

Allegiance or nuisance?

School acts of patriotism create division, opinions

KEVIN LYNCH
Editor-in-Chief

Because of a personal medical condition, junior Emerson Ford has difficulty standing comfortably for long periods of time. Normally, this issue does not pose too much difficulty for them throughout the school day, with one notable exception: the Pledge of Allegiance, which Ford chooses to regularly remain seated during.

"I'm just tired," Ford said. "... I have more important things going on than standing up every morning to talk to a flag."

In 1979, the Illinois General Assembly passed a law requiring that all public elementary schools engage in the Pledge before school, with this requirement being extended to high schools in 2002, according to the Chicago Tribune. U.S. History teacher Mike Sebestyen says that much of the reasoning behind this extension was the goal of increasing patriotism after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

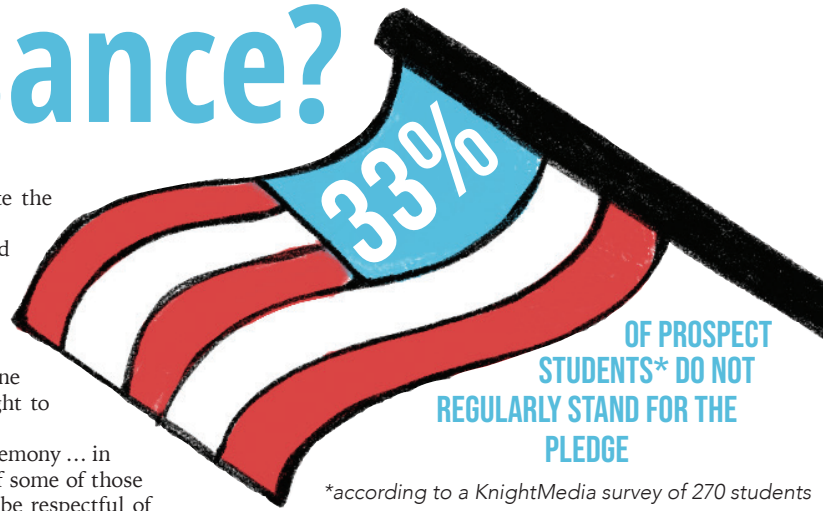
This law, however, does not mean that students are forced to stand and recite the Pledge without exception. According to the Freedom Forum Institute, the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of speech prevents the government from forcing any conduct upon citizens regarding matters of opinion,

ensuring that the choice not to stand or recite the pledge is protected under the law.

Sebestyen sees the Pledge as a force for good in public schools because the goal of public education, in his mind, is to create better educated and informed citizens, with patriotism being a major facet of this objective. However, at the same time, he feels that anyone who has valid criticism or reasoning has a right to choose for themselves.

"It's important to keep the symbolism of ceremony ... in its proper space and not make a big deal out of some of those things," Sebestyen said. "... It's important to be respectful of those symbols, but at the same time respectful of other people's decision to either honor or protest those symbols."

Ford isn't trying to protest anything with their actions; however, in addition to their difficulty with simply physically standing for it, Ford also believes that most students — themselves included — do not know or appreciate the true meaning of what they say each morning, a problem stemming back



YOU LEARN TO MEMORIZE AND RECITE THE WORDS; NO ONE KNOWS WHAT 'INDIVISIBLE' MEANS IN SECOND GRADE,"

- Emerson Ford, junior

to when they were taught the words initially as young children.

"It would accomplish its goal better if kids were taught what it means," Ford said. "Because you learn to memorize and recite the words; no one knows what 'indivisible' means in second grade."

For District 214 School Board President Bill Dussling, the Pledge and other demonstrations of patriotism come with added meaning, as he previously served in the armed services — first in Europe, then in Vietnam, piloting a

helicopter as part of the Air Force in the latter conflict.

Even in spite of the discouraging amount of recognition he received for his service in Vietnam, he says, his experience in the military did nothing to change or dampen the national pride that he already held.

"I think I've always been a patriot," Dussling said. "My experience in Vietnam certainly didn't lessen that patriotism, and I still have that patriotism that this is the best country in the world. We have freedoms of every kind from religion to choice of life to whatever ... This is a marvelous country, and yes, I'm patriotic."

While Dussling's self-proclaimed patriotism means that he would never consider not standing for the Pledge or national anthem, he still believes that anyone who chooses not to participate in these rituals has the right to do so, though, like Ford, he encourages students to become more educated on history, civics and current events in order to gain the same sense of national pride.

"It's important that younger people understand what this country is about," Dussling said. "We have an almost sacred charge to make sure that this country is strong, make sure that we appreciate this country and make sure that we have a choice."

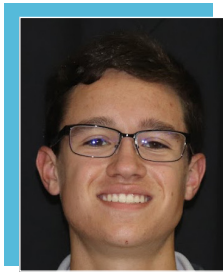
In the meantime, however, Ford, Sebestyen and Dussling all agree that respecting others' choices is a must, regardless of one's personal feelings.

"My grandfathers fought to protect the rights and freedoms for people to not stand if they don't want to," Sebestyen said. "... There's complexity to freedom, and too many people try to make it very one way or the other, and that simplifies it too much." **▶**

Pride, patriotism plummet

The Land of the Free. The Home of the Brave. Land where my fathers died. Land of the pilgrims' pride. The one with all the nukes.

You know, America.



KEVIN LYNCH
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Our country can be called a lot of things, but "unpatriotic" is rarely among them.

Based on a You Gov survey, 41 percent of Americans responded that they believe their country is the best, the greatest amount out of all 19 countries surveyed, which checks out. Us Americans sure are pretty quick to praise our own accomplishments — quicker than we were to abolish slavery, that's for darn sure.

All day, every day, we're told how glad we should be to live in this country; that nowhere else in the world would we be allowed to live as freely and happily as we do here. But most of the time, this patriotism simply equates to telling us citizens how grateful we should be that we're not something else, rather than actually highlighting any real benefits of being an American.

Because I mean, at least we're not living in a dictatorship, right? And it sure is lucky that we're "Americans" and not any of those other icky nationalities! And hey, most of all, thank capital-"g"-God we're not communist!

But building a sense of national unity simply out of, "at least it could be worse!" isn't helping anyone, and it certainly isn't bringing anybody closer together.

According to data from the Pew Research Center, in the past six years, the percentage of Democrats and Republicans who associate members of the opposite party with negative traits has increased as much as 28 percent in some categories, climbing from 30-40 percent to well over 50-60 percent. These traits include: close-mindedness, dishonesty, immorality, laziness and lack of intelligence.

So, what happened? After all, it's clear that wrapping everybody in a fuzzy red, white and blue blanket hasn't made us any more willing to snuggle together; in fact, that blanket has more holes in it than we'd like to admit.

If we're being honest, the kind of early-20th-century patriotism that we've come to know, the land-of-opportunities, flag-waving, freedom-touting kind of rhetoric that our grandparents came to America expecting, hasn't been a reality in decades.

Back then, America was supposedly a haven for countless jobs, a place of endless potential for success. Now, all we hear about is how jobs are moving out of the country.

Back then, America was supposedly a welcoming place for people of all races and nationalities. Now, we actively restrict people we don't like from coming into our country

with bans and laws.

Back then, the country rallied around charismatic and likable leaders and visionaries. Now, we vote for people based on who's the lesser of two evils.

Were any of these idealistic concepts even remotely realistic, even when they were popular?

Not at all; in fact, I'm sure that many times, these issues were just as bad, if not worse than they are now. But the kind of naive optimism that fueled many a patriotic poem has all but faded; outside of the über-patriotic, the classic star-spangled rhetoric ain't foolin' anyone. How am I, as a red-blooded American, expected to feel any sort of national pride when I can google "Top 10 U.S. Military Massacres" or "Guantanamo Bay highlight reel" anytime I please?

At this point, we've got everything but Area 51 footage to substantiate the increasingly common belief that America ain't everything our forefathers made it out to be.

Hell, no student at Prospect was even alive for the 9/11 attacks; anything else that could possibly be construed as a "moment of unity" has been politicized to no end. Expecting teenagers and young people to cheer for a national symbol that, for many of us, has only been associated with endless arguing, the killing of innocents and, oh right, standing up for a song every once in a while, is silly.

You can blame these things on whoever you want — out-of-touch government, partisan division, the media, the whole works — the fact of the matter is that America is America; and no amount of finger-pointing or so-called reconciliation is going to repair the trust or faith that the everyday person feels in their nation.

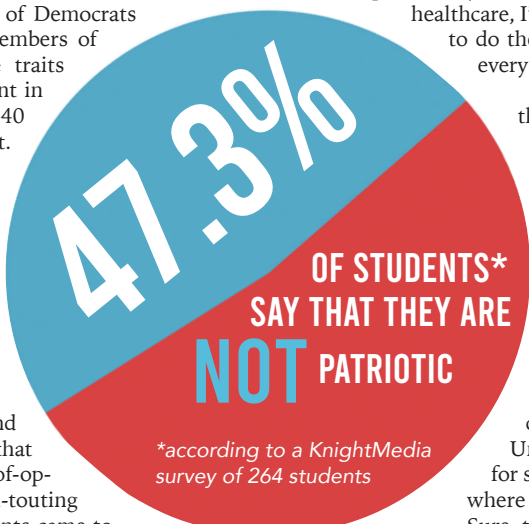
John F. Kennedy may have said, "Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country," and sorry to break it to ya Jack, but America is capitalist; if you're not even willing to give us free healthcare, I'm hard-pressed to find it in me to do the ol' heart/hand combo before every football game.

Patriotism may be a good thing, but acting like every single citizen should be speed-dialing their nearest flag-pole-installation contractor to celebrate a country that has given them no reason to be trusted outside of, "we're better than a dictatorship" is a bit silly.

Does that mean that America is going down the tubes? Probably not, but the days of pretending that the United States as a country stands for something outside of "the place where we live" are long past over.

Sure, the Constitution is nice and all, but acting like American democracy is still worth getting all misty-eyed and patriotic over, 11 score and 15 years later, is a bit like your parents telling you to be grateful that they bought you an iPhone SE.

Because as much as I'd love to stay in bed, I think a lot of us all woke up from the American Dream a long, long time ago. **▶**



cartoons by Emily DePaz