

## Patriotism Without Parochialism

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### Gleanings from Contemporary Poetry and Prose

#### Tony Hoagland, "America"

Then one of the students with blue hair and a  
tongue stud  
Says that America is for him a maximum security  
prison  
Whose walls are made of Radio Shacks and Burger  
Kings and MTV episodes  
Where you can't tell the show from the commercial.  
And as I consider how to express how full of bull I  
think he is,  
He says that even when he's driving to the mall in  
his Isuzu Trooper  
With a gang of his friends, letting rap music pour  
over them  
Like a boiling Jacuzzi fill of ball-peen hammers,  
even then he feels  
Buried alive, captured, and suffocated in the folds  
Of the thick quilt of America.

And I wonder if this is a legitimate category of pain,  
Or whether he is just spin-doctoring for a better  
grade.  
And then I remember that when I stabbed my  
father in a dream last night,  
It was not blood, but money that gushed out of him,  
Bright green hundred-dollar bills spilling from his  
wounds,  
And, this is the weird part—he gasped,  
"Thank God, those Ben Franklin bills were clogging  
up my heart.  
And so I perish happily,  
Freed from that which kept me from my liberty."  
Which is when I knew it was a dream, since my  
dad  
Would never speak in rhymed couplets,  
And I look at the student with his acne and cell-  
phone and phony ghetto clothes  
And I think, "Maybe I am asleep in American too,  
And I don't know how to wake myself up either."  
And I remember what Karl Marx said at the end of  
his life:  
"I was listening to the cries of the past  
When I should have been listening to the cries of  
the future."  
But how could he have imagined 100 channels of  
24-hour cable  
Or what kind of nightmare it might be

When each day you watch rivers of bright mer-  
chandise run past you  
And you are floating in your pleasure boat upon  
this river  
Even while others are browning underneath you  
And you see their faces twisting in the surface of  
the waters  
And yet it seems to be your own hand  
Which turns the volume higher?

#### Jacob Needleman, *The American Soul*

My friend, Bela—a transplanted American Jew—  
once looked at me with his intensely sensitive eye  
and said, "You are *very, very* American." Mystified,  
I asked him what he meant. "Your movements ...  
they have the freedom of the plains...."

Bela loved the same thing that I loved about  
America: its unformed freedom that was open to any  
kind of possibility. Being unformed, it was highly  
charged with energy. It was the future. It was not  
what is given, what is inherited, what is born into a  
man or woman.... To be American was not to be  
born to anything at all.

To put it another way, to be American was an  
idea, not an inescapable organic given. America is a  
nation formed by philosophical ideals that have  
been thought through by human beings—it is the  
only nation in the world that is so constituted.  
America is not a tribal, ethnic, or racial identity. It is  
a philosophical identity composed of ideas of free-  
dom, liberty, independent thought, independent  
conscience, self-reliance, hard work, and justice.

This is both the weakness and the strength of  
America. To love America is not to love one's  
roots—it is to love the flower that has not yet blos-  
somed, the fruit as yet unripened. To love American  
is to love the future....

### Reflections

One of the 20th century's preeminent clergymen  
died on April 12 of this year. William Sloane  
Coffin served for many years as senior minister of  
New York City's Riverside Church, and before that  
had gained some notoriety as a chaplain at Yale  
University, his alma mater, during the turbulent  
1960s. Sloane Coffin embodied the spirit of liberal  
Christianity. He was an early advocate of racial  
equality and marched beside Martin Luther King, Jr.

He spoke out early and often against the war in Vietnam. Throughout his long career in the ministry and until his death at 81, he preached an unapologetic liberal gospel and championed a variety of liberal causes.

And yet Sloane Coffin's background would have given little indication that the arc of his destiny would bend quite so far to the left. Like our current president, George W. Bush, he was the scion of a wealthy Northeastern family. Like the President, he attended Yale and was initiated into its prestigious Skull and Bones Society. Like Mr. Bush, he served in the military and then spent three more years working for the CIA. Yet in the end, the paths of these two men diverged dramatically. In praising his friend at Sloane Coffin's memorial service, James Carroll described him as:

A patrician who was tribune of the nobodies.  
A patriot who had served his country nobly,  
but was suddenly in disobedient dissent. A  
critical thinker with a simple faith.

During his career, Coffin preached what was, in his own words, "an uncomfortable Gospel," one which confronted society with the contradictions between its Christian identity and its un-Christian conduct, between its pious rhetoric and its self-aggrandizing proclivities.

His vociferous opposition to discriminatory practices, useless wars, and an unjust economic system caused more than a few of his critics to declare William Sloane Coffin "anti-American." The duty of a patriot, they insisted, is to support the nation, its leaders, and its endeavors in all important matters—to stand united because in unity there is strength. A patriot is one who sets aside his or her doubts, who suspends his or her private judgment in deference to those who have been duly elected or appointed to set the nation's agenda. As President Bush has said, "I am the decider," and the citizen's role, the patriot's duty, is to accept those decisions and let the man lead.

Sloane Coffin would have bristled at being labeled "anti-American," for he would have seen himself as what Louis Menand has described as a "dissenting patriot." According to Menand, such a patriot is wedded to the philosophical foundations of the republic, and to the vision of its Founders. When he perceives the nation's moral underpinnings to be under siege, he feels duty-bound to speak up. The "dissenting patriot," Menand writes, "believes the United States to be basically virtuous," and makes upholding that virtue his or her first pri-

ority. The "consenting patriot," on the other hand, routinely *conflates* the nation's changing policies with its core principles, failing to recognize how the two are constantly in tension and often clash.

I would argue that Sloane Coffin was not only a "dissenting" but a "deep" patriot. He had enough broad knowledge and in-depth experience of his country to know what was most worth protecting and preserving. And that was *not* its enviable standard of living, *not* its military prowess, *not* its technological virtuosity. What the deep patriot seeks to defend is that set of humane and enlightened values articulated in America's formative literature that have given hope and inspiration to humankind for well over two centuries.

For several years now, our nation's "dissenting" patriots, its "deep" patriots, have protested Bush administration policies that have kept hundreds of men in detention—without formal charges—at Guantanamo. It is, they argue, both illegal and "un-American" to maintain such a facility. At long last the President has said he agrees. "Guantanamo sends ... a signal," George Bush said two weeks ago. "It provides an excuse ... to say that the U.S. is not upholding the values that they're trying to encourage other countries to adhere to." Last week the Supreme Court agreed that indefinite detention without trial was patently offensive. Still, the President has no immediate plans to shut down that prison. Who is the patriot, and who the pretender?

But Mr. Bush is hardly exceptional. In recent weeks, Congress came within a whisker of approving a Constitutional Amendment proscribing desecration of the American flag. The majority in the House was well over two-thirds, and a single changed vote in the Senate would have sent the measure to the states for almost certain ratification.

If we wish to understand the difference between "deep" and "shallow" patriotism the Flag Desecration Amendment offers a telling example. In the United States today the gap between rich and poor is wider than it has been in over a hundred years. The percentage of children living in poverty exceeds that of any other developed Western nation. We have the sixth highest reported crime rate in the

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world—higher even than Mexico’s and Colombia’s. Government spending on prisons has increased by 600% in the last two decades and the percentage of U.S. citizens behind bars far surpasses that of our political and economic peers. Despite the positive rhetoric of the “No Child Left Behind” act, the Federal Government now spends 42% more money on corrections than it does on education.

In other words, at the same time the Congress and the President press hard for passage of a flag

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desecration amendment to the Constitution, the “liberty and justice” for which it stands—which the flag is intended to symbolize and which *really* constitute the spirit of America—are being aggressively undermined. Shallow patriotism lacks the will to wrestle with

and resolve issues of substance, and uses symbols and superficialities to manipulate and inflame popular emotions. There is nothing profound about this species of patriotism; it is all about political posturing and opportunism, and yet more than two thirds of our U.S. senators and representatives have embraced it. This is what I call hypocrisy and what the Bible calls idolatry.

Those who live abroad may be able to see what we, on the inside, have elected to ignore. The religious writer Philip Yancey travels overseas frequently, and in recent years he has made it a standard practice to ask people on other continents what they think of the United States. “What three words come to mind when you consider my country?” he asks them. Regrettably, words like “freedom,” “democracy,” and “fair play” are seldom mentioned these days. The most frequent allusions are to America’s wealth, its military power, and its decadence.

Another name for “shallow patriotism” is *nationalism*, a species of political fundamentalism that frowns on dissent and brooks no opposition. Nationalism tends to be undiscerning, and places its emphasis and its confidence instead on symbols, slogans, parades, and highly orchestrated political rallies. It dismisses the critical role free speech plays in preserving American virtue and our democratic legacy.

The conservative commentator Dinesh D’Souza is a nationalist, and in his book *What’s So Great About America* he suggests that the United States is

threatened more by the “enemies within” than by those plotting against us from abroad. By “enemies” he means people like William Sloane Coffin who are openly critical of the government’s priorities and policies. “Can an open society, where such criticisms are permitted, find the fortitude and the will to resist external assault?” D’Souza wonders.

In this man’s estimation, the United States has become so fragile and so vulnerable that spirited dissent may no longer be tolerable. Or, as former President Bill Clinton once said, in today’s world “It is better for the United States to be perceived as strong and wrong than weak and right.” Power, the nationalist proclaims, is more crucial than virtue.

The highly acclaimed political historian John Lukacs recently observed that the word “nationalism” is relatively new; it made its first appearance in political discourse only a little over a century ago. It describes, Lukacs writes, a position that is assertive, aggressive, that would export Americanism—by force if necessary—to the whole world. Increasing the power and wealth of the country is nationalism’s paramount concern, and nothing is permitted to stand in the way of that objective. As one high U.S. official famously announced a few years ago, come hell or high water, “The American standard of living is simply not negotiable.”

Nationalism speaks the language of raw self-interest and typically lacks both conscience and a sense of humility. Its sentiments are narrowly parochial rather than broadly universal; it is us against the world. It produces warped thinking like that displayed by Air Force General Charles Horner who, a few months after 9/11, offered this advice to the Bush White House:

In the end, if we are going to lead, then we must be considered the madmen of the world, capable of any action, willing to risk anything to achieve our national interests.... If we are to achieve noble purposes we must be prepared to act in the most *ignoble* manner.

Historians have a name for people who think like this, and it is not “patriot.” What General Horner and his acolytes at the Department of Defense, in the Justice Department, at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, in the Oval Office are advocating is a radical nationalism that bears a disturbingly close resemblance to fascism. The language General Horner employs is not that of a thoughtful democrat, but of a tyrant, a demagogue and, as Yugoslav writer Danile Kis remarks, an ignoramus. “Nationalism is the line of least resistance,” Kis writes, “it is the easy

way” because it prefers the unilateral application of violence to collaborative tactics that require greater patience and perseverance.

Given the present orientation of the country and its leadership, some honest self-assessment appears to be in order. Where does our country appear to be headed? Has a shift away from republican values occurred and are there trends of which we ought to be wary? Robert Paxton has published a definitive study of fascism, and some of what he says ought to give us pause.

Underlying all fascism, Paxton writes, “is a passionate nationalism, combined with a ... Manichean view of history as a battle between good and evil camps ... in which one’s own community or nation has been the victim.” Sound familiar?

Among other notable characteristics of fascism, Paxton mentions the following:

Fascist leaders try to create and maintain an “overwhelming sense of crisis, which defies conventional solutions. They thus are able to take any action, without legal or moral limits, against the nation’s enemies, both internal and external.

Fascism attempts to deposit all legitimate authority in one person, who relies on his own instincts rather than universal reason, and is believed to “incarnate the nation’s destiny.”

Willfulness and active coercion are perceived as both effective and, in some sense, glorious. There is widespread agreement that the “chosen people” may appropriately dominate others, more or less free of traditional or international constraints.

Finally, Paxton says, “Fascism is an affair of the gut more than of the brain.”

Post-9/11 America comes disturbingly close to matching the preceding profile. The country suffers

from a distinct sense of victimization, is kept constantly on edge by a never-ending war on terror, is told that it must accept an imperial executive and a broad curtailment of civil rights in the interest of security. Although other nations are expected to abide by international conventions and rules, we routinely refuse to be held accountable. As Americans we *make* the rules, we don’t follow them.

That great Boston patriot Samuel Adams would be appalled by such a development. Although he is now associated with a popular brand of beer, he

would be more profitably remembered for these stirring words:

We may look to armies for our defense, but  
Virtue is our best security. It is not possible  
that any state should long remain free, where  
virtue is not supremely honored.

Adams knew whereof he spoke. Ultimately, our security *does* lie in our virtue. A poll of Muslim countries conducted last year by the Pew Research Center found anti-Americanism to be rampant in every Muslim nation but one. In that particular country—Indonesia—approval of the U.S. jumped an enormous 23% in a single year. Why? Because the United States had responded rather generously to the 2004 tsunami that devastated Indonesia’s coastline and killed 200,000 people. “The lesson is clear,” Matthew Yglesias wrote in *The American Prospect*.

... when the U.S. directs its *counter-terrorism* efforts to genuine self-defense, and channels its *idealistic* impulses into ... popular causes ... world opinion looks more kindly on our country.

Although I do not have a “God Bless America” bumper sticker on my Honda Hybrid, I do consider myself a patriot. I am someone who loves the amber waves of grain and purple mountains majesty too much to see them diminished by strip malls and strip mines. I am too devoted to the principles of simple justice and elementary fairness to accept meekly that the claims of the few to unlimited money and power at the expense of the many. And I am too adamant about my freedoms to trade them in for a false sense of security. Like William Sloane Coffin I declare myself a “dissenting patriot” who will not be deterred by the disapproval of flag-waving uber-Nationalists. And, finally, I find myself heartily agreeing with sentiments expressed by a Christian thinker named Tony Campolo. With his words I close:

I have to go on believing in an America that is still the embodiment of the noblest and best of humanity, even as evidence mounts to the contrary.... I struggle to keep faith in American these days, but I’ve committed myself to continue working to create the America I believe in—the America that strives to be a land of justice and freedom for all and that is, in some ways, a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. May all of us who call this nation home commit ourselves to making this, the greatest experiment in political history, a success.