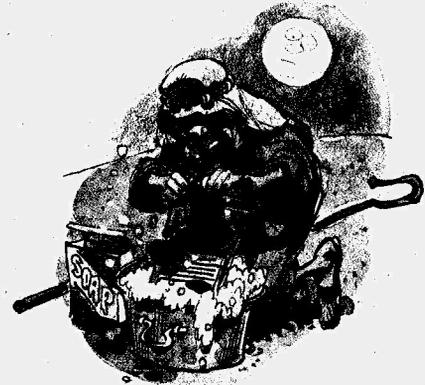




"I led the pigeons to the flag..."



"One naked individual..."



"While shepherds washed their socks at night..."

ONE NATION AND A VEGETABLE

When children learn the Pledge of Allegiance, they often stumble on phrases like "One nation indivisible" — with hilarious results. Here are more of their creative interpretations of the familiar. By Ralph Keyes



"Lead us not into Penn Station..."



"Give us this day our jelly bread..."



"One Asian...with little tea and just rice for all..."

Our first-grader recently learned the Pledge of Allegiance and one day he happily recited it for us:

"I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for Richard stands—"

"Wait," we said. "Who's Richard?"

David looked puzzled. "I don't know," he replied shrugging. "That's just the way it goes."

I've since discovered that David is part of a great American tradition: mislearning the Pledge. *The New York Times* columnist William Safire once suggested that "Richard Stans" is the most saluted man in America (others say it's actually "Richard Sands"). Safire also reports that many small children think they've "led the pigeons to the flag," but many simply "pledge a legion to the flag."

As long as children have learned recita-

tions and songs, they have been doing it in creative ways. During debate on a bill to require Illinois schoolchildren to recite the Pledge of Allegiance daily, Assemblyman Alan Greiman confessed that until the end of grade school he was sure the line "one nation, indivisible" was "one nation, invisible." (The bill passed nonetheless.) Another variation teachers sometimes hear is "one nation and a vegetable."

Theatrical producer Cheryl Crawford remembered her own childhood interpretation of this line for so long that half a century later she titled her autobiography *One Naked Individual*. In an author's note, Miss Crawford explained that her girlhood blooper "perfectly describes my sense of myself in the face of the formidable world in which I led my life."

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"José, can you see..."



"God Shave the Queen"



"Gladly, the Cross-eyed Bear..."



"Round John Virgin..."



"Hark, the Harold Angels Sing!"

ONE NATION AND A VEGETABLE

continued

she moved from the United States to Windsor, Ontario, Canada, children's author Marion Holland still remembers the way she learned *God Save the King*. In her second-grader's mind the phrase "long to reign over us" was clearly "long to rain over us." As she sang this song every morning Holland imagined raindrops gently caressing her face—and pictured a rhinoceros with reindeer horns sauntering by, as well!

In Nova Scotia, my 10-year-old nephew, Jeremy, first learned his country's anthem, *O, Canada*, as the more familiar "Air Canada." I understood his mistake, remembering baseball games at which young fans sang "José, can you see?" in my own national anthem.

Children who are taught unfamiliar words and phrases often convert them into ones that make more sense—or simply invent new words altogether. According to our family lore, my elder brother, Gene, first mastered The Lord's Prayer by condensing the mysterious phrase "hallowed be thy name" into "halovanina" ("Our Father, who art in heaven, halovanina"). Others recall learning this prayer's line about "daily bread" as "give us this day our jelly bread" or "our dirty bread."

One Connecticut schoolgirl was not only on a first-name basis with the Lord

to whom she prayed, but imagined he lived nearby: "Our Father, who art in New Haven, Harold be thy name." (This man reappears every Yuletide when kids sing, "Hark, the Harold Angels Sing.")

Like the Connecticut youngster—and the many young New Yorkers who have prayed, "lead us not into Penn Station"—children commonly use nearby locales to bring confusing lines closer to home. Rhode Island lawyer Robert Ellis Smith, 46, recalls that as a first-grader in Providence he thought *Silent Night* included the phrase, "Brown University, mother and child." Smith had trouble visualizing Mary and baby Jesus in a distant town called Bethlehem, but no difficulty at all imagining them among the nativity scenes on the nearby college campus.

The same line had a different meaning for Mark Gordon, now 33 and working in Illinois for the state government. Gordon recalls a childhood of singing, "Round young virgin," and remembers having "an image of an overweight Mary with baby Jesus on her lap."

Then there is "Round John Virgin." As the story goes, a Sunday-school pupil was asked to draw a Nativity scene. His drawing included a plump gentleman standing beside Mary and the baby Jesus. When asked who the fat man was, the boy said earnestly: "That's Round John Virgin."

It's striking how much a part of our

folklore such mistakes have become. When she speaks before church groups, Sharon Marr Brown carries a cross-eyed teddy bear whom she introduces as "Gladly" to knowing smiles. This is because, like her, so many of her listeners learned the hymn, *Gladly the Cross I'd Bear*, as "Gladly, the Cross-Eyed Bear." Sharon Brown also recalls learning "There is a Bomb (rather than a "Balm") in Gilead"—and wondering when it would explode.

English-born Judy Owen, 35, a college biology professor in Pennsylvania, reports that "while shepherds washed their socks at night" was as standard in her childhood carols as she's sure it is in her daughter Tricia's Christmas singing. (It is unlikely, however, that nine-year-old Tricia will have the chance to sing "God Shave the Queen.")

The prize for the most creative interpretation of memorized lines takes us back to our own Pledge of Allegiance. In a children's book called *In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson*, author Bette Bao Lord tells the story of a 10-year-old girl named Shirley who has moved from China to Brooklyn, as she herself did in 1946. With hand over heart, her soft voice barely audible over those around her, Shirley murmurs: "I pledge a lesson to the frog of the United States of America, and to the wee puppet for witches' hands. One Asian, in the vestibule, with little tea and just rice for all." ★