

Some Thoughts on “Patriotism” Written on July 4

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Most important thought: I’m sick and tired of this thing called “patriotism”.

The Japanese pilots who bombed Pearl Harbor were being patriotic. The German people who supported Hitler and his conquests were being patriotic, fighting for the Fatherland. All the Latin American military dictators who overthrew democratically-elected governments and routinely tortured people were being patriotic — saving their beloved country from “communism”.

General Augusto Pinochet of Chile, mass murderer and torturer: “I would like to be remembered as a man who served his country.” 1

P.W. Botha, former president of apartheid South Africa: “I am not going to repent. I am not going to ask for favours. What I did, I did for my country.” 2

Pol Pot, mass murderer of Cambodia: “I want you to know that everything I did, I did for my country.” 3

Tony Blair, former British prime minister, defending his role in the murder of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis: “I did what I thought was right for our country.” 4

At the end of World War II, the United States gave moral lectures to their German prisoners and to the German people on the inadmissibility of pleading that their participation in the holocaust was in obedience to their legitimate government. To prove to them how legally and morally inadmissible this defense was, the World War II allies hanged the leading examples of such patriotic loyalty.

I was once asked after a talk: “Do you love America?” I answered: “No”. After pausing for a few seconds to let that sink in amidst several nervous giggles in the audience, I continued with: “I don’t love any country. I’m a citizen of the world. I love certain principles, like human rights, civil liberties, democracy, an economy which puts people before profits.”

I don’t make much of a distinction between patriotism and nationalism. Some people equate patriotism with allegiance to one’s country and government or the noble principles they supposedly stand for, while defining nationalism as sentiments of ethno-national superiority. However defined, in practice the psychological and behavioral manifestations of nationalism and patriotism are not easily distinguishable, indeed feeding upon each other.

Howard Zinn called nationalism “a set of beliefs taught to each generation in which the Motherland or the Fatherland is an object of veneration and becomes a burning cause for which one becomes willing to kill the children of other Motherlands or Fatherlands. ... Patriotism is used to create the illusion of a common interest that everybody in the country

has.” 5

Strong feelings of patriotism lie near the surface in the great majority of Americans. They’re buried deeper in the more “liberal” and “sophisticated”, but are almost always reachable, and ignitable.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the mid-19th century French historian, commented about his long stay in the United States: “It is impossible to conceive a more troublesome or more garrulous patriotism; it wearies even those who are disposed to respect it.” 6

George Bush Sr., pardoning former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and five others in connection with the Iran-Contra arms-for-hostages scandal, said: “First, the common denominator of their motivation — whether their actions were right or wrong — was patriotism.” 7

What a primitive underbelly there is to this rational society. The US is the most patriotic, as well as the most religious, country of the so-called developed world. The entire American patriotism thing may be best understood as the biggest case of mass hysteria in history, whereby the crowd adores its own power as troopers of the world’s only superpower, a substitute for the lack of power in the rest of their lives. Patriotism, like religion, meets people’s need for something greater to which their individual lives can be anchored.

So this July 4, my dear fellow Americans, some of you will raise your fists and yell: “U! S! A! ... U! S! A!”. And you’ll parade with your flags and your images of the Statue of Liberty. But do you know that the sculptor copied his mother’s face for the statue, a domineering and intolerant woman who had forbidden another child to marry a Jew?

“Patriotism,” Dr. Samuel Johnson famously said, “is the last refuge of a scoundrel.” American writer Ambrose Bierce begged to differ — It is, he said, the first.

“Patriotism is the conviction that this country is superior to all other countries because you were born in it.” — George Bernard Shaw

“Actions are held to be good or bad, not on their own merits but according to who does them, and there is almost no kind of outrage — torture, the use of hostages, forced labour, mass deportations, imprisonment without trial, forgery, assassination, the bombing of civilians — which does not change its moral colour when it is committed by ‘our’ side. ... The nationalist not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them.” — George Orwell 8

“Pledges of allegiance are marks of totalitarian states, not democracies,” says David Kertzer, a Brown University anthropologist who specializes in political rituals. “I can’t think of a single democracy except the United States that has a pledge of allegiance.” 9 Or, he might have added, that insists that its politicians display their patriotism by wearing a flag pin. Hitler criticized German Jews and Communists for their internationalism and lack of national patriotism, demanding that “true patriots” publicly vow and display their allegiance to the fatherland. In reaction to this, postwar Germany has made a conscious and strong effort to minimize public displays of patriotism.

Oddly enough, the American Pledge of Allegiance was written by Francis Bellamy, a founding member, in 1889, of the Society of Christian Socialists, a group of Protestant ministers who asserted that “the teachings of Jesus Christ lead directly to some form or

forms of socialism.” Tell that to the next Teaparty ignoramus who angrily accuses President Obama of being a “socialist”.

Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, we could read that there’s “now a high degree of patriotism in the Soviet Union because Moscow acted with impunity in Afghanistan and thus underscored who the real power in that part of the world is.” 10

“Throughout the nineteenth century, and particularly throughout its latter half, there had been a great working up of this nationalism in the world. ... Nationalism was taught in schools, emphasized by newspapers, preached and mocked and sung into men. It became a monstrous cant which darkened all human affairs. Men were brought to feel that they were as improper without a nationality as without their clothes in a crowded assembly. Oriental peoples, who had never heard of nationality before, took to it as they took to the cigarettes and bowler hats of the West.” — H.G. Wells, British writer 11

“The very existence of the state demands that there be some privileged class vitally interested in maintaining that existence. And it is precisely the group interests of that class that are called patriotism.” — Mikhail Bakunin, Russian anarchist 12

“To me, it seems a dreadful indignity to have a soul controlled by geography.” — George Santayana, American educator and philosopher

Another thing Americans have to be thankful for on July 4

The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has a new feature on their [website](#) called “Find Insurance Options”. You just provide certain information about your family size, your age, your employment situation, your financial situation, whether you have certain disabilities or diseases, whether you now have Medicare or some other health insurance, or how long you have not had health insurance, whether you have been denied insurance, whether you are someone’s dependent, a veteran? an American Indian? an Alaskan Native? etc., etc., etc. ... and the site gives you suggestions as to where and how you might find health insurance that might suit your particular needs. The head of HHS, Kathleen Sebelius, tells us “This is an incredibly impressive consumer tool,” adding that the site is capable of providing tailored responses to about 3 billion [sic] individual scenarios. “This information can give folks choices that they just didn’t have any idea they had available to them.” 13

Isn’t that remarkable? Where else but in America could one have such choice? Certainly not in Communist Cuba. There it’s only one scenario, one size fits all — you’re sick, you go to a doctor or to a hospital, and you get taken care of to the best of their abilities; no charge; doesn’t matter what your medical problem is, doesn’t matter what your financial situation is, doesn’t matter what your employment situation is, there’s no charge. No one has health insurance. No one needs health insurance. Isn’t that boring? Communist regimentation!

Separation of oil and state?

On May 19, in a congressional hearing, Rep. Jason Altmire (D-Pa.) asked BP America President Lamar McKay: “Is there any technology that exists that you know of that could have prevented this from happening?”

“I don’t know of a piece of technology that could have prevented it,” replied McKay. 14

Given the extremely grave consequences of a deepwater oil-drilling accident that's a pretty good argument that such operations are too risky and dangerous to be permitted, is it not?

Moreover, if it could have been prevented if BP had not been so negligent and reckless to save money, can we count on all oil companies in the future to never put profits before safety? I think not. And if an accident happens can we count on the company being able to rectify the damage quickly and efficiently? Apparently not.

So, will those who serve corporate America learn a lesson from the BP Gulf of Mexico disaster? Well, consider the following: Oil companies – even as you read this — are busy making plans for further Gulf drilling; in June the Mineral Management Service of the US Interior Department was continuing to issue waivers to these companies which exempt them from submitting a detailed analysis of the environmental impact of their plans, not at the moment for drilling new wells but to modify their existing projects in the Gulf; one waiver was to a British company called BP. 15... Here's the District Manager for Louisiana of the Mineral Management Service: "Obviously, we're all oil industry. Almost all of our inspectors have worked for oil companies and on these same [oil drilling] platforms." 16... A financial analyst at the preeminent bank J.P. Morgan Chase announced some good news for us — the US Gross Domestic Product could gain slightly from all the expenditures for cleaning up the mess, adding that "the magnitude of these setbacks looks dwarfed by the scale of the US macroeconomy". 17... And three leading congressional Republicans recently referred to the spill as a "natural" disaster. 18

If I were the president I would in fact prohibit all underwater drilling for oil, permanently. President Obama announced a six-month prohibition and has run into a brick wall of oil companies, politicians, and the courts. He'll cave in, as usual, but I wouldn't. How would I make up for the loss of this oil? Not by importing more oil, but sharply reducing our usage. Here are two suggestions to begin with:

The US Department of Defense is not only the leading consumer of oil in the United States, it is the leading oil consumer in the entire world. A 2007 report by a defense contractor posits that the Pentagon in its foreign wars and worldwide military support operations (such as maintaining thousands of bases at home and abroad) might consume as much as 340,000 barrels (14 million gallons) every day, a quantity greater than the total national consumption of Sweden or Switzerland. 19 This is taken from an article with the title: "How Wars of the Future May Be Fought Just to Run the Machines That Fight Them". If the American defense industry is added in, the military-industrial complex would be 12th in the world in oil consumption, more than India.

Accordingly, as president, I would take the admittedly controversial step of abolishing the United States military. The total savings, including the mammoth reduction in oil consumption, would be more than a trillion dollars a year.

Class assignment:

1. Try and think of the things that would improve the quality of life in American society, things that money could bring about, that would not be covered by a trillion dollars.
2. If you believe that having no military would open the United States to foreign invasion, state:

- A. who would invade;
 - B. why they would do so;
 - C. how many soldiers they would need to occupy a nation of more than 300 million people.
3. List the dozen wars the United States has been involved in since the 1980s and specify which of them you are glad and proud of.
 4. On October 28, 2002, five men were murdered by a mob in India because they had killed a (sacred) cow. 20 On the very same day the United States was actively engaged in preparing to invade Iraq and kill thousands of people for control of their oil. Discuss which society was more insane.

Second suggestion to reduce oil usage: Public transportation would be nationalized so as to reduce prices to levels very easily affordable for virtually the entire population, resulting in a huge reduction of private automobile and gasoline usage. This public transportation system would not be required to show a profit. Like the military now.

The Cold War is Over. Long Live the Cold War

I recently attended a showing of Oliver Stone's new documentary film, "South of the Border", which concerns seven present-day government leaders of Latin America -- in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, Paraguay, Cuba and Brazil — who are not in love with US foreign policy. After the film there was a discussion panel in the theatre, consisting of Stone, the two writers of the film (Tariq Ali and Mark Weisbrot) and Cynthia Arnson, Director of the Latin American Program of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, in Washington; the discussion was moderated by Neal Conan of National Public Radio.

It perhaps was not meant to be a "debate", but it quickly became that, with Arnson leading the "anti-communist" faction, supported somewhat by Conan's questions and more vociferously by a segment of the audience which took sides loudly via applause and cries of approval or displeasure. Twenty years post-Cold War, anti-communism still runs deep in the American soul and psyche. Candid criticism of US foreign policy and/or capitalism is sufficient to consign a foreign government or leader to the "communist" camp whether or not that term is specifically used.

In the late 1980s, as Mikhail Gorbachev was steering the Soviet Union away from its rivalry with the West in a bid for a "new thinking" foreign policy, Georgiy Arbatov, director of the Soviet's Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies, declared to the United States: "We will do the most horrible thing to you; we will leave you without an enemy." 21

The American military-industrial-intelligence complex understands the need for enemies only too well, even painfully. Here is U.S. Col. Dennis Long, speaking in 1992, shortly after the end of the Cold War, when he was director of "total armor force readiness" at Fort Knox, Kentucky:

For 50 years, we equipped our football team, practiced five days a week and never played a game. We had a clear enemy with demonstrable qualities, and we had scouted them out. [Now] we will have to practice day in and day out without knowing anything about the other team. We won't have his playbook, we won't know where the stadium is, or how many guys he will have on the

field. That is very distressing to the military establishment, especially when you are trying to justify the existence of your organization and your systems.

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Arbatov was right about the United States fearing a world without an enemy, but wrong about the United States actually being left without one. In addition to all the enemies produced in the Middle East by military interventions and the War on Terror, the US has had a continuous supply of “communists” challenging Washington’s militant hegemony – from Yugoslavia, Cuba and Haiti to the present large crop in Latin America. We should realize that the Cold War was essentially not a struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. It was more a struggle between the United States and the Third World. The US sought to dominate the Third World and intervened in many countries even when the Soviets were not playing any significant role at all in the political tumult in those places, albeit Washington propaganda routinely yelled “communist”. There existed a strong push in the United States to stand tall against communism, particularly communism of the invisible variety, since that was the most dangerous kind.

In actuality, Bolshevism and Western liberalism were united in their opposition to popular revolution. Russia was a country with a revolutionary past, not a revolutionary present; and the same could be said about the United States.

In the post-film discussion, Stone replied to a charge of the film being biased by stating that the US media is generally so slanted against the governments in question that his film is an attempt to strike a needed balance. Indeed, it must be asked: How many of the 1400 American daily newspapers or the numerous television stations even occasionally report on Washington’s continually ongoing attempts to subvert the governments in question or present the programs and policies of their leaders in a positive light? Particularly Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and Evo Morales of Bolivia, the two main focuses of the film; not forgetting of course that American journalists accuse Cuba of violating human rights first thing upon their awakening each morning.

While we no longer hear about the “international communist conspiracy”, American foreign policy remains profoundly unchanged. It turns out that whatever Washington officials and diplomats at the time thought they were doing, the Cold War revisionists have been vindicated; it was not about containing something called “communism”; it was about American supremacy, expansion and economic interests.

Choosing a warlord

The media have been rather preoccupied by the replacement of General Stanley McChrystal by General David Petraeus in Afghanistan; it’s been like gossip-column material, or a sporting event, or the Oscars; “Petraeus for president” some clamor, lots of letters to the editor, all over the Internet. Some journalists have discussed which general would be better for the war effort. To me, this is tantamount to asking “Which Doctor Strangelove do you prefer to be in charge of our international psychotic mass murdering?” Hmm ... let’s see ... hmm ... ah, here’s the answer: Who gives a fuck?

Notes

1. *Sunday Telegraph* (London), July 18, 1999

2. *The Independent* (London), November 22, 1995
3. *Far Eastern Economic Review* (Hong Kong), October 30, 1997, article by Nate Thayer, pages 15 and 20
4. *Washington Post*, May 11, 2007, p.14
5. "Passionate Declarations" (2003), p.40; ... *Z Magazine*, May 2006, interview by David Barsamian
6. "Democracy in America" (1840), chapter 16
7. *New York Times*, December 25, 1992
8. "Notes on Nationalism", p.83, 84, in "Such, Such Were the Joys" (1945)
9. Alan Colmes, "Red, White and Liberal" (2003), p.30
10. *San Francisco Examiner*, January 20, 1980, quoting a "top Soviet diplomat"
11. "The Outline of History" (1920), vol. II, chapter XXXVII, p.782
12. "Letters on Patriotism", 1869
13. *Washington Post*, July 1, 2010
14. *Washington Post*, June 17, 2010
15. *McClatchy-Tribune News Service*, June 20, 2010
16. *Washington Post*, May 27, 2010
17. *Wall Street Journal*, June 15, 2010
18. *Washington Post*, June 18, 2010
19. Michael Klare, "[The Pentagon v. Peak Oil](#)", *Tom Dispatch*, June 14, 2007
20. *Washington Post*, October 29, 2002, p.18
21. "Russia Now", a supplement to the *Washington Post*, Oct. 28, 2009, p.H4
22. *New York Times*, February 3, 1992, p.8

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