

## Sidedoor: Season 11, Episode 9 – Everybody Pledge Now Transcript

**Lizzie Peabody:** This is *Sidedoor*, a podcast from the Smithsonian, with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

**Lizzie:** There are a couple of sounds that immediately take me right back to school.

*[bell ringing]*

**Lizzie:** And the school bell is one of them.

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *This is one of many school bells that we have that has an eagle on the top.*

**Lizzie:** This is Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs. She's curator for the History of Education Collection at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *So we have them with eagles, we have them with liberty bells. We have, you know, a lot of patriotic school bells.*

**Lizzie:** Debbie's showing me some of the things you might find in a classroom in the late 1800s—things you'd also find if you go poking around the museum's permanent exhibition, "Many Voices, One Nation." Classrooms of yore were bursting with patriotic paraphernalia: pictures of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, little American flag papers that you can wrap around your pencil. See, public school—or "common" school, as it was called back then—was a relatively new thing in the 1800s, and a big part of its mission was to educate America's youngest citizens about what it meant to be an American in the language of kids—colorful pictures and songs.

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *Here's an example of Uncle Sam school songbooks.*

**Lizzie:** And more explicitly, like in this magazine, *The Youth's Companion*.

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *And it's basically the size of a large, like, Life magazine. Something your grandparents would probably recognize in format.*

**Lizzie:** *The Youth's Companion* was a magazine for kids and families. The issue Debbie's showing me is dated September, 1892. And she's looking for something specific as she turns to one of the pages in the middle. And there it is: instructions for classrooms across the country to follow. It begins with the raising of the flag. Once the flag is raised, the children all stand at attention, facing it.

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *At the signal from the principal, the pupils in order of rank, hands to their*

*sides and facing the flag.*

**Lizzie:** The principal gives another signal. The children raise their hands to their foreheads. Palms facing downward.

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *So they're saluting. Then standing together, they repeat, "I pledge allegiance to my flag and the republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."*

**Lizzie:** *Was this the first time the pledge was read by children in school?*

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *This is the first time that the pledge is read by anyone.*

**Lizzie:** In the fall of 1892, millions of children across America recited the pledge of allegiance for the very first time. But why? Where did the idea of the pledge come from, and how did these words become as familiar to us as the sound of the American school bell?

**Lizzie:** This time on Sidedoor, we're going back to school—in the 1880s. We trace the evolution of the pledge of allegiance from its roots as a business gimmick to a soothing balm for anxieties about a changing American identity. So unfurl your flags and get ready. That's coming up after the break.

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**Lizzie:** After the American Civil War, patriotism surged in America—particularly in the North. The nation rallied around patriotic symbols like bald eagles, George Washington's portrait and the American flag. But as America swelled with national pride, something else was growing, too.

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *This huge explosion of immigration that makes the people who are already in America nervous.*

**Lizzie:** The Smithsonian's Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs again. She says in the 1870s, only a few years after the end of the Civil War, millions of immigrants poured into America from Eastern and Southern Europe.

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *This group of immigrants are not speaking English and not speaking German, which is the second most popular language at that point in America.*

**Lizzie:** They're speaking Polish, Lithuanian, Italian.

**Marc Leepson:** *Just think of the movie The Godfather, and think of that picture of New York City, crowded with immigrants, working menial jobs.*

**Lizzie:** Marc Leepson is author of *Flag: An American Biography*. He says this wave of immigration fueled a feeling of nativism, this idea that people who'd been here first had more rights and a higher standing in society. And by first, they meant European immigrants, not actual Native Americans. If these new immigrants wanted the American dream, well, they'd have to become American.

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *And as a result, we get this movement to teach civics, and also to encourage patriotism in the classroom.*

**Lizzie:** New York City appointed a former Union army officer to take the lead teaching children patriotism in the classroom—a man named George T. Balch. While visiting classrooms, he saw that many were overcrowded with immigrant children.

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *And Balch sees this condition and gets worried.*

**Lizzie:** He doesn't want New York to become Little Poland, Little Italy, or really any little immigrant enclave of any kind. He wants these kids to assimilate, to become American patriots.

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *So he introduces what's known as the "Balch Pledge."*

**Lizzie:** It's 1885. And his pledge sounds like this.

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *We give our heads and our hearts to God and our country. One country, one language, one flag.*

**Marc Leepson:** *That had 100 percent—well maybe let's say it had 95 percent to do with inculcating love of country as embodied by that flag among the children of immigrants who were starting school in the United States, and immigrant children themselves.*

**Lizzie:** Balch's pledge became a staple of classrooms in New York and beyond. It was a hit, and it stayed a hit for the rest of the 1880s. Until along came a man named Francis Bellamy.

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *He's an interesting character.*

**Lizzie:** Bellamy was a Baptist pastor from Boston and a staunch socialist. He thought Gilded Age capitalism of the late 1800s would erode traditional American values. As would "every alien immigrant of inferior race."

**Lizzie:** *How should we think of Bellamy?*

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *As a racist. [laughs]*

**Lizzie:** *Oh, okay. Well, that's pretty straightforward, I guess.*

**Lizzie:** Bellamy was kicked out of his flock in 1891 for preaching against the evils of capitalism. Now unemployed, he found a job with a magazine called *The Youth's Companion*—remember that! The magazine was struggling to sell subscriptions at the time, but the owner had a plan. See, *The Youth's Companion* was running a campaign called "The Schoolhouse Flag Movement," which promised to raise a flag over every schoolhouse. Children could sell magazine subscriptions to their families and neighbors, and if they sold enough subscriptions, they could get a flag in their classroom.

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *It's no different than kids today, you know, asking to sell calendars, candy, whatever.*

**Lizzie:** But instead of raising money for their marching band uniforms or class trip ...

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *the goal is to get a flag for their classroom.*

**Lizzie:** *So ginning up patriotism is good business.*

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *Correct. It's very good business. And it's good business all around with school supplies.*

**Lizzie:** Bellamy's whole job at the magazine was to come up with ways to make this schoolhouse flag campaign a success, to find ways to whip kids into a patriotic frenzy, make patriotism hip, like the Pokemon Go of the era. That way, they'd have more incentives to sell more magazines to earn that classroom flag.

**Lizzie:** So Bellamy and his colleague, whose name was James Upham, they were savvy salesmen. And they said, "Maybe we can create a big event centered around the flag, so kids *need* to have a flag for their schoolhouse." One of them was like, "Well, look here. The 400th anniversary of Columbus sailing the ocean blue in 1492 is coming right up in just a few months." And they were both like, "Well, celebrate good times. Come on!"

**Lizzie:** Bellamy wrote to President Benjamin Harrison and said, "Hey, why don't we do a national celebration for the 400th anniversary of Columbus landing in America?" And in a letter we have at the Smithsonian, Harrison responded saying something along the lines of "Yeah, let's do it. And I'm putting you in charge of it."

**Lizzie:** Upham and Bellamy's plan was off to the races. And then Upham said, "Bellamy, if we're gonna go to all this trouble, why do you want to give so much free press to this Balch and his pledge? Why don't we create our own?" Bellamy shoots him a thumbs up and starts writing a pledge of his own. At least, that's more or less what happened.

**Lizzie:** Later in his life, when Bellamy reflected on writing the pledge, he said ...

*[ARCHIVE CLIP, [voice actor]: It was my thought that a vow of loyalty or allegiance to the flag should be the dominant idea. I especially stressed the word 'allegiance,' and I liked the word 'pledge' better than 'vow.'"]*

**Lizzie:** So he writes, "I pledge allegiance to my flag and the republic for which it stands." Bellamy said he chose the word 'republic' over 'country' or 'nation' because ...

*[ARCHIVE CLIP, [voice actor]: It distinguished the form of government chosen by the founding fathers and established by the Revolution.]*

**Lizzie:** Bellamy concludes his pledge with the line, "One nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." He says those three words, "one nation, indivisible" represent all the struggles the nation has endured from the Revolution through the Civil War. The final pledge went like this, "I pledge allegiance to my flag and the republic for which it stands: one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." And this sounds pretty close to the pledge we know today, but there are a couple things missing—and we'll get to that in just a bit.

**Lizzie:** But as of the fall of 1892, Bellamy and *The Youth's Companion* had their pledge, and they had the Columbus Day event to go with it. And on October 21, millions of students around the nation used the official program from *The Youth's Companion* to guide their celebration.

**Lizzie:** As the flag was raised, they put their hands to their foreheads and began to recite Bellamy's pledge of allegiance, also following his directions on how to salute the flag during the pledge.

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *Now at the words "to my flag," the right hand is to go out extended.*

**Lizzie:** To help you visualize this—but please don't follow along!—you'd start the pledge with your hand held up to your forehead like a military salute. And as soon as you mention the flag, you stretch your hand out towards it.

**Marc Leepson:** *It resembled the Nazi salute, and you could see pictures of children in classrooms with them almost looking like they're doing the ...*

**Lizzie:** *Like Hitler Youth.*

**Marc Leepson:** *Yeah, Hitler Youth. Correct.*

**Lizzie:** That would change later, during World War II, when this salute became associated with

fascism.

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *Suddenly, we don't want our children to be looking like Hitler Youth, do we?*

**Lizzie:** *I don't think so.*

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *So we change the salute so that it's the hand over the heart.*

**Lizzie:** In any case, the Bellamy pledge had made its debut.

**Lizzie:** *Debbie, how quickly did the Bellamy pledge catch on in schools?*

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *Immediately.*

**Lizzie:** This began a new era, not just for the pledge but for American patriotism. Soon, schools around the country would deem the pledge mandatory. But what happens when you require children to salute a flag that symbolizes the freedom to, well, *not* salute the flag? It's okay if you are perplexed. We'll unpack it after the break.

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**Lizzie:** The pledge may have been born in the late 1800s, but the early 1900s created the perfect conditions for it to take root and spread like amber waves of grain across America.

**Marc Leepson:** *The Spanish-American War probably is the perfect example of what was going on.*

**Lizzie:** Historian Marc Leepson again. The Spanish-American War lasted for three months in 1898. It's how the US took control of Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines and Cuba from Spain. Marc says it created a patriotic fervor across America for a few reasons. For one, it was the first American war since the Civil War. Former Union and Confederate foes now had a common enemy: the Spanish Empire.

**Marc Leepson:** *Those who fought for the South and those who fought for the North fought together under one flag, and that would be the Stars and Stripes.*

**Lizzie:** Another reason the war caused a wave of patriotism was how the media covered it. It began when the US ship The Maine blew up in the harbor of Havana. And it was never proven that Spain attacked The Maine, but newspapers ran wild with the story anyway.

**Marc Leepson:** *I remember telling them, you know, entire front pages with The Maine in flames. And this was done to America, and the phrase, "Remember the Maine."*

**Lizzie:** Newspapers of the time saw how enragement equaled engagement. If they could rile up their audience and pull at the patriotic heartstrings, they could increase readership—what was known as "yellow journalism" at the time. There's a famous story about a conversation between newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst and an illustrator he sent to Cuba before the attack on The Maine. The illustrator said, "There's no war here to cover." Hearst replied, "You furnish the pictures, I'll furnish the war."

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *They're selling newspapers, you know? [laughs]*

**Lizzie:** The Smithsonian's Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs again. She says it's kind of another example of what *The Youth's Companion* did by stirring up patriotism for its flag campaign.

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *The Youth's Companion, they're selling magazines. The media is selling newspapers.*

**Lizzie:** But patriotism wasn't the only thing raging as America entered the 1900s. The nativist ideology and hostility towards new immigrants grew stronger as more and more people flocked to America every year. Teddy Roosevelt, who gained popularity during the Spanish-American War, became president in 1901.

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *And he talks about there should be no hyphenated Americans. There shouldn't be German-Americans, there shouldn't be Italian-Americans. We're all one country, and therefore we need to get rid of this hyphenation bit.*

**Lizzie:** Public schools, of course, were ground zero for instilling patriotic values, and the pledge became a big part of this. At the turn of the century, New York became the first state to require students to recite the pledge at the beginning of school. Others followed close behind. But even in states where the pledge wasn't required, it became nearly impossible—and sometimes dangerous—to not honor the flag as America entered World War I.

**Marc Leepson:** *People were getting arrested for not standing at attention in front of the American flag, for not displaying a flag in their window.*

**Lizzie:** *What?*

**Lizzie:** This was really surprising to me. Marc says America went into a "Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys" mindset, which is a song from the Civil War.

**[ARCHIVE CLIP, "Rally 'Round the Flag":** *[singing] Yes, we'll rally 'round the flag, boys. we'll rally once again."]*

**Marc Leepson:** *It's just natural. I mean, in any country you rally around patriotic symbols when there's crisis such as a war.*

**Lizzie:** States wrote new and extreme flag laws. In Texas, you could get 25 years in jail for using language in public or private that cast contempt on the American flag.

**[ARCHIVE CLIP, "Rally 'Round the Flag":** *[singing] Yes, we'll rally 'round the flag, boys. we'll rally once again. Shouting the battle cry of freedom."*

**Marc Leepson:** *In California, a man thought to have insulted a flag was forced to kneel on the sidewalk and kiss it.*

**Lizzie:** In St. Louis, a German-American was dragged out of his house by a mob of 300 people.

**Marc Leepson:** *He was forced to march down the street barefoot carrying two small American flags. They wrapped him up in a large American flag and made him kiss the flag as he walked.*

**[ARCHIVE CLIP, "Rally 'Round the Flag":** *[singing] Yes, we'll rally 'round the flag, boys. we'll rally once again. Shouting the battle cry of freedom."*

**Lizzie:** Then they marched the man to a tree at the edge of town and lynched him.

**Marc Leepson:** *His crime in the eyes of the mob was he had given a speech earlier that evening at a socialist meeting in which he allegedly made disloyal remarks.*

**Lizzie:** But even with all these new laws popping up in various states about respecting the flag, there was still no single, federal American flag code setting out rules and regulations for how to treat the flag. And there was no official pledge of allegiance, either. People just heard Bellamy's in school and that became the pledge they knew. That is, until 1923.

**Lizzie:** By the 1920s, all these rules around the flag got pretty confusing. Besides state laws, there were dozens of organizations that each had different rules about respecting the flag. Like how do you carry it? How do you fold it? What do you do when it's time to retire a tattered flag, and how tattered does it have to be to be retired? Can I make a flapper dress out of the Stars and Stripes for that Fourth of July party at the speakeasy?

**Marc Leepson:** *So it was decided that there should be a conference in Washington, DC, in 1923, in which they would come up with one flag code.*

**Lizzie:** And it was at this conference that veterans' groups and leaders of the military agreed on a



single flag code. And they also took this opportunity to tweak the wording to Bellamy's pledge.

**Marc Leepson:** *They changed it from, "I pledge allegiance to my flag," to "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America."*

**Lizzie:** Apparently, there was concern some of the immigrant children could be confused when pledging allegiance to "my flag." Maybe they thought "my flag" as in, "The Italian flag because I'm Italian." So the flag committee was like ...

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *We're gonna be really specific.*

**Lizzie:** *Let there be no doubt.*

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *Let there be no doubt.*

**Lizzie:** The conference ended by voting to make Bellamy's pledge the pledge of allegiance for the United States of America, to be read in classrooms by children nationwide. But with this step forward, some Americans pushed back.

**Lizzie:** In 1935, a leader of the Jehovah's Witnesses called on his followers to refuse to recite the pledge of allegiance, saying it was a "salute to an earthly emblem. Ascribing salvation to it was unfaithfulness to God." In other words ...

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *They're treating the flag as a sacred object in the pledge. And they don't want to participate.*

**Lizzie:** In Minersville, Pennsylvania, when a fifth-grade boy named Billy Gobitis refused to stand for the pledge, his teacher tried to physically force his hand out of his pocket to make him salute. The next day, his older sister Lillian did the same thing. The school board quickly passed a resolution saying that refusing to recite the pledge of allegiance was insubordination. And then it expelled the Gobitis kids.

**Lizzie:** The Gobitises sued the Minersville School District over their pledge policy. They argued that they had the First Amendment right to practice religion as they please. And their case went all the way to the Supreme Court.

**Lizzie:** In June of 1940, the Supreme Court sided with the school. It ruled 8-1 that yes, you can compel students to recite the pledge of allegiance. It is not a violation of the First Amendment. The court wrote that, "National unity was the basis of national security." The lone dissenter in the decision, Justice Harlan Stone, wrote ...

**[ARCHIVE CLIP, [voice actor]:** *The state seeks to coerce these children to express a sentiment*

*which violates their deepest religious convictions. The very essence of liberty is the freedom of the individual from compulsion as to what he shall think and what he shall say."]*

**Lizzie:** The decision made national news. It also made Jehovah's Witnesses the target of national outrage. Within weeks, Jehovah's Witnesses were being attacked across the country. A mob of thousands burned the Kingdom Hall in Maine. In Illinois, police jailed one town's 60 Jehovah's Witnesses to protect them from their neighbors. In Wyoming, a Witness was tarred and feathered. One Southern sheriff told a reporter why Witnesses were being run out of town. "They're traitors; the Supreme Court said so. Ain't you heard?"

**Lizzie:** When the frenzy died down, the American Civil Liberties Union reported that 1,500 Witnesses had been attacked in more than 300 communities. But as I've learned, American history is a series of backlashes—and backlashes to those backlashes. And in the case of *Minersville v. Gobitis*, the backlash to the backlash came just a few years later.

**Lizzie:** In 1942, the West Virginia Board of Education passed a regulation similar to the one in *Minersville*. It required students to recite the pledge. And when two Jehovah's Witness children refused to say the pledge, they were expelled. But this time, the country was in a very different place than it had been just a few years earlier. The United States was in the darkest years of World War II. Americans had a front-row view of how unbridled nationalism and coerced patriotism devolved into fascism in Nazi Germany. So this time, when the West Virginia case made it all the way to the Supreme Court, the justices reached a different decision.

**Marc Leepson:** *The Supreme Court reversed the earlier ruling, and by a 6-3 vote, the court voted to overturn the Gobitis decision. I always thought this was kind of ironic. On Flag Day, June 14, 1943, the court ruled that school children should not be compelled to recite the pledge.*

**Lizzie:** Justices Hugo Black and William Douglas reversed their rulings from the *Minersville* case. In a concurring opinion, they wrote that patriotism, by its nature, cannot be mandated.

**[ARCHIVE CLIP, [voice actor]:** *Love of country must spring from willing hearts and free minds, inspired by a fair administration of wise laws enacted by the people's elected representatives within the bounds of express constitutional prohibitions.]*

**Lizzie:** In other words, patriotism is a lot like love—you can't force it, you have to feel it. Which is the opposite of what Americans saw happening in Nazi Germany. and why they changed the salute from the outstretched arm to a hand over your heart. And this is a good way to understand the pledge. It's always been an instrument, not just to express loyalty to our nation, but to define our national identity, especially against those we seek to be different from. For instance, Balch and Bellamy both wrote that we are "one nation."

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *They're referring to we're not divided from the Confederacy, we're all one country. So that is where that comes from.*

**Lizzie:** This language came straight out of the Civil War, and it was World War II that spurred changes

to the salute. And then in the 1950s, when America was in the midst of the Cold War, Catholics pushed President Eisenhower to add the words "Under God" to the pledge. They argued we needed to differentiate ourselves from the "godless Communists" we were fighting.

**Marc Leepson:** *I remember one day they told us, you know, "Okay, from now on you're gonna say, 'Under God.'"*

**Lizzie:** Marc was nine years old in 1954 when "Under God" was added to the pledge. And most of us were introduced to the pledge the same way he was: in school. It was something you did over and over, and likely never really thought about. And as you grew older, it became so ingrained in your mind you'd never forget it. Which makes me think of the holiday classic *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. Aunt Bethany, who is in her 80s and has dementia, is asked to say grace before dinner. She bows her head, puts her hands together to pray and says ...

**[ARCHIVE CLIP, *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*: I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America.]**

**Lizzie:** Barely skipping a beat, the entire table joins in, saying the pledge with her. Uncle Eddie even stands up and puts his hand over his heart.

**Lizzie:** Since the pledge of allegiance is so familiar, it's easy to assume that it's always been around, that it was forged by patriots, like the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence. But when you trace the history, you can see that it's a living thing. It's evolved from a business gimmick written by a socialist to sell magazine subscriptions, to a way to calm rising anxieties over the changing American identity—be it from European immigrants, fascists or Communist enemies. And for the past century, there's been an inherent tension between the desire for national unity that the pledge strives for and the individual freedoms it honors.

**Lizzie:** But even though the pledge can't be required, it's still said by nearly every public school student in America daily. Debbie says schools are where children are introduced to America's long, complicated history. And the pledge is part of that history.

**Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs:** *It's a grounding. It's a grounding for you, a place where you start.*

**Lizzie:** It's up to you to decide what direction your patriotic journey goes next, and what you contribute to an America that provides liberty and justice for all.

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**Lizzie:** You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. To learn more about all the different pledge-related objects and artifacts we have in the Smithsonian collection, check out our newsletter. You can subscribe at [SI.edu/Sidedoor](http://SI.edu/Sidedoor). We'll also include a link to Marc Leepson's new book.

**Marc Leepson:** *It's called The Unlikely War Hero. It's a different kind of POW story, a different kind of Vietnam War story. It's an uplifting story in the end.*

**Lizzie:** For help with this episode, we want to thank Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs, Marc Leepson and Valeska Hilbig. Thanks to PJ Tabit and Tom Peabody for giving voice to some of our characters, as well as producer James Morrison.

**Lizzie:** Our podcast is produced by James Morrison, and me, Lizzie Peabody. Executive producer is Ann Conanan. Our editorial team is Jess Sadeq and Sharon Bryant. Mimi Plato writes our newsletter. Fact-checking by Nathalie Boyd. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Transcripts are done by Russell Gragg. Extra support comes from PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda, and our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

**Lizzie:** If you have a pitch for us, send us an email at Sidedoor[at]si.edu. If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship[at]prx dot org.

**Lizzie:** I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

**Marc Leepson:** *I mean, the irony of it is that probably 99 percent of the people who are wearing an object printed, emblazoned, with the American flag are doing it out of patriotism and out of honoring the flag, but they are actually in violation of the U.S. flag code.*

**Lizzie:** *[laughs] Oh my gosh!*

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