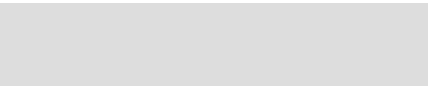


## Give Us Back Our Damn Flag

### The leftist case for patriotism

By [Peter Dreier And Dick Flacks](#) *Thursday, Jul 1 2004*



Since 9/11, patriotic expressions in public life have dramatically soared. We see displays of the Stars and Stripes on cars, businesses, T-shirts, caps, lapel pins and even tattoos, along with bales of CDs with patriotic songs. During periods of social and political turmoil, America's leaders have always sought to impose rituals of loyalty, civics lessons and other forms of patriotic observance. In that tradition, George W. Bush has tried to define opposition to his war policy as unpatriotic. His first response to 9/11 included the declaration that "either you are with us or you are with the terrorists," a comment aimed not only at leaders of other nations but at domestic critics as well. (The misnamed Patriot Act was clearly designed to stigmatize dissent.) And the buildup to the Iraq invasion was framed by endless miles of star-spangled bunting and the continuous looping of "God Bless America."

This post-9/11 patriotic fervor has revitalized the conventional wisdom that love of country is synonymous with conservatism. Conservatives, we are told, wave the flag. Or wear it on their lapels. Leftists, by contrast, only scorn it. Or burn it. Since the Vietnam War era, many liberals and progressives have been uncomfortable about patriotism. They equate it with jingoism and militarism. They have been reluctant to wave the flag. They weren't sure it was theirs. And George W. Bush's brand of blind "my country right or wrong" jingoism has, on this Fourth of July, only deepened the dilemma.

But some progressives are now challenging this conventional reflex, no longer conceding that conservatives have a monopoly on Old Glory. During the weeks before Bush's invasion of Iraq, the anti-war movement countered with bumper stickers illustrated with an American flag that proclaimed, "Peace Is Patriotic." Since then, demonstrations against the

invasion and occupation of Iraq have been festooned with American flags. The Veterans for Peace are doing more than any official body to publicly honor those who have given their lives in combat, creating symbolic Arlington cemeteries with crosses marking the war dead in a growing number of cities.

“Take Back Our Country,” a line used by Pat Buchanan when he declared a cultural war at the 1992 Republican Convention, has now become a rallying cry for liberals. John Kerry has been appropriating the key line from Langston Hughes’ Depression-era poem “Let America Be America Again” as a campaign slogan.

Indeed, throughout the nation’s history, many American radicals and progressive reformers 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.

Nevertheless, progressives are faced with the tough question of what exactly it means to be patriotic in an increasingly global economy and interdependent world. Multinational corporations based in the U.S. obviously have no loyalty to this country. They do their best to outsource jobs to low-wage countries and to avoid paying taxes. (Ironically, most American flags are made in China, and Wal-Mart, whose founder, Sam Walton, promoted the motto “Buy American,” now imports 60 percent of its merchandise and accounts for about 12 percent of all U.S. imports from China, most of it made under sweatshop conditions.)

But the slogan “Buy American,” which sounds patriotic to some and protectionist to others, isn’t much help if you’re a progressive hoping to shop with a conscience. Most apparel produced in the U.S. is made under awful sweatshop conditions by companies that exploit immigrants and violate minimum-wage and other labor laws. Even the Department of Defense buys some of its uniforms from companies that operate sweatshops.

Progressives show their patriotism today by looking for a union label in their American-made clothes, or they can look for a “fair trade” label on various consumer goods made overseas. (Help is available from several nonprofit groups: *www.fair*

*tradefederation.com; www.transfairusa.org; www.nosweat*

*apparel.com*; and *www.unionlabel.org*.) The American activists who've protested at World Trade Organization and World Bank meetings to demand better living standards for Third World workers aren't simply do-gooders. When workers in China or Mexico get paid a living wage, American companies have less incentive to move jobs from U.S. soil, and those workers have more money to buy U.S.-made products.

But let's get back to the Red-White-and-Blue. 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.

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 — was created by writers of decidedly progressive sympathies.

For example, the Pledge of Allegiance itself was originally authored and promoted by a leading Christian socialist, Francis Bellamy (cousin of best-selling radical writer Edward Bellamy), who was fired from his Boston ministry for his sermons depicting Jesus as a 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. He hoped the pledge would promote a moral vision to counter 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.

Bellamy's invocation of American patriotism on behalf of social justice is part of a hidden tradition. 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 II, the fusion of populist, egalitarian and anti-racist values with patriotic expression reached full flower. Aaron Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* and *A Lincoln Portrait* are now patriotic musical standards, regularly performed at major civic events, written by a member of a radical composers' collective.

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.

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, support for the underdog, and class struggle were all of a piece. 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.

Stimulated by the recent nostalgia for World War II, old recordings by left-wing performers of the 1940s Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and the Almanac Singers, Josh White, Burl Ives, Leadbelly, and Paul Robeson are, fortunately, undergoing a revival. This was material deliberately created to promote the war effort, expressing the passionate fervor of left-wing resistance to fascism. The best songs also express the conviction that the fight against fascism must encompass a struggle to end Jim Crow and achieve economic democracy at home. Indeed, President Franklin Roosevelt's speeches during that period reflect many of the same themes and images. And if you add to these songs the scripts of numbers of Hollywood war movies and radio plays by some of America's leading writers — some of whom were later blacklisted — it becomes clear that popular culture in support of that war was largely the creation of American leftists.

Even 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.

Interestingly, 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 September 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.

In the midst of a controversial and increasingly unpopular war, and with a presidential election under way that will shape the nation’s direction, there is no better way to celebrate America than to listen to Van Zandt’s patriotic anthem. And while doing so, maybe waving a flag and remembering it’s also yours.

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