

What's wrong with saying Pledge in Arabic? (Opinion)

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An upstate New York school district canceled a program of saying the pledge in foreign languages.

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CNN —

If ignorance is bliss, then America must be a pleasure junkie, because we sure are chasing that dragon.

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The most recent example: A school in New York sought to celebrate “National Foreign Language Week” by having the pledge of allegiance read in a different language every day. You get one guess as to what happened when it was Arabic day.

Complaints came in from both Jewish parents and people who had lost family in Afghanistan, according to the school superintendent.

What language do they speak in Afghanistan? Not Arabic. The main languages are Dari and Pashto. Perhaps this complaint illustrates why we need more education, not less.

Unfortunately, this wasn't an isolated incident. Earlier this year in Florida, parents were up in arms because a school taught about Islam in a history class. And, there are perennial stories about "Americans" offended by a Spanish recitation of the pledge.

Because of the outcry, Pine Bush students will now not hear the pledge in Italian, Spanish, Japanese, or French, as planned.

That they were deprived of such a pedagogical exercise is bad enough. What is worse is that the school district felt that it had to apologize. The district's statement was a surrender to ignorance.

"The intention was to promote the fact that those who speak a language other than English still pledge to salute this great country. We sincerely apologize to any students, staff or community members who found this activity disrespectful."

Instead of the Pine Bush students learning about other languages and cultures, they learned that the "heckler's veto" and phony tales of "offense" trump open mindedness and the quest for knowledge. At least they do in modern-day American education. Perhaps this is a lesson best learned now, because once they get to college, it will be even worse.

Our universities were once places where ideas were safe to flourish, and we went to question what we knew. Today, they are places where disfavored ideas are all but banned. According to students, Dixie State (Utah) bans posters that "mock" anyone, including former president Bush. Last year, Smith College's president apologized and there was a student outcry because students had "hurt feelings" when alumna Wendy Kaminer argued at a panel discussion moderated by the college president against using the euphemism "the n-word" in historical discussions. She believed that using the actual word, in context, was proper (and it is).

Yes, censorship of ideas and speech is no longer a top-down or parent-driven phenomenon. Now students themselves insist on being insulated from anything that might make them question their beliefs. Instead of debating an anti-abortion protester, Oregon University students preferred to call the campus police – who briefly took their side. George Will was



slated to speak at Scripps College in a program specifically designed to challenge students' prevailing views. But, since he challenged the feminist view of sexual assault on campus, Scripps pulled his invitation.

When I went to college, I enjoyed challenging my beliefs. I still do. I hope that my children constantly do the same. That is how we grow. If we cannot tolerate foreign languages, or distasteful ideas, even in an educational setting, what hope do we have?

When we have orthodoxy of thought, the very notion of liberty begins to shrivel up and die. When the cry of "I'm offended" can shut down debate over philosophies, or learning about other cultures, or learning other languages, then what have our educational institutions become? How much further will this enforced ignorance and orthodoxy need to go before education is just another word that comes untethered from its meaning?

And the very inspiration for this column, a debate over the pledge of allegiance, makes the problem even more glaring. A rote and thought-free-chant of mindless allegiance can't even be expressed in a different language? Is America really so fragile that if a citizen proclaims "fidelità agli Stati Uniti" that it means anything less because it is in Italian?

Perhaps this highlights more than the fact that we should step away from the brink of ignorance while we can. Perhaps a good place to start is by doing away with enforced orthodoxy of thought and speech in the first place. Perhaps a good place to do that would be by doing away with the pledge of allegiance itself.

Perhaps if we pledged to uphold the Constitution, instead of a piece of cloth, we would be reminded of what really built this nation – the Spirit of the Enlightenment.

No views are so sacred that they need not be challenged. Whether we are talking about learning to say the Pledge in Japanese, or hearing a speaker who challenges our beliefs, that is what education is about, not enforced ignorance.

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