

policies and institutions that create war. These two words are inextricably bound to the actions of the state, whether we agree with them or not. At a time when the United States has become thoroughly unilateralist, it is disconcerting that many antiwar activists would still focus on appeals to the U.S. government, which has made it perfectly clear that it will not be constrained by the United Nations, much less world opinion. Why would this same government be any more responsive to its own citizens?

As part of this unilateralism, Bush has demanded a regime change in Iraq and is posturing against North Korea. Many activists, in turn, have called for a “regime change at home.” While both the Iraqi and U.S. regimes are impediments to a free and safer world, a change of leadership in these two specific cases will not alter the conditions that give rise to systemic violence in both societies. Nor are these problems exclusive to Iraq and the United States. In dictatorships or nation-states, when the few attempt to govern the many, coercion—either through warfare or subtler methods— is the only recourse to sustain centralized power. Statecraft of any kind is not the answer. We need a reconstruction of society that places power in accountable, directly democratic institutions instead.

To say that “peace is patriotic” ultimately buries demands for genuine freedom for all beneath a misplaced desire for legitimacy. If we want to invoke the liberatory dimensions of U.S. history, however limited by their own times, then let’s look to the New England tradition of town meetings, experiments in worker self-management, the community self-help programs of the Black Panthers, and the movements to contest and redefine notions of sexuality and gender, among others. Let’s forget about appearing patriotic. Rather, let’s insist on the ability of all people and communities to self-determine and control their own destinies in a global society premised on cooperation and mutual aid. As the Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta once proclaimed, “Everything depends on what people are capable of wanting.”

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We hope that this essay will spark a constructive dialogue among antiwar activists, and challenge our allies’ ideas regarding patriotism and social change. In today’s political climate, those of us who are willing to speak out against the rising tide of militarism need each other more than ever. Let’s work together to demand a world where direct democracy, freedom, and diversity prevail.

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## Disentangling the Antiwar Movement from the American Flag

Patriotism in its simplest, clearest, and most indubitable meaning is nothing but an instrument for the attainment of the government’s ambitious and mercenary aims, and a renunciation of human dignity, common sense, and conscience by the governed, and a slavish submission to those who hold power. That is what is really preached wherever patriotism is championed. Patriotism is slavery.

— Leo Tolstoy

Peace is the continuation of war by other means.

— Hannah Arendt



Since September 11, 2001, many antiwar activists in the United States have wrapped their dissent in the American flag. In an increasingly constrictive political climate, they are anxious to find ways to appear more legitimate. For some, carrying the flag celebrates the Bill of Rights, particularly the rights to free speech and public assembly. For others, it recalls foundational events for this country such as the Boston Tea Party and American Revolution that symbolize the struggle against the tyranny of colonial rule. People of conscience raise the stars and stripes to assert that “peace is patriotic,” and that they are the real Americans. The U.S. government, by contrast, claims to be waging war in order to uphold America’s core values, or as Bush puts it, precisely because “we are a peace-loving nation.”

Who will prevail in this contest to define the true patriots?

It is vital to ensure that U.S. opposition is clearly visible alongside the strength and solidarity of antiwar demonstrations around the globe. As activists in the United States, we need to distinguish our views from the actions and aims of “our” government, and build a strong movement. But we can only do that if our arguments against war are in line with our intentions.

The stark fact is that dissenters, no matter how noble, do not get to determine the meaning of patriotism. Although popular conceptions of U.S. history suggest that patriotism is about freedom, democracy, and creating a better world, in reality it has largely been used by the state to thwart the realization of these ideals. Patriotism, in essence, asks citizens to put aside their concerns and disagreements with the government, and to get behind the senti-

ment of “my country, right or wrong.”

Historically, patriotism was used in the 1920s to back up efforts to deport “undesirables” during the Red scare. Later, during the time of the Second World War, it justified interning Japanese Americans in camps on U.S. soil. In the 1950s, patriotism was used to repress the Left through such vehicles as the House Un-American Activities Committee, and during the Vietnam War period, to silence resistance through slogans such as “love it or leave it.” Patriotism has been employed to rationalize military excursions and state-sponsored violence, from the invasion of Grenada and Panama to illegally arming the Nicaraguan Contras.

Patriotism, in the past and present, is predominantly defined by those in power to bolster support for their agendas. Consider the ubiquity of American flags since 9-11. Immediately after the tragedy, millions of Americans expressed their sadness and solidarity with the families of the deceased in a variety of ways, from displaying wreaths and firefighters’ helmets to lighting candles. Shortly thereafter, Bush called for a day of prayer and for Americans to fly their country’s flag. While some had turned to the flag prior to Bush’s urging, the change was unmistakable after his plea. Alternate expressions of mourning persisted, yet the American flag became the main indication of one’s grief. It was soon difficult to find a house, automobile, or public space unadorned with the stars and stripes.

As the Bush administration rapidly manipulated grief into retribution, the meaning of this powerful symbol also shifted. Today, the same flags flown after September 11 stand for much more than sorrow. The flag has largely become representative of unquestioning allegiance to national security, a faith in government, and a willingness to strike at unknown enemies. This process of redefining patriotism facilitates the state’s ability to exercise power for its own ends.

For more than a year, the Bush administration has been crafting a spurious dichotomy between patriotism and terrorism. Having initiated an unending and ill-defined “war against terror,” the U.S. government claims free license to do whatever it wishes. Anything that promotes “security” for America—such as eroding civil liberties, dramatically increasing the military budget, or insisting on a war on Iraq—is now seen as justifiable.

In the name of patriotism, the Bush administration devised the overtly racist policy of registering citizens whose national heritage is Middle Eastern. The aptly named USA PATRIOT Act limits movement across borders, forces registration of foreign-born citizens, vastly expands investigative powers even where no crime is alleged, and labels dissenters as potential “terrorists.” To question or oppose these policies is deemed unpatriotic, and disagreement is consequently silenced. What politician, after all, would have willingly chosen to vote against a piece of legislation with this acronym and risk being seen as un-American? And now, a second PATRIOT Act is in the works to further undo the freedoms that the government is purportedly marshaling its troops to protect.

Not only does the attempt to articulate dissent in the language of



patriotism take on meanings that are out of our control, it also rings of parochialism in an increasingly interdependent and global world. Such language establishes a false distinction between “us” and “them.” To return to September 11, victims from the twin towers included citizens of nearly every country. Almost more than any single event in recent memory, it should have been understood as a global trauma, binding numerous peoples and cultures in a shared grief. Yet once the American flags went up in large numbers, 9-11 became re-scripted as a national tragedy by those in power. “Good” America was now compelled to fight a shadowy “evil,” thus laying the groundwork for future conflict and wars.

If appeals to patriotism are actually counter to the aims of even the most modest antiwar position, the other half of the equation in “peace is patriotic” proves to be just as inadequate. To merely object to a war against Iraq suggests that there has been peace all along, even though the United States and Britain have been bombing Iraq repeatedly since the 1991 Gulf War. More than a million Iraqi children have already died at the hands of the U.S.-driven UN economic embargo against Iraq, according to the World Health Organization. Such “peacetime” practices demand a movement concerned with more than just preventing a U.S. invasion and subsequent military occupation. As antiwar demonstrators in Munich recently declared, “Your war kills off what your peace leaves standing.”

The Bush administration speaks of peace too, but as the ultimate justification for war, much in the same way that it contemplates using nuclear weapons in Iraq to free the world from the dangers of weapons of mass destruction. Whether in the form of overt military action or less direct interventions, U.S. foreign policy practices a peace that is really war, but by other methods. The goal today appears to be nothing less than increasing America’s dominance on a global scale in order for a tiny elite to have disproportionate political and economic influence.

In the end, the attempt to mainstream dissent through claims of “patriotism” or “peace” unwittingly ties our nascent antiwar movement to the