

# Making Peace Patriotic



Anti-war perspectives from the early republic

President Bush and his courtiers like to remind us that we are “at war,” a prepositional phrase that casts a pall over the entire culture. With whom or what are we at war, you ask? Not Al Qaeda, or the assorted fanatics it inspired by killing three thousand people on 9/11, or even the shadowy insurgents of Iraq or Afghanistan. Rather, we are at war with an abstraction: “terror.” Plainly, such a war has no discernible end point; clearly, this is the intention. War not only serves the geopolitical designs of our right-wing rulers but also vindicates their absolutist cosmology, in which force and “faith” obviate reason, circumstance, and the decent opinion of others. However much they boast and hector and call for blood, they do not want to win so much as they want to remain “at war.” The best evidence of this is how impatiently they prosecuted a war of grim necessity (Afghanistan) in order to wage one of predatory choice (Iraq).

In order to contest this Orwellian strategy and the carnage that ensues,

opponents of war in general and the Iraq disaster in particular need to ground their arguments in a coherent rationale of civic virtue. It is not enough to simply say, “peace is patriotic,” because the terms of patriotism have been contaminated by the cynical dichotomies of us versus them, good versus evil, freedom versus terror. The meanings of public duty and good citizenship must be rebuilt to reflect the saner voices within and among us, or else the present bloodletting will merge seamlessly into some other war for some other reason. I write *rebuilt* because those antiwar principles once represented a potent voice in American civic life. Like the wisdom of such organizations as Veterans for Peace, the arguments of the fifty-odd “Peace Societies” of the 1810s and 1820s offer a valuable perspective that might enable a less homicidal future.

It is always easy to dismiss peace writers as hapless dreamers, holed up in pleasant bubbles of their own making. True to script, the “friends of peace” of the early nineteenth century were often New England Unitarians who presumed, evidence notwithstanding, that white Christians were uniquely “civilized” and so destined to uplift the heathen masses of the earth. And yet they also included veterans of the recent Anglo-American wars and residents of Ohio, North Carolina, New York, and, for that matter, London. Cosmopolitan in spirit if not in lifestyle, they had inherited the eighteenth-century principle of “universal benevolence,” or goodwill to all nations. That global perspective fell out of favor during the French Revolution, when conservatives such as Edmund Burke applauded “national prejudices” as positive and natural. But after the prodigious bloodshed of the Napoleonic era, peace writers revived the humanistic ideal and sought to apply it in a more practical and wizened way. In short, they were idealists, not dreamers.



illustration by John McCoy

Indeed, their most important insight was that “society”—shorthand for all the hopes of the Enlightenment—could also bring out the worst in people. The mysterious energy that held strangers together, these early peace activists believed, sometimes unlocked human goodness and sometimes suffocated an innate moral sense. The “war spirit,” for example, began with a small number of

politicians and generals who excelled at scaring ordinary people. After devising an obtuse reason for going to war with one nation or another, they salted the party line with tribal hatreds and primal urges. Once it spread to enough newspapers, broadsides, and speeches, the war spirit inevitably appealed to a variety of feelings and motives in the society, *some of which were virtuous*. Neighbors embraced neighbors; storekeepers reduced their prices; consumers forswore luxuries. No one could take issue with the anomalous harmony nor remember what had occasioned it. War thus became its own justification.

In contrast to later theories about the grim rationality of warfare ("politics by other means"), these thinkers argued that it actually settled no fundamental conflicts. "[After] all the wars of the last half century . . . what is the recompense?" asked the Reverend Thomas Stone, a pacifist from Maine. "A Bourbon to France. A Holy Alliance to the continent of Europe." And, for that matter, a commercial treaty between Britain and the United States that much resembled the arrangements in place before the War of 1812. Nothing had changed, aside from the twisted pride the nation now took in the traumas it had endured and inflicted. In other words, aside from those rare cases when an innocent country was attacked, the hollow claims about war as a "national necessity" ultimately boiled down to the narrow interests of a few elites or to the inherently irrational notion of "national honor." War was a lot like dueling, Stone observed, although duelists at least did their own killing and dying.

Peace writers lamented the bloody insanity of war because they were certain that they could stop it, and their confidence, no less than their grief, ultimately followed an interpretation of world politics. "There is a decided tendency towards what are called liberal institutions," noted John Ware, a Boston physician and peace writer, in 1824. Unlike contemporary scholars, Ware had no trouble defining "liberal." Any government worthy of that label was "founded upon a regard to the rights and happiness of mankind at large, and not of a privileged few." Liberal states and institutions did not exclude, persecute, or divide their people, nor lift one class, order, or race over any other. By their very nature, they looked after their own citizens. But they also imbued their policies and proclamations with universal benevolence, thus robbing the war spirit of its xenophobic marrow.

In an early version of a mantra I first heard in grade school, the peace writers of the early republic thus divined that true democracies would never fight each other. "Till it can be proved that the happiness and prosperity of the mass of mankind, are promoted by the miseries and calamities of war," Ware reasoned, "we must believe that popular institutions will always be pacific." War did not grow organically from the social ferment of the civilized age but lingered from the barbaric times when hooded elites ruled supreme. Dethrone the warmongering tyrants and demagogues, and people would realize their common interests and cease murdering each other. Establish liberal and representative polities, and people would intuitively turn to the arts of peace.

It is heartbreaking to read these heady predictions and impossible to count all

the ways that our own history has deviated from them. Suffice it to say, the liberal conception of citizenship lost out to racist populism and a curious faith in the just deserts of the "free market." Suffice it to say, as we Americans acquired a greater share of the world's wealth and power, we internalized the bizarre claim, loosely derived from covenantal theology, that God blesses our nation with exclusive fervor. Especially since the mid-twentieth century, a massive military establishment centered at the Pentagon has also insured a steady supply of influential people who need to have wars. The baroque lies they invent to justify those conflicts ensnare us in murderous tautologies of kill or be killed, freedom or slavery, "national honor" or "national disgrace."

What is the underlying logic of such bellicose nationalism? What assumptions does it rely upon and then force on us? Oddly enough, the recent crisis on the Korean peninsula may throw some light on the darkness. After detonating a small nuclear device, the news apparatus of the Stalinist regime beamed the happy news to the masses. Great news! What an achievement! The official language from Pyongyang stressed the glory that this semi-dud of an underground explosion had showered on everyone. Apparently, the North Korean state would have its starving people believe that its destructive power not only defends them but also reflects well on them—or even *is* them. North Koreans are supposed to identify with the state, to imagine their paltry selves in its spectacular image.

Obviously, America is rich and North Korea poor. Clearly, our leaders do not rule with such naked force. Happily, their adolescent incompetence drew a popular rebuke this past November. But what is the message of right-wing blowhards if not the equivalence of "ordinary" people (white, male, and angry) and the military might of the United States? What does "patriotism" mean to them but the worship of that might as a register of their own virility? The unifying theme of the contemporary right is not the approach of the Rapture or the return of the Confederacy but the manifest destiny of the United States to bestride the world and deal violently with those in the way. This message appeals to brittle egos and authoritarian personalities; it enables people to pretend that they are as fearsome as the war machine they help pay for. Bumper stickers say it best and worst: "First Baghdad, then Paris." "Kill 'em All, and Let Allah Sort them Out." One of the ironies of this pathology, of course, is that it also counsels hatred of "the government," particularly when said government condescends to assist Americans on the losing ends of luck or prejudice or the holy market.

An alternative rationale for patriotism might run like this: we have duties to *all* our fellow citizens, with whom we share resources, laws, and public space. Our loyalties should therefore extend to other people, not to the government. And while our goodwill naturally concentrates inside the borders of the nation state, just as it does within our own households, it must not exist in tension with the people of the wider world. "He loves his country," one early peace writer wrote of the ideal person, "but he cannot narrow his mind to

love his country alone. He loves the world; he loves the universe." Alongside your everyday ties and loyalties, he told his audience, you must cultivate "the deep and operative feeling" that "you are not citizens of America more than you are citizens of the world." The true patriot believes and behaves like a practical humanitarian, not an embittered partisan.

Under the moral sway of this kind of patriotism, no one would dare repeat, "support the troops," and then abide the pitiless administration that cuts their health and disability benefits. Nor would they use Veterans' Day or Memorial Day as an opportunity for belligerent rhetoric and star-spangled photo ops. These occasions would instead become a shared moment of quiet contemplation, a time to remember not only the 141,000 Americans now being shot at in Iraq but also the hundreds of thousands of civilians from that country who have died so that neoconservative fantasies might live. Smug demagogues who presently attract good television ratings by swearing cultural "war" on whole swaths of the American population would then be exposed as deficient citizens who need to relearn their obligations.

This kind of patriotism is neither quixotic nor utopian. It neither requires nor offers a fundamental shift in the power arrangements of our society. What it does require is a principled form of leadership and citizenship that takes language and ideas seriously. And what it does offer is a way to knit specific platforms—universal health care, anti-discrimination measures, due attention to humanitarian disasters—into a consistent logic and sensibility. Just as the hegemonic aspirations of right-wing politicians enable and endorse a swaggering hostility to foreigners and a ready pool of the war spirit, enlightened patriotism might promote a general ethos of cooperation and moderation in international affairs.

Needless to say, encouraging such patriotism would only mark the beginning of a much more difficult struggle for a more just and peaceful world. But if there is nothing else to be learned from Bush's catastrophic reign, it is the power of political leadership to frame and shape the moral parameters of the culture. Our current leaders project a violent, prideful image (their own military records notwithstanding) and insist that we ignore our many problems and focus instead on our ability to blow things up and kill people. Change that leadership, and the terms of being an American can change, too. Change that leadership, and peace can reassert itself as the true and greatest purpose, the last, full measure of democracy itself.

## Further Reading:

The primary sources consulted for this essay include Thomas T. Stone, *Sermons on War* (Boston, 1829) and John Ware, *Address Delivered Before the Massachusetts Peace Society, at their Ninth Anniversary* (Boston, 1825). On "universal benevolence," see Evan Radcliffe, "Revolutionary Writing, Moral Philosophy, and Universal Benevolence in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of the History of*

*Ideas*, 54 (April 1993): 221-40.

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