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Progressives Take Back the Flag

This July 4 feels different. We no longer have a president in the White House who questions our patriotism if we disagree with him. We now have a president who understands that loyalty to country is neither conservative nor liberal. President Barack Obama recognizes that the ways we Americans express our patriotism are as diverse and contentious as our nation.

The Bush administration questioned the loyalty of anyone who challenged its war on terrorism. In his 2001 State of the Union address, President George W. Bush claimed, "You're either with us, or with the terrorists." The administration introduced the Patriot Act to codify this view, giving the government new powers to suppress dissent. (The anti-war movement countered with bumper stickers illustrated with an American flag that proclaimed "Peace is Patriotic.")

In contrast, Obama has said: "I have no doubt that, in the face of impossible odds, people who love their country can change it." He observed that, "Loving your country shouldn't just mean watching fireworks on the 4th of July. Loving your country must mean accepting your responsibility to do your part to change it. If you do, your life will be richer, our country will be stronger."

The flag, as a symbol of the nation, is not owned by the administration in power, but by the people. We battle over what it means, but all Americans -- across the political spectrum -- have an equal right to claim the flag as their own.

To some, patriotism means "my country -- right or wrong." To others, it means loyalty to a set of political principles, and thus requires dissent and criticism when those in power violate those standards. As Martin Luther King said in a speech during the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955, "the great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right."

Progressives understand that people can disagree with their government and still love their country and its ideals.

Indeed, throughout U.S. history, many American radicals and progressive reformers have proudly asserted their patriotism. To them, America stood for basic democratic values -- economic and social equality, mass participation in politics, free speech and civil liberties, elimination of the second-class citizenship of women and racial minorities, a welcome mat for the world's oppressed people. The reality of corporate power, right-wing xenophobia, and social injustice only fueled progressives' allegiance to these principles and the struggle to achieve them.

Most Americans are unaware that much of our patriotic culture -- including many of the leading symbols and songs that have become increasingly popular since the 9/11 tragedy -- was created by people with decidedly progressive sympathies.

For example, the Pledge of Allegiance was authored and promoted by Francis Bellamy, a leading Christian socialist. Bellamy penned the Pledge of Allegiance in 1892 to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' discovery of America by promoting use of the flag in public schools.

It was the Gilded Age, an era of major political and social conflict. Reformers were outraged by the widening gap between rich and poor, and the behavior of corporate robber barons who were exploiting workers, gouging consumers, and corrupting politics with their money. Workers were organizing unions. Farmers joined forces in the Populist movement to leash the power of banks, railroads, and utility companies. Progressive reformers fought for child labor laws, against slum housing, and in favor of women's suffrage. Radicals were gaining new converts.

In foreign affairs, Americans were battling over the nation's role in the world. America was beginning to act like an imperial power, justifying its expansion with a combination of white supremacy, manifest destiny, and spreading democracy. At the time, nativist groups in the North and Midwest as well as the South were pushing for restrictions on immigrants -- Catholics, Jews, and Asians -- deemed to be polluting Protestant America. In the South, the outcome of the Civil War still inflamed regional passions. Many Southerners, including Civil War veterans, swore allegiance to the Confederate flag.

Bellamy (cousin of best-selling radical writer Edward Bellamy) believed that unbridled capitalism, materialism, and individualism betrayed America's promise. He hoped the Pledge of Allegiance would promote a different moral vision to counter the rampant greed he thought was undermining the nation. Bellamy initially intended to use the phrase "liberty, fraternity and equality," but concluded that the radical rhetoric of the French Revolution wouldn't sit well with many Americans. So he coined the phrase, "one nation indivisible with liberty and justice for all," intending it to express a more egalitarian vision of America, a secular patriotism to help unite a divided nation.

Or consider the lines inscribed on the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Emma Lazarus was a poet of considerable reputation in her day, who was a strong supporter of Henry George and his "socialistic" single-tax program, and a friend of William Morris, a leading British socialist. Her welcome to the "wretched refuse" of the earth, written in 1883, was an effort to project an inclusive and egalitarian definition of the American Dream.

And there was Katharine Lee Bates, a professor of English at Wellesley College. Bates was an accomplished and published poet, whose book *America the Beautiful and Other Poems* includes a sequence of poems expressing outrage at U.S. imperialism in the Philippines. A member of progressive-reform circles in the Boston area, concerned about labor rights, urban slums and women's suffrage, an ardent feminist, for decades she lived with and loved her Wellesley colleague Katharine Coman, an economist and social activist.

"America the Beautiful," written in 1893, not only speaks to the beauty of the American continent but also reflects her view that U.S. imperialism undermines the nation's core values of freedom and liberty. The poem's final words -- "and crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea" -- are an appeal for social justice rather than the pursuit of wealth.

In the Depression years and during World War 2, the fusion of populist, egalitarian and anti-racist values with patriotic expression reached full flower.

Langston Hughes' poem, "Let America Be America Again," written in 1936, contrasted the nation's promise with its mistreatment of his fellow African-Americans, the poor, Native Americans, workers, farmers and immigrants:

*O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.*

In 1939, composer Earl Robinson teamed with lyricist John La Touche to write *Ballad for Americans*, which was performed on the CBS radio network by Paul Robeson, accompanied by chorus and orchestra. This 11-minute cantata provided a musical review of American history, depicted as a struggle between the "nobody who's everybody" and an elite that fails to understand the real, democratic essence of America.

Robeson, at the time one of the best-known performers on the world stage, became, through this work, a voice of America. Broadcasts and recordings of *Ballad for Americans* (by Bing Crosby as well as Robeson) were immensely popular. In the summer of 1940, it was performed at the national conventions of both the Republican and Communist parties. The work soon became a staple in school choral performances, but it was literally ripped out of many public school songbooks after Robinson and Robeson were identified with the radical left and blacklisted during the McCarthy period. Since then, however, *Ballad for Americans* has been periodically revived, notably during the bicentennial celebration in 1976, when a number of pop and country singers performed it in concerts and on TV.

Aaron Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* and *A Lincoln Portrait*, both written in 1942, are now patriotic musical standards, regularly performed at major civic events. Few Americans know that Copland was a member of a radical composers' group.

Many Americans consider Woody Guthrie's song "This Land Is Your Land," penned in 1940, to be our unofficial national anthem. Guthrie, a radical, was inspired to write the song as an answer to Irving Berlin's popular "God Bless America," which he thought failed to recognize that it was the "people" to whom America belonged.

The words to "This Land Is Your Land" reflect Guthrie's assumption that patriotism and support for the underdog were interconnected. In this song, Guthrie celebrated America's natural beauty and bounty, but criticized the country for its failure to share its riches. This is reflected in the song's last and least-known verse, which Pete Seeger and Bruce Springsteen included when they performed the song in January at a pre-inaugural concert in front of the Lincoln Memorial, with President-elect Obama in the audience:

*One bright sunny morning in the shadow of the steeple

By the relief office I saw my people.
As they stood hungry I stood there wondering

If this land was made for you and me.*

During the 1960s, American progressives continued to seek ways to fuse their love of country with their opposition to the government's policies. The March on Washington in 1963 gathered at the Lincoln Memorial, where Martin Luther King Jr. famously quoted the words to "My Country 'Tis of Thee," repeating the phrase "Let freedom ring" 11 times.

Phil Ochs, then part of a new generation of politically conscious singer-songwriters who emerged during the 1960s, wrote an anthem in the Guthrie vein, "The Power and the Glory," that coupled love of country with a strong plea for justice and equality. The words to the chorus echo the sentiments of the anti-Vietnam War movement:

*Here is a land full of power and glory;

Beauty that words cannot recall;

Oh her power shall rest on the strength of her freedom*

Her glory shall rest on us all.

One of its stanzas updated Guthrie's combination of outrage and patriotism:

*Yet she's only as rich as the poorest of her poor;
Only as free as the padlocked prison door;
Only as strong as our love for this land;
Only as tall as we stand.*

This song later became part of the repertoire of the U.S. Army band.

And in 1968, in a famous anti-war speech on the steps of the Capitol, Norman Thomas, the aging leader of the Socialist Party, proclaimed, "I come to cleanse the American flag, not burn it."

In recent decades, Bruce Springsteen has most closely followed in the Guthrie tradition. From "Born in the USA," to his songs about Tom Joad (the militant protagonist in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*), to his anthem about the 9/11 tragedy ("Empty Sky"), Springsteen has championed the downtrodden while challenging America to live up to its ideals.

Steve ("Little Stevie") Van Zandt is best known as the guitarist with Springsteen's E Street Band and, most recently, for his role as Silvio Dante, Tony Soprano's sidekick on *The Sopranos*. But his most enduring legacy should be his love song about America, "I Am a Patriot," including these lyrics:

*I am a patriot, and I love my country,

Because my country is all I know.
Wanna be with my family, People who understand me.

I got no place else to go.
And I ain't no communist,
And I ain't no socialist,
And I ain't no capitalist,
And I ain't no imperialist,
And I ain't no Democrat,
Sure ain't no Republican either,
I only know one party,
And that is freedom.*

Since the American Revolution, each generation of progressives has expressed an American patriotism rooted in democratic values that challenged jingoism and "my country -- right or wrong" thinking. They rejected blind nationalism, militaristic drum beating, and sheep-like conformism. Throughout the United States' history, they have viewed their movements -- abolition of slavery, farmers' populism, women's suffrage, workers' rights, civil rights, environmentalism, gay rights, and others -- as profoundly patriotic. They believed that America's core claims -- fairness, equality, freedom, justice -- were their own.

America now confronts a new version of the Gilded Age. In the midst of a recession, the gap between rich and poor is still widening. Americans are feeling more economically insecure than at any time since the Depression. They are upset by the unbridled greed and political influence peddling demonstrated by banks, drug companies, insurance companies, and other large corporations. They are angry at the growing power of American-based global firms who show no loyalty to their country, outsource jobs to low-wage countries, avoid paying taxes, and pollute the environment. Sam Walton, the founder of Wal-Mart, America's largest corporation, promoted the motto "Buy American," but the retail giant now imports most of its merchandise from Asia, much of it made under sweatshop conditions. (Ironically, most American flags are made in China.)

These trends have triggered a growing grassroots movement demanding more regulation of business, labor law reform, universal health insurance, living wages, fairer trade, and stronger consumer and environmental safeguards.

This movement, which embodies the idea of "liberty and justice for all," reflects America's tradition of progressive patriotism. It recognizes that conservatives have never had a monopoly on Old Glory.

Happy July 4th.

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