

# The Third Side of the Coin: In God We Trust

by [Michael E. Marotta](#)

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In 1862, the Civil War looked grim for the North. The South had better commanders, better officers and more motivated soldiers. They proved it by winning all the major battles. "The Army of the Potomac" was needed to defend Washington DC which was right across from the Confederacy. Not all Northerners were in favor of the war in the first place and once the losses mounted, support was harder to come by. The South drafted men in April of 1862. When the North tried to draft men in 1863, there were riots in New York City because the Irish had no desire to die on behalf of coloreds... and the idea of "preserving the Union" was *not* perceived by all as the major reason for the war. Even some people who opposed slavery also opposed the war, while others who supported the Union were not opposed to slavery.

In the face of this, the North called on the Almighty. In 1863, Congress authorized "In God We Trust" and it appeared on the Two Cent coins of 1864. The North won the war. God, however, had little to do with the matter. Credit belongs to the drunkard Hiram Grant who threw men at the South and ground them down by attrition. Even so, "In God We Trust" became a standard item on US coinage and coins without it were called "Godless."

It is not unusual for a government to invoke the Almighty. The coins of Britain and Spain have Dei Gratia or DG on them, showing that their king rules by the Grace of God or with the Thanks of God. The coins of imperial Germany said "Gott Mit Uns" meaning "God (is) with us" while the coins of the Kingdom of the Netherlands said "God zij met ons" (or "God zy met ons"), meaning "(may) God be with us", more of a plea than an assertion.

Americans nominally prefer to separate church and state. The British colonies of North America were a diverse lot. Most colonies founded for religious reasons tended to be monolithic. (In Massachusetts, they hanged Quaker missionaries.) However, there were so many religious groups so close together that toleration was a requirement of peace. Religious liberty for all originated in Maryland as a defensive move by the Catholic ruling class which recognized that it was surrounded by Protestants.

In the mid-1700s, many educated persons were religiously liberal. Deism was considered the appropriate attitude. The Unitarian Church was founded at this time. Around 1800, John Adams was happy to declare that America was not a Christian nation. The US Constitution has as its First Amendment the statement that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;"

For the US Mint to assert that "we" trust in "God" certainly contradicts this injunction. Consider again the words of the First Amendment: Congress shall not pass any law that grants any special regard to any religion and Congress cannot pass any law that prevents anyone from practicing their religion.

However, since *most* people practice *some kind* of religion, the matter was settled in a different way. Furthermore, most people who do practice a religion, tend to be intolerant of other religions and especially united against those who choose not to practice any religion. Christians, Moslems, and Jews are united in their Abrahamic zeal to crush disbelievers. Joshua at Jericho is the symbol of their mandate from heaven. In America, anyone who does not believe in God keeps their mouth shut if they know what is good for them.

Every now and then someone like Mark Twain, H. L. Menken, or Ayn Rand is able to inject a different view into the mainstream of thought. Generally, most people agree with the sentiments of President Theodore Roosevelt who called Thomas Paine "a filthy little atheist" even though he was none of the above.

Interestingly, Theodore Roosevelt wanted In God We Trust removed from American coinage. The theory is that it is sacrilege to put the name of the Almighty on a common object. This was too subtle to win favor with most people for whom superstition and ritual are the same as theology and reverence.