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Patriotism's Secret History

Our most cherished national symbols--from the Pledge of Allegiance to "America the Beautiful" to Lady Liberty's poetry--are rooted in liberal ideals.

Peter Dreier and Dick Flacks May 16, 2002 | This article appeared in the June 3, 2002 edition of *The Nation*.

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Many Americans believe that the left is "antipatriotic" (and even anti-American), while the political right truly expresses the American spirit and reveres its symbols. Particularly since the late 1960s--when the movement against US 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.

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In the next four years--and beyond--progressives must create the political space for the president to represent the majority of Americans.

Peter Dreier and Donald Cohen

Recent months have 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. 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. But in our 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.

A case in point: In Santa Barbara, California, progressive County Supervisor Gail Marshall is facing the possibility of a recall election fueled by right-wing forces opposed to her support for environmental regulation, affordable housing and labor unions. Because Marshall occupies the key swing seat on the five-member county board, Santa Barbara's conservative activists--funded by oil interests, agribusiness and land developers--have been trying to unseat her for years. They launched a recall campaign after Marshall refused to rubber-stamp a proposal to require the Pledge of Allegiance at meetings of one of her community advisory boards. Marshall said she wanted the board to discuss the idea, but her opponents--who made sure that TV camera crews were present at the meeting where the issue first surfaced--have turned her civil libertarian instincts into proof that she's hostile to public expressions of patriotism.

In TV ads and newsletters, Marshall's opponents--who are gathering signatures for a recall petition that, if successful, will go before the voters this fall--claim that her alleged reluctance to have the pledge recited was clear confirmation of their suspicion that she is a "socialist."

Ironically, the Pledge of Allegiance was written in 1892 by a leading Christian socialist,

Francis Bellamy, who was fired from his Boston ministry for his sermons depicting Jesus as a socialist. 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 he 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, with its robber barons and exploitation of workers. Bellamy intended the line "One nation indivisible with liberty and justice for all" to express a more collective and egalitarian vision of America.

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