott Key's poem became the national anthem in 1931 when Congress adopted a resolution which was signed by President Herbert Hoover.⁶

The first time "In God we trust" was used on U.S. currency was 1864, nearly a century before it was officially enshrined into law as our national motto. In 1861, amidst the opening years of the U.S. Civil War, Reverend M.R. Watkinson from Pennsylvania wrote to then Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase, suggesting that a motto signifying America's trust in God be stamped on American coins.⁷ Watkins wrote, "What if our Republic were not shattered beyond reconstruction? Would not the antiquaries of succeeding centuries rightly reason from our past that we were a heathen nation?"⁸ In his letter, he argued that America should have a phrase on coins revealing that America is not "disowning" God.⁹ In response, in 1864, Congress enacted legislation authorizing the phrase "In God We Trust" to be stamped on coins being minted in that year.¹⁰ However, it wasn't until 1957 that our motto was printed on paper currency.¹¹

Nearly a century after the decision to print the phrase on American coins, in the perilous and bipolar world left by World War II, people sought guidance and hope. The U.S. was engaged in aggressive efforts to "liberat[e] captive nations" from Communist-aligned countries, and Soviet "brinkmanship" brought the world to the precipice of nuclear war.¹² In those uncertain times, Christian leaders urged that "a renewed commitment to Christianity's social and moral truths" was "the only strong foundation for Western civilization,"¹³ given the existential threats posed by secularistic totalitarianism.

Echoing this call, Representative Charles E. Bennett delivered a speech on the floor of Congress reaffirming the divine origins of America's freedom at a time when atheistic Communism threatened the country's existence:

At the base of our freedom is our faith in God and the desire of Americans to live by His will and by His guidance. As long as this country trusts in God, it will prevail. To remind all of us of this self-evident truth, it is proper that our currency should carry these inspiring words, coming down to us through our history: "In God We Trust."¹⁴

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⁵ Juan F. Perea, *Demography and Distrust: An Essay on American Languages, Cultural Pluralism, and Official English*, 77 MINN. L. REV. 269, 275 (1992); Steven B. Epstein, *Rethinking the Constitutionality of Ceremonial Deism*, 96 COLUM. L. REV. 2083, 2122 (1996).

⁶ 36 U.S.C. § 301.

⁷ Epstein, *supra* note 5, at 2123.

⁸ *History of "In God We Trust,"* U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY (Sept. 28, 2017)

<https://www.treasury.gov/about/education/Pages/in-god-we-trust.aspx>.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Steven B. Epstein, *Rethinking the Constitutionality of Ceremonial Deism*, 96 COLUM. L. REV. 2083, 2122 (1996)..

¹¹ *How 'In God We Trust' Got on the Currency in the First Place,* TIME (SEPT. 28, 2017), <http://time.com/4179685/in-god-we-trust-currency-history/>.

¹² AMERICAN CONSERVATISM: AN ENCYCLOPEDIA 691 (Bruce Frohnen et al. eds., 2006, 1st ed. 2006).

¹³ *Id.* at 163.

¹⁴ *Id.*

The centrality of religious faith to the nation's security gained further ground during President Dwight Eisenhower's Administration. Both Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and President Eisenhower supported calls to reaffirm our nation's history and commitment to this shared American value.¹⁵ Secretary Dulles believed the U.S.'s role in the Cold War "was virtually messianic," and President Eisenhower was an "openly religious" man who "compos[ed] and recit[ed] a prayer before his first inaugural address, open[ed] cabinet meetings with prayer, and establish[ed] the interdenominational White House Prayer Breakfast."¹⁶ At the urging of the Catholic Knights of Columbus, he even added "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954.¹⁷

Accordingly, in 1956, Congress passed legislation, codifying "In God we trust" as our national motto. At the time, as now, it was popularly assumed that "E Pluribus Unum" was the national motto.¹⁸ The 1956 Congressional Report acknowledged popular belief: "[T]he phrase 'E Pluribus Unum' has also received wide usage in the United States. However, the committee considers 'In God We Trust' a superior and more acceptable motto for the United States."¹⁹

In November 2011, Congress voted to reconfirm "In God we trust" as the national motto.²⁰ Despite the best efforts of litigious atheists and some on the Left, this law still stands and is codified in [36 U.S.C. § 302](#) (2002).

There are some who take issue with our national motto and question its constitutional legitimacy. They wrongly claim that "In God we trust" violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. There has never been a successful challenge to the constitutionality of the national motto.²¹ The motto's reference to God is not an establishment of religion but a reflection of our nation's shared heritage of faith.

While the government may not favor one religion over the other, it also may not be hostile to religion. In fact, while the Founders may have differed over the contours of the relationship between religion and government, they never deviated from the conviction that "there was a necessary and valuable moral connection between the two."²² The national motto simply echoes a core principle enshrined in the Declaration of Independence – that our rights are God given:

We hold these truths to be self-evidence, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.²³

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¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.* at 262; 691.

¹⁷ Christopher J. Kauffman, *Faith and Fraternalism* 385 (Harper & Row 1982).

¹⁸ Michael I. Meyerson, *The Original Meaning Of "God": Using The Language of the Framing Generation to Create a Coherent Establishment Clause Jurisprudence*, 98 MARQ. L. REV. 1035, [1044 \(2015\)](#).

¹⁹ Epstein, *supra* note 10.

²⁰ Sarah Moughty, *"In God We Trust" Reaffirmed as National Motto . . . Again*, PBS.ORG (Nov. 4, 2011), <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/in-god-we-trust-reaffirmed-as-national-motto-again/>.

²¹ See *supra* note 4.

²² PHILIP HAMBURGER, SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE 480 (2002).

²³ THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, *available at* <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

The Supreme Court of the United States has consistently recognized that religion has always played a vital role in American history and society. For example, in *School District v. Schempp*, the Court acknowledged that “religion has been closely identified with our history and government.”²⁴ In *Zorach v. Clauson*, the Court explained our Nation’s religious heritage in detail:

We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being. We guarantee the freedom to worship as one chooses. We make room for as wide a variety of beliefs and creeds as the spiritual needs of man deem necessary. We sponsor an attitude on the part of government that shows no partiality to any one group and that lets each flourish according to the zeal of its adherents and the appeal of its dogma. When the state encourages religious instruction or cooperates with religious authorities by adjusting the schedule of public events to sectarian needs, it follows the best of our traditions. For it then respects the religious nature of our people and accommodates the public service to their spiritual needs. To hold that it may not would be to find in the Constitution a requirement that the government show a callous indifference to religious groups. *That would be preferring those who believe in no religion over those who do believe.*²⁵

Several United States Supreme Court decisions indicate that the national motto is a constitutional acknowledgment of the Nation’s religious heritage.²⁶ Additionally, the lower courts are unanimous in holding that the inscription of the national motto on the nation’s currency is constitutional.²⁷

Thus, our national motto is not an establishment of religion. Rather, as reflected in the nation’s history – its fight for independence, against slavery, and against atheistic Communism – the national motto encapsulates the fundamental truth that our country was founded upon a belief in God who endowed all people with “inalienable rights.”²⁸

²⁴ 374 U.S. 203, 212 (1963).

²⁵ 343 U.S. 306, 313–14 (1952)(emphasis added).

²⁶ See, e.g., *Van Orden v. Perry*, 545 U.S. 677, 716 (2005) (Stevens, J., dissenting); *Elk Grove Unified Sch. Dist. v. Newdow*, 542 U.S. 1, 37 (2004) (O’Connor, J., concurring); *County of Allegheny v. ACLU*, 492 U.S. 573, 602–04, 673 (1989) (Opinions joined by all the Justices); *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 676 (1984); *Sch. Dist. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, 303 (1963) (Brennan, J., concurring).

²⁷ *Newdow v. Peterson*, 753 F.3d 105, 108 (2d Cir. 2014) (per curiam); *Newdow v. Lefevre*, 598 F.3d 638, 640 (9th Cir. 2010); *Kidd v. Obama*, 387 Fed. App’x. 2, 2 (D.C. Cir. 2010) (per curiam); *Gaylor v. United States*, 74 F.3d 214, 217–18 (10th Cir. 1996); *Aronow v. United States*, 432 F.2d 242, 243 (9th Cir. 1970); *O’Hair v. Blumenthal*, 462 F. Supp. 19, 19–20 (W.D. Tex. 1978), *aff’d sub nom. O’Hair v. Murray*, 588 F.2d 1144, 1144 (5th Cir. 1979) (per curiam); cf. *Lambeth v. Bd. of Comm’rs*, 321 F. Supp. 2d 688, 707 (M.D.N.C. 2004) (relying on currency cases to hold that displaying “In God We Trust” on a government building did not violate the Establishment Clause); *Meyers v. Loudoun Cty. Sch. Bd.*, 251 F. Supp. 2d 1262, 1274–75 (E.D. Va. 2003) (relying, in part, on currency cases to hold that displaying “In God We Trust” in a school building did not violate the Establishment Clause); *Schmidt v. Cline*, 127 F. Supp. 2d 1169, 1178 (D. Kan. 2000) (relying on currency cases to hold that displaying “In God We Trust” in a County Treasurers office did not violate the Establishment Clause). See also, *ACLU v. Capitol Square Review & Advisory Bd.*, 243 F.3d 289, 301 (6th Cir. 2001) (en banc) (Sixth Circuit expressed its view in dicta that the national motto is constitutional).

²⁸ THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, *supra* note 23.