



In God We Trust Motto

Brief Overview/History

"In God We Trust" was adopted as the official motto of the United States in 1956. The phrase was designed as an alternative to *E pluribus unum*, which was the unofficial motto first used in 1782 when the Great Seal of the United States was also created. The phrase may have originated from the words of the "The Star-Spangled Banner" written during the War of 1812. The fourth stanza includes the phrase, *"And this be our motto: 'In God is our Trust.'"* The motto first appeared on U.S. coins in 1864 and on paper currency in 1957 (a one-dollar silver certificate). The law making *In God We Trust* the national motto was passed through a joint resolution by the 84th Congress ([L. 84-851](#)) and signed by President Dwight Eisenhower on July 30, 1956.

Chief Historian at Antietam National Battlefield, Ted Alexander, maintains the motto was first used by the 125th Pennsylvania Infantry as a battle cry on September 17, 1862. From the crucible of the Civil War, the Reverend M. R. Watkinson, in a letter dated November 13, 1861, petitioned the Treasury Department to add a statement recognizing, "Almighty God in some form in our coins," perhaps as a declaration that God was on the Union side. Treasury Secretary, Salmon P. Chase, acted on Watkinson's proposal and directed the Director of the Philadelphia Mint, James Pollock, to begin work on potential designs that included the phrase. Due to an Act of Congress dated January 18, 1837, mottoes and devices that are placed on U.S. coins, had to first be prescribed by enacting additional legislation. Such legislation was introduced and passed on April 22, 1864, allowing the Secretary of the Treasury to authorize the inclusion of the phrase on one-cent and two-cent coins.

The use of "In God We Trust" has not been continuous since its inception. In 2006, on the 50th anniversary of its adoption, the Senate reaffirmed the phrase as the official national motto and in 2011, the [House of Representatives](#) passed an additional reaffirming resolution in a 396-9 vote. It is also the motto for the [State of Florida](#).

Legal/Regulatory Precedence and Rule of Law

- [Aronow v. United States](#) 432 F.2d 242 (1970) in the United States Court of Appeals, Ninth Circuit.
 - The court ruled that, "It is quite obvious that the national motto and the slogan on coinage and currency 'In God We Trust' has nothing whatsoever to do with the establishment of religion. Its use is of patriotic or ceremonial character and bears no true resemblance to a governmental sponsorship of a religious exercise."
 - The decision was cited in [Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow](#), a 2004 case on the Pledge of Allegiance: "These acts of 'ceremonial deism' are 'protected from Establishment Clause scrutiny chiefly because they have lost, through rote repetition, any significant religious content.'"
- [Zorach v. Clauson](#) (1952)
 - The Supreme Court held the nation's, "institutions presuppose a Supreme Being" and that government recognition of God does not constitute the establishment of a state church as the Constitution's authors intended to prohibit."

- [Madalyn Murray O’Hair, et al. v. W. Michael Blumenthal](#), Secretary of Treasury, et al. 588 F.2d 1144 (1979) in the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit.
 - Ms. O’Hair is known for successfully challenging compulsory prayer in U.S. public schools. The United States District Court, Western District of Texas, referring to the wording of the Ninth Circuit above, ruled that, “From this it is easy to deduce that the Court concluded that the primary purpose of the slogan was secular; it served as secular ceremonial purpose in the obviously secular function of providing a medium of exchange. As such it is equally clear that the use of the motto on the currency or otherwise does not have a primary effect of advancing religion.” This ruling was also sustained by the Fifth Circuit court.
- The atheist *Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.* conducted a national survey showing that “*In God We Trust*” was regarded as religious by an overwhelming percentage of American citizens. The results prompted the filing of a lawsuit on June 8, 1994 in a Denver, CO District Court to have the phrase removed from U.S. paper currency and coins, as well as to discontinue its use as the national motto.
 - Their lawsuit was dismissed by the district Court without trial on the grounds that the motto is not a religious phrase. A federal judge with the Tenth-Circuit Court of Appeals confirmed the dismissal, stating in part, “...we find that a reasonable observer, aware of the purpose, context, and history of the phrase ‘*In God We Trust*,’ would not consider its use or its reproduction on U.S. currency to be an endorsement of religion.”
 - The U.S. Supreme Court—where the national motto hangs on the wall—declined to review all of these rulings saying that, “[o]ur previous opinions have considered in dicta the motto and the pledge [of allegiance], characterizing them as consistent with the proposition that government may not communicate an endorsement of religious belief.”

Supportive Talking Points

- According to a [2003 joint poll by USA Today, CNN, and Gallup](#), 90% of Americans support the inscription, “*In God We Trust*” on U.S. coins.
- The long held motto has not historically presented any constitutional difficulty, is not coercive, and does not prefer one religious denomination over another.
- The motto has withstood numerous challenges and has a solid history of favorable court rulings.
- [Amicus Brief](#) in support of the motto defended in U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York.
- The motto reflects the rich cultural heritage of religion and religious liberty that was so prominent in our nation’s founding.
- The national motto is not law (i.e., does not enforce a system of rules) and therefore does not violate the First Amendment’s establishment clause.

Opposition Talking Points

- Having a religious oriented motto contradicts principles regarding the separation of church and state and violates the Constitution of the United States that prohibits the government from passing any law respecting the establishment of religion.
- The concept of “trust” in God is not a universal belief within the United States and therefore, should not be considered as a national motto.
- The United States is a melting pot of cultural values and the motto does not support all beliefs, including atheism, agnosticism and deism.
- The United States is a democracy and not a theocracy and should not promote a specific religion.
- Placing the motto in public schools is a waste of valuable educational funds, creates the impression of school sponsorship and requires vigilant monitoring due to the “captive audience” nature of the school environment.

States with Successfully Enacted Legislative Initiatives/Authors, Sponsors

- [Colorado \(July 6, 2000\)](#)
 - Posting of the motto in public schools: The Colorado State Board of Education voted 5-1 to approve a non-binding resolution that encouraged the “*appropriate display*” of the “*In God We Trust*” motto in public schools and other public buildings. This is believed to be the first such resolution by a state board in the United States. The vote was divided on party lines: five Republicans were in favor and one Democrat was opposed.

- [Mississippi \(June, 2001\)](#)
 - The legislature passed an unfunded mandate to require all public classrooms, auditoriums and cafeterias to display the national motto. State Senator Alan Nunnalee, sponsor of the legislation, said, “*Prayer and the Ten Commandments have been removed from the classrooms, and I was looking for a way to put back the values I feel that our country was founded upon. Educators know that visual reinforcement is an important part of learning. And if that’s the case, it’s important that we visually reinforce the foundation of our nation.*” Kenneth Briggs, a printer from Pearl, MS, donated 35,000 posters containing the motto to Mississippi’s schools.
 - [See](#) re: HB 51.

- [Virginia \(May 29, 2002\)](#)
 - Virginia Gov. Mark Warner signed a bill into law that requires public schools to hang posters containing the motto “In God We Trust.” Apparently there was no mechanism for funding the posters. However, a private donor contributed the necessary money to print and distribute the posters.
 - [See also](#)

- [Florida \(June 22, 2006\)](#)
 - In recognition of the national motto and the great seal of the State of Florida, Gov. Jeb Bush signed House Bill No. 1145 adopting “In God We Trust” as the official state motto.

- [Kentucky \(March, 2014\)](#)
 - State legislators authorized the display of the national motto, which now hangs in 11 committee rooms in the State Capitol and Capitol Annex, where legislators have offices and meeting rooms.

- **North Carolina**
 - [North Carolina \(January, 2015\)](#)
 - Belville and Brunswick County Boards of Commissioners unanimously approved the display of the national motto.
 - [North Carolina \(January, 2015\)](#)
 - The Pender County Board of Commissioners voted unanimously to add the national motto above the county seal in the Board’s meeting hall.

- [Georgia \(January, 2015\)](#)
 - Conyers-Rockdale County Board of Commissioners voted to display the national motto in the Assembly Hall where regular meetings are held.

States with Drafted/Pending Legislative Initiatives/Authors, Sponsors

- **Pennsylvania**
 - HB 1728
 - [See also.](#)
 - [See also.](#)
 - [See also.](#)
 - **Primary Author:** Rick Saccone (R)
 - **Brief Summary:** The House Bill would require school districts to display “In God We Trust” in classrooms and other areas of public schools. Bill sponsors maintain that the requirement promotes learning as it coincides with the 150th anniversary of the first time the phrase was minted onto U.S. coins under the direction of James Pollock, who ran the U.S. Mint during the Civil War and later became Pennsylvania’s governor.
- **New York**
 - County Resolution
 - [See also.](#)
 - **Primary Sponsor:** Shelia Marcotte (R)
 - **Brief Summary:** Six Republican legislators are seeking to display the national motto in legislative chambers in the White Plains County office.

Federal Legislation/Resources

- [Congressional Resolution](#)
 - [See also.](#)
 - [See also.](#)
 - [See also.](#)
- [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#)

Law and Policy Contacts / Additional Resources

- [Alliance Defending Freedom \(ADF\)](#)
 - **Primary Contact:** Alan Sears, Esq., President, CEO
 - **Mission:** An alliance-building legal organization that advocates for the right of people to freely live out their faith.
- [Liberty Counsel](#)
 - **Primary Contact:** Mathew Staver, Esq., President, CEO
 - **Mission:** An international nonprofit litigation, education and policy organization dedicated to advancing religious freedom, the sanctity of life and the family.
- [Pacific Justice Institute](#)
 - **Primary Contact:** Brad Dacus, Esq., President
 - **Mission:** A legal defense organization specializing in the defense of religious freedom, parental rights and other civil liberties.
- [Wallbuilders](#)
 - **Primary Contact:** David Barton

- **Mission:** An organization dedicated to presenting America’s forgotten history and heroes, with an emphasis on the moral, religious and constitutional foundation of which America was built.
- **See Attachment** titled, A Constitutional Amendment Protecting School Prayer and Other Religious Speech (2001) by David Barton/Wallbuilders

- [National Legal Foundation](#)
 - **Primary Contact:** Steven Fitschen, Esq., President
 - **Mission:** A Christian public interest law firm dedicated to the preservation of America’s freedom and constitutional rights.
 - [See also.](#)

- [American Center for Law and Justice](#)
 - **Primary Contact:** Jay Sekulow, Esq., President
 - **Mission:** To protect religious and constitutional freedoms by engaging in legal, legislative and cultural issues through advocacy, education and litigation.

- The Story of Our National Motto
 - **Primary Contact:** Mike Fuljenz

- [In God We Trust](#)
 - **Primary Contact:** Bishop Council Nedd
 - **Mission:** To protect America’s religious heritage