

“In God We Trust” or “*E Pluribus Unum*”?

The American Founders Preferred the Latter Motto

by Thomas A. Foster on Nov 9, 2011

Last week Congress voted to reaffirm that the national motto of the United States is “In God We Trust.” Rep. Randy Forbes, R-Va., introduced the measure and argued that we would be following “our predecessors” by declaring a national trust in God. Last year he and the Congressional Prayer Caucus had criticized President Obama when he “falsely proclaimed” in a speech in Jakarta that “E Pluribus Unum” is the national motto.

The conservatives who criticized Obama and who claim the mantle of the Founding Fathers are mistaken on both counts. Although “In God We Trust” is the official motto, “E Pluribus Unum” has long been acknowledged as a de facto national motto. After all, it is on the Great Seal of the United States, which was adopted in 1782. Moreover, in the 1770s and ’80s Congress opposed a theistic motto for the nation, and many of the founders worked hard to prevent one from being established.

In July 1776, almost immediately after signing the Declaration of Independence, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson were tasked with designing a seal and motto for the new nation. In August John Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail, that he had proposed the “Choice of Hercules” as the image for the seal. Adams believed that individuals should choose to lead moral personal lives and to devote themselves to civic duty, and he preferred a secular allegory for that moral lesson.

The other two committee members proposed images that drew on Old Testament teachings, but neither shared the beliefs of those today who assert the role of God in our national government. Benjamin Franklin, a deist who did not believe in the divinity of Christ, proposed “Moses lifting up his Wand, and dividing the Red Sea, and Pharaoh, in his Chariot overwhelmed with the Waters.” This motto he believed, captured the principle that “Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God.”

Thomas Jefferson, who later created his own Bible by cutting out all mentions of the miracles of Jesus Christ (as well as his divine birth and resurrection), envisioned “The Children of Israel in the Wilderness, led by a Cloud by day, and a Pillar of Fire by night, and on the other Side Hengist and Horsa, the Saxon Chiefs, from whom We claim the Honour of being descended and whose Political Principles and Form of Government We have assumed.” Of all of his accomplishments, Jefferson selected just three for his tombstone, one of which was writing the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which established a separation of church and state.

The three men worked in consultation with an artist, Eugène Pierre Du Simitière, who rejected all of the ideas of the three committee members. His own first attempt was also rejected by Congress. It would take years and several more committees before Congress would approve the final design, still in use today, of an American bald eagle clutching thirteen arrows in one talon and an olive branch in the other.

Only the motto “E Pluribus Unum” (“from many, one”) survived from the committee on which Adams, Jefferson, and Franklin had served. All had agreed on that motto from the beginning.

The current motto, “In God We Trust,” was developed by a later generation. It was used on some coinage at the height of religious fervor during the upheaval of the Civil War.

It was made the official national motto in 1956, at the height of the Cold War, to signal opposition to the feared secularizing ideology of communism.

In other words, “In God We Trust” is a legacy of founders, but not the founders of the nation. As the official national motto, it is a legacy of the founders of modern American conservatism — a legacy reaffirmed by the current Congress.