

A prayer changed the U.S. Capitol

The Constitution says the president "shall from time to time give Congress information of the State of the Union." The Constitution does not require a particular format, but modern presidents have fulfilled this obligation by delivering a speech from the well of the House of Representatives.

Just above where the president speaks are four large words written in gold:

By David New

"In God We Trust." Very few Americans are aware how those words got there. The phrase "In God We Trust" has been on our money since the Civil War. In 1956, Congress made it our national motto. However, the display of "In God We Trust" in the House of Representatives is a fairly recent addition.

A short 22-word prayer caused installation of the national motto in the House of Representatives. The prayer was as follows: "Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers and our Country."

This prayer is known as the Regents' Prayer. The Board of Regents, which had administrative authority over the public schools in the state of

New York, wrote the prayer. In June 1962, the U.S. Supreme Court said the Regents' Prayer was unconstitutional and violated the separation of church and state. The court said it was not the "business of government" to write prayers.

However, in the following year we found out it did not matter if the government wrote the prayer. In a subsequent decision, the court ruled against the Lord's Prayer as well. Apparently, the Supreme Court decided it would no longer tolerate vocal prayer of any kind during class time.

The public reaction to the school prayer decision was very

negative. The American people did not feel such a short prayer violated the separation of church and state. Most people believed that as long as student participation was voluntary, the traditional practice of school prayer should be allowed. Indeed, the Board of Regents did not require the local public schools to include a prayer in their school day.

It was voluntary. Public opinion polls since 1962 have suggested that support for school prayer in some form is popular with most Americans.

The reaction of Congress was equally negative. Congress felt the court's decision was out of step with

American traditions and values.

This is when our national motto enters the picture. Rep. John Williams, Mississippi Democrat, sponsored House Resolution 740, which authorized installing "In God We Trust" in gold letters in the well of the House of Representatives. It is clear from the debates concerning the resolution that a major reason Congress installed the national motto was to protest the school prayer decision by the Supreme Court.

The House approved the resolution in September 1962 and the motto was installed that December. The following January, President John F. Kennedy became the first president to give his State of the Union address with the golden words above him. It was the last time he did so, due to his tragic assassination in November 1963.

Thus, one short prayer not only changed the U.S. Capitol building but began a long battle over religion in public schools.

This was the beginning of the culture wars in America.

David W. New is a lawyer in the Washington, D.C. area. He is the author of "Religious Freedom in America for Beginners," which is available on Amazon.com

