
Patriotism and Progressivism*

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Many Americans believe that the left is “anti-patriotic” (and even anti-American) whereas the political right truly expresses the American spirit and reveres its symbols. Particularly since the late 1960s—when the movement against U.S. intervention in Vietnam gained momentum—the terms “progressive” and “patriotism” have rarely been used in the same sentence, at least in the mainstream media. It has become conventional wisdom that conservatives wave the American flag while leftists burn it. Patriotic Americans display the flag on their homes; progressives turn it upside down to show contempt.

Since the World Trade Center bombing on September 11, 2001, the U.S. has seen a dramatic increase in the number of Americans proudly displaying the Stars and Stripes on their cars, homes, businesses, T-shirts, caps, lapel pins and even tattoos, along with sales of CDs with patriotic songs. Retail stores have redesigned everything from coffee mugs to bikinis in red-white-and-blue. Since September 11, bills to make the Pledge of Allegiance mandatory in public schools have been introduced in seven states; half the states already require it. On October 12, 2001, a month after the tragic event, a right-wing group based in Orange County—Celebration U.S.A., Inc.—enlisted President Bush and Secretary of Education Rod Paige to participate in a synchronized nationwide recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in schools across the country, a ritual that was repeated a year later. In October 2001, the U.S. House of Representatives voted 404 to 0 for a resolution encouraging the display of signs in public schools proclaiming “God Bless America.”

This outpouring of flag waving signifies a variety of sentiments—from identification with the victims of the September 11 attacks to support for the military’s invasion of Afghanistan and, later, Iraq. But in U.S. popular culture, displays of the American flag are—along with the very idea of “patriotism”—typically viewed as expressions of “conservative” politics. The patriotic fervor since September 11 has revitalized that belief and, as in other times, has given conservative politicians and pundits a handy means to undermine dissent and progressive initiatives.

But the reality is more complicated. Loyalty to country is neither conservative nor liberal. The ways we Americans express our patriotism are as diverse and contentious as our nation. It depends on the core values one associates with

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the United States. Patriotism to some 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.”

The controversy over President Bush’s plan to invade Iraq reflected the conflicting battle over patriotism. The Bush administration questioned the loyalty of anyone who challenged its war on terrorism. In his 2001 State of the Union address, 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.”

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.

During periods of social and political turmoil, America’s leaders have sought to impose rituals of loyalty, civics lessons, and other forms of patriotic observance. Most Americans are unaware that much of our patriotic culture—including many of the leading symbols and songs that have become increasingly popular since September 11—were created by writers of decidedly left-wing sympathies.

A case in point is the recent controversy over the Pledge of Allegiance. In an incredible act of bad political timing, a panel of judges from the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled on June 26, 2002 that the words “under God” in the Pledge violate the First Amendment, which requires the separation of church and state. The controversy over the Pledge was no doubt heightened because it came at a time when expressions of patriotism were at a fever pitch. Would the same furor have erupted if the dispute was over the phrase “with liberty and justice for all”?

Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives alike attacked the court’s decision for undermining one of the nation’s most hallowed patriotic traditions. President George Bush branded the ruling “ridiculous” and Republican Senator Trent Lott of Mississippi called the judges “stupid.” Just hours after the ruling, the U.S. Senate voted 99 to 0 to express strong disagreement with the decision. Senator Tom Daschle of South Dakota, the Democratic majority leader, called the ruling “just nuts” and in symbolic defiance mobilized his colleagues to recite the Pledge on the Senate floor. House Speaker Dennis Hastert, an Illinois Republican, led many House members to gather on the Capitol steps to recite the Pledge and sing “God Bless America.”

But, ironically, the guardians of tradition were not, in fact, defending the traditional Pledge. The words “under God” were not part of the original pledge, written in 1892 by Francis Bellamy. Following a campaign led by the Knights of Columbus, they were added by Congress in 1954, at the height of the Cold War, when many political leaders believed that the nation was threatened by godless communism.

Bellamy’s original version had already been changed once before. In 1923, over the objections of the aging Bellamy, the National Flag Conference, led by the American Legion and the Daughters of the American Revolution, changed the opening, “I pledge allegiance to my flag,” to “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America.”

Thanks to the news coverage of the Pledge controversy, Americans learned that what we consider to be “tradition” is constantly evolving. They also encountered—probably for the first time—the name of Francis Bellamy, who wrote the Pledge. But lost in the public dispute was any understanding of who Bellamy really was and what he was trying to accomplish.

Bellamy, who lived between 1855 and 1931, wrote the Pledge in 1892. 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. Socialist candidates for office were gaining new converts. 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.

In foreign affairs, Americans battled 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 was a Baptist minister and leading Christian socialist who was ousted from his Boston church for his sermons depicting Jesus as a socialist. He believed that unbridled capitalism, materialism, and individualism betrayed America’s promise. He hoped the Pledge would promote a different moral vision to counter the rampant greed he believed 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 collective and egalitarian vision of America, a secular patriotism to help unite a divided nation.

Bellamy penned the Pledge of Allegiance for *Youth’s Companion*, a magazine for young people published in Boston with a circulation of about 500,000. A few years earlier, the magazine had sponsored a largely successful campaign to sell

American flags to public schools. In 1891, the magazine hired Bellamy—whose first cousin, Edward Bellamy, was the famous socialist author of the utopian novel *Looking Backward*—to organize a public relations campaign to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's discovery of America by promoting use of the flag in public schools.

Bellamy gained the support of the National Education Association, along with President Benjamin Harrison and Congress, for a national ritual observance in the schools, and wrote the Pledge of Allegiance as part of the program's flag salute ceremony. Bellamy thought such an event would be a powerful expression on behalf of free public education. Moreover, he wanted all the schoolchildren of America to recite the pledge at the same moment. He hoped the pledge would promote a moral vision to counter the individualism embodied in capitalism and expressed in the climate of the Gilded Age.

Emma Lazarus shared a similar vision. In 1883, she wrote "The New Colossus," a poem that was added to a bronze plaque at the base of the Statue of Liberty 18 years later—including its most famous lines: "Give me your tired, your poor/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Lazarus was a poet of considerable reputation in her day, a well-known figure in literary circles. She was a strong supporter of Henry George and his socialistic single tax program. She even published a sonnet in honor of his book *Progress and Poverty*. She was also a friend of William Morris, a leading British socialist. Her poem's welcome to the "wretched refuse" of the earth was an effort to project an inclusive and egalitarian definition of the American dream.

The words to "America the Beautiful" were written in 1893 by Katherine Lee Bates, a professor of English at Wellesley College. Bates was an accomplished poet. Her book, *America the Beautiful and Other Poems*, published in 1911, includes a sequence of poems expressing outrage at U.S. imperialism in the Philippines. Bates identified with the anti-imperialist movement of her day and was part of the progressive reform circles in the Boston area concerned about labor rights, urban slums, and women's suffrage. She was also an ardent feminist, and for decades lived with and loved her Wellesley colleague Katharine Coman, an economist and social activist.

"**A**merica the Beautiful" not only speaks to the beauty of the American continent but also reflects Bates's view that social injustice and U.S. imperialism undermine the nation's core values of freedom and liberty. The poem's famous words—"and crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea"—are an appeal for social justice rather than the pursuit of wealth.

Bellamy, Lazarus, and Bates wrote their now-famous words during the contentious Gilded Age, but their progressive version of patriotism has found expression ever since. Many Americans consider Woody Guthrie's song "This Land Is Your Land," penned in 1940, to be their unofficial national anthem. Guthrie was a radical who 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 fusion of patriotism and support for the underdog.

In this song, Guthrie celebrates America's natural beauty and bounty, but criticizes the country for its failure to share its riches, reflected in the song's last and least-known verse:

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?

Guthrie was not alone in combining patriotism and radicalism during the Depression and World War II. In that period of the Popular Front, many American composers, novelists, artists, and playwrights engaged in similar projects. In his poem "Let America Be America Again," written in 1936, Langston Hughes 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.

And later in the poem:

O, yes
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!
As ever-living seed,
Its dream
Lies deep in the heart of me.

In the early 1930s, a group of young composers and musicians—including Marc Blitzstein (author of the musical *The Cradle Will Rock*), Charles Seeger (a well-known composer and musicologist and father of folksinger Pete Seeger), and Aaron Copland—formed a "composers collective" to write music that would serve the cause of the working class. They turned to American roots and folk music for inspiration. Many of their compositions—including Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man" and "Lincoln Portrait"—are now patriotic musical standards, regularly performed at major civic events.

Earl Robinson was a member of the composers collective who pioneered the effort to combine patriotism and progressivism. In 1939, he 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 "nobodies who are everybody" and an elite who failed 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 television.

During World War II, with lyricist Lewis Allen, Robinson co-authored another patriotic hit, "The House I Live in." Its lyrics asked, and then answered, the question "What is America to me?" posed in the first line of the song. The song evokes America as a place where all races could live freely, where one could speak one's mind, where the cities as well as the natural landscapes were beautiful. The song was made a hit by Frank Sinatra in 1945. Sinatra also starred in an Oscar-winning movie short—written by Albert Maltz, later one of the Hollywood Ten—in which he sang "The House I Live in" to challenge bigotry, represented in the movie by a gang of kids who had roughed up a Jewish boy.

"The House I Live in," like the "Ballad for Americans," was exceedingly popular for several years, but became controversial during the McCarthy period and has largely disappeared from public consciousness. Its co-author, Lewis Allen, was actually Abel Meeropol, a high school teacher who had also penned "Strange Fruit," the anti-lynching song made famous by Billie Holiday. In the 1950s, Meeropol and his wife adopted the sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg when the latter were executed as atomic spies. Despite this, Sinatra kept the song in his repertoire.

Perhaps the most astonishing performance of "The House I Live in" was at the nationally televised commemoration of the centenary of the Statue of Liberty in 1986, when Sinatra sang it as the finale to the program, with President Ronald Reagan and his wife Nancy Reagan sitting directly in front of him.

Only a handful of Americans could have grasped the political irony of that moment: Sinatra performing a patriotic anthem written by blacklisted writers to a President who, as head of the Screen Actors Guild in the 1950s, helped create Hollywood's purge of radicals. Sinatra's own left-wing (and nearly blacklisted) past and the history of the song itself have been obliterated from public memory.

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

Phil Ochs, 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.

Interestingly, this song later became part of the repertoire of the U.S. Army band. And in 1967, 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 U.S.A.," to his songs about Tom Joad (the militant protagonist in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*), to his recent anthem about the September 11 tragedy ("Empty Sky"), Springsteen has championed the down-trodden while challenging America to live up to its ideals. Indeed, by performing "Born in the U.S.A.," "My City of Ruins" (in which he urges people "come on rise up!"), and "Land of Hope and Dreams" at benefits for the families of World Trade Center casualties, Springsteen coupled his anger at injustice with his belief in the nation's promise.

In each major period of twentieth-century history—the Progressive era, the Depression, World War II, and the postwar era—American radicals and progressives expressed an American patriotism rooted in democratic values and consciously aimed at challenging jingoism and "my country—right or wrong" thinking. Every day, millions of Americans pledge allegiance to the flag, sing "American the Beautiful" and "This Land Is Your Land," and memorize the words on the Statue of Liberty without knowing the names of their authors, their political inspiration, or the historical context in which the texts were written.

The progressive authors of much of America's patriotic iconography rejected blind nationalism, militaristic drum beating, and sheep-like conformism. So it would be a dire mistake to allow, by default, jingoism to become synonymous with patriotism and the American spirit. Throughout the United States' history, radicals and reformers have viewed their movements 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. The gap between rich and poor is widening. The unbridled greed and political influence peddling demonstrated by the top executives of Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, and other large corporations have triggered another wave of public outrage demanding more regulation of business. The behavior of large Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs) and pharmaceutical companies angers Americans who can't afford the cost for basic health care. The growing power of American-based

global firms, who show no loyalty to their country in terms of where they move their jobs, the taxes they pay, or the environment they pollute, has led to a grassroots movement for fairer trade. (Ironically, most American flags are now made in China.)

In the midst of current patriotic exuberance both authentic and manipulated, then, it is useful to recall the forgotten cultural legacy of the left. We need to ask, once again, "What is America to us?"

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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