

Join or Die:
The Contradiction of American Patriotism

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The “Losers:” Dissent and Legacy of Defeat in American Politics

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Ever since the first settlers came to the New World, the narrative of American Patriotism started making its way into common culture. In 1630, John Winthrop led a pilgrimage of people from England and began New England's second major colony at Massachusetts Bay. He famously preached that these new settlements "shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us,"¹ thus introducing the idea that the United States is an exceptional nation and also the relationship between this sovereign nation and a sovereign God. While Winthrop could not have predicted the trajectory of American history, he surely set an example of what he believed the Puritan nation would resemble. A century later, his dream would begin to take shape. The common narrative of the American Revolution tells of honorable battles fought between *Patriots* and *Loyalists*. Ironically, however, these titles are synonyms, and they beg the question—patriotic to whom? Loyal to whom? Coincidentally, while the patriots were calling themselves "Americans," they were fighting to earn that title. But why were they fighting? What was so great about being an *American*? Then fast forward another century, and the great nation is at war again, arguably battling over what it means to be an *American*. This war was different for many reasons, but a huge distinction is that while it similarly started with a rebellion, it never turned into a revolution. The Confederates were sinners where the Patriots were saints. The narrative of patriotism in the United States combines exaggerated history with the teachings of Christianity to create a sense of nationalism which in turn is based more in mystic nostalgia rather than actual valor. American idealism is older than the nation itself, but at the point when colonists decided they were no longer British, they decided they were in fact God's favored nation: America.

¹ John Winthrop, "John Winthrop's City upon a Hill, 1630," Mtholyoke.edu, (accessed December 7, 2016).

According to men like John Winthrop, God has always had a hand in the American existence. Had Winthrop been alive for the Revolution, it is highly probable that he would have pledged his allegiance to the Patriots and fought what became known among the ranks as a kind of spiritual battle. On principle, the Revolution was purely political. British-imposed taxes were obscene, American colonists no longer needed to be an extension of the British Empire, and there were enough of them that they should have been well represented in the government. Yet, on a personal level, there was a lot of belief that the war had clear religious undertones. The idea of war in and of itself requires that one side be the antagonist and the other side the protagonist. Of course, depending on which perspective one takes, the roles will be reversed. The Revolution was no different and from the perspective of the American Patriot, the British Soldier was sent from hell itself, or at least the narratives used allude to this idea. On this topic, Charles Royster writes,

“One source of the revolutionaries’ confidence lay in their obedience to God. A religious vocabulary voiced many of the calls to serve in the Continental Army and to promote its cause. A belief in God’s design for the future of America and in His governance over the life of the individual influenced most Americans’ understanding of their activities. Explanations of conduct that today might use then depended on religious teachings for clarity and conviction.”²

² Charles Royster. *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 13.

Royster explains that the Revolutionaries justified their otherwise sinful actions by claiming God was on their side. Knowing full well the odds were against them, the Patriots trusted their faith. Royster writes, “The revolutionaries confidently expected victory—that is, concessions from Britain—even when they spoke of a long war, and they found volunteers who they believed would achieve this unquestionable, inevitable mark of God’s favor.”³

Additionally, the American soldiers believed they were fighting the battle their fathers wanted them to fight. Catherine Albanese writes about this sensation in her work on civil religion. She argues that for the Patriots, gaining freedom from the British equated to obeying God’s commands. Albanese quotes a resolve from the Continental Congress saying,

“It is an indispensable duty which we owe to God, our country, ourselves, and posterity, by all lawful ways and means in our power to maintain, defend and preserve those civil and religious rights and liberties, for which many of our fathers fought, bled, and died, and to hand them down entire to future generations.”⁴

The Congress resolve reflected feelings common throughout the colonies that going to war was less a choice they made and more a battle defending their spirits. The problem with this narrative is its centralization of God. Should God exist, and he be the God of Israel, why should the Americans believe God was on their side? Along with the idea of American exceptionalism in

³ Royster, 61.

⁴ Catherine L. Albanese. *Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), 25.

this case came the idea of American martyrdom. If the war happened according to this narrative, they were the victims through and through.

While it is clear British Colonialism did take advantage of underdeveloped lands, on the macro level, the Americans were just as guilty of the same crimes. They fought for freedom and independence while holding slaves and oppressing their women. Yet, for the sake of morale and identity, Americans branded themselves as victims and rose from the ashes as glorious martyrs. Cynthia Koch argues for the concept of American martyrdom in her essay, *Teaching Patriotism*. She writes,

“All the now-familiar elements of the popular history of the American Revolution are represented in this schoolbook lesson. Charges were hurled of political oppression and cultural dissonance as British policy, carried out in ‘gilded palaces,’ was characterized as ‘slavery’ in ‘gaudy dress.’ A virtuous and humble America became a ‘land of liberty,’ benevolently governed in the name of the ‘Almighty Being.’ Above all, American martyrdom became a virtue in the national saga as colonists, although ‘blest with liberty,’ endured economic and physical isolation in their ‘lonely cottage.’ Ultimately, America’s pain gave birth to a millennial vision linking America’s national destiny and world freedom: ‘May our land be a land of liberty, the seat of virtue, the asylum of the oppressed, a name and a praise in the whole earth, until the last shock of time shall bury the empires of the world in undistinguishable ruin!’”⁵

⁵ Cynthia M. Koch, "Teaching Patriotism: Private Virtue for the Public Good in the Early Republic," in *Bonds of Affection: Americans Define Their Patriotism* ed. John Bodnar (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 41.

The narrative of the war is arguably inevitable. The leaders of the Revolution were committing treason, and trying to convince a whole nation of people to commit treason with them. They had to use every angle they could, and really demonize the British. However, it is not as easily argued that they needed to bring God into the picture. It is ironic that they bring God into the picture considering they would later claim the States as free from religious persecution. Granted, most people at the time in America and Britain were Christian, it is just as oppressive to turn a man's God against him as it is to outlaw the worship of his God. Regardless, the Americans beat the odds, win the war and give birth to a new independent nation.

After the war, historians had an important story to tell. Not only was their job to commemorate the facts of the war, but they also were charged with the duty of memorializing the country's foundation. When the war ended, the nation had been at least temporarily convinced of its own strength. But as morale from the victory faded, the next critical step was defining the country as an independent entity. Koch elaborates on the ideas swirling around the topic of national identity and collective history in the early United States. She quotes Noah Webster saying:

“Our constitutions of civil government are not yet firmly established; our national character is not yet formed; and it is an object of vast magnitude that systems of education should be adopted and pursued which may not only diffuse a knowledge of the sciences but may implant in the minds of the American youth

the principles of virtue and liberty and inspire them with just and liberal ideas of government and with an inviolable attachment to their own country.”⁶

Koch through Webster reiterates the idea of American virtue. Along with defining the new nation and government came the charge of defining that nation’s moral code. The Americans knew they did not want a monarchy, they wanted democracy. The foundation of their independence was simply the idea that all men are created equal. Naturally, if all men are equal, they should hold the same values, and thus virtue is conjured. Koch writes,

“Virtue was most important among the moral concepts the republican educators sought to instil, and it carried highly specialized meaning in this period...Without virtue...even the most elegantly crafted republican government was doomed to failure.”⁷

Koch’s analysis presents a contradiction. The Americans wanted to be this morally upright and righteous nation, but they were still actively committing the same crimes over which they fought the British. They called themselves slaves while they were still slaveholders. They founded their country, taught their children, and created their government on moral codes to which they themselves did not abide.

⁶Koch, “Teaching Patriotism,” 21.

⁷ Koch, 23.

Yet, the nation continued moving forward. Though the progress was not a straight upward trajectory, the United States prevailed as a united nation until the years leading up to the Civil War. Though it is clear there were patriotic sentiments that arose out of the Revolution, the question remains as to whether or not they would last. Cynthia O’Leary even goes so far as to argue that before the Civil War, there was no national patriotism. “Controversies over the appropriate representation of patriotism were not new, but before the Civil War local and regional variations dominated political culture.”⁸ The debate over whether or not patriotism existed before the Civil War depends on how patriotism is defined, but clearly there was some form of nationalism that developed in order for the country to gain her independence. Regardless, the idea of nationalism was faced with a huge dilemma when entering the Civil War. O’Leary highlights the issue America faced, writing:

“Never neutral, nationalism always creates, reflects, and reproduces structures of cultural power. Like most nation-states, the United States did not develop coherently or homogeneously. Instead, the drive to build the nation reveals paradoxical processes of unifying and dividing, consolidating and fracturing, remembrance and amnesia.”

She goes on to quote Homi Bhabha saying,

⁸ Cecilia Elizabeth O’Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 10.

“a nation’s existence is also dependent on ‘a strange forgetting of the history of the nation’s past: the violence involved in establishing the nation’s writ. It is this forgetting—a minus in the origin—that constitutes the *beginning* of the nation’s narrative.’”⁹

O’Leary is subtly describing the mystification of American history that started the moment Christopher Columbus “discovered” the New World. The problem with building a nation and a culture on lies, is that when they fall apart, no one gets out unscathed. Thus, the Civil War is born. The war was undeniably fought over the issue of slavery, and that cannot be completely the fault of the Southern states. When the founding fathers wrote the Declaration of Independence, they wrote “All men are created equal.” Yet they knew they did not believe that, or if they did they were not considering black Americans as men. They founded a free and independent nation on principles of captivity and colonialism. In addition to the founders’ contradiction, the Civil War itself was a strange juxtaposition to the Revolution. In the war for Independence, the Revolutionaries were rebels committing crimes, but they happened to be successful. In the Civil War, the Confederates were rebels committing arguably the same crime of treason along with the moral crime of slavery, but they were not as lucky as the Revolutionaries, and therefore it is called the Civil War and not the Confederate Revolution. Joyce Appleby writes,

“Fighting a war for independence has not unified Americans. Rather, it created the problem of nationalism—that imperative to hang together once the practical

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

tasks of fighting a common foe and securing a peace treaty no longer exerted centripetal pressure.”¹⁰

Appleby points out an important criticism of wartime nationalism. It worked incredibly well after the Revolution because there was a common foreign enemy. The problem the Civil War introduced was a domestic enemy, which inevitably divided the nation. Whether or not it can be concluded that nationalism existed before the Civil War, it is undeniable that it grew during the war and thereafter. Unfortunately, it had to manifest in two opposing narratives in accordance with the nature of the war.

While the Patriots of the Revolution were able to use God and religion to their advantage, that idea presented a dilemma for both sides of the Civil War. If God had a hand in the inner workings of American society, whose side would he take during their Civil War? The inherent problem with religious conviction is that it is based on personal faith. Therefore it becomes difficult to claim that one party is more correct than the other if both parties are claiming the same God is commanding two different things. Nationalism in the name of God became increasingly difficult during the Civil War because of that dispute. Religion played a huge role in the Civil War, even more than the Revolution because after Independence, the nation decided that they should all have similar morals in order to form a more perfect union. Being that the Civil War was a moral conflict, interpretation of God’s will had to come into play. In her analysis of the Civil War, Chandra Manning writes,

¹⁰ Joyce Appleby. “Recovering America's Historic Diversity: Beyond Exceptionalism,” *The Journal of American History* 79 (1992): 421.

“The explanations that seemed to fit increasingly had to do with God. Specifically, from the middle of 1863, many troops in both armies saw the war as God’s punishment for ‘our sins,’ though Northerners and Southerners differed in who they meant by ‘our’ and what they meant by ‘sins.’”¹¹

Regardless of who one sided with, it could be agreed upon that the nation on the whole did something wrong. Even the Northerners who most would assume were more correct, were not free from blame, and they admitted that themselves. Manning goes on to explain that the Northerners did not feel blameless. She quotes Robert Winn, an English-born Kentucky Union soldier saying,

“‘The Americans are a sort of chosen people, a people who will ultimately lead the nations in their forward march toward a kind of millennium,’ but toleration of slavery halted American progress. ‘This war was brought about by the agent of the Slave Power’ must ‘in the end emancipate the last slave.’ Until it did, war would continue.”¹²

Through Winn, Manning alludes to the idea that American exceptionalism was still alive even in these dark times. Winn, knowing full well that the country was not looking so great at the moment, is hopeful that America will rise again, but only after slavery is eradicated. The argument between right and wrong fueled the Civil War. It was a moral and political dispute that

¹¹ Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 113.

¹² Manning, 116.

was also inherently religious. Those feelings are ever displayed in the songs of each respective side.

Battle Hymn of the Republic would become a classic patriotic anthem born out of the Civil. Julia Ward Howe penned the poem in 1861 and helped rally Union troops on the battlefield. Howe wrote,

“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; He is trampling out the vintage where grapes of wrath are stored;/ He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword,/ His truth is marching on./ Glory, glory, hallelujah! Glory, glory, hallelujah! /Glory, glory, hallelujah! His truth is marching on.”¹³

Howe’s words were published later in 1863 on the front page of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Though this excerpt seems fairly unbiased, the last verse makes it clear whose side Howe is on,

“In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,/ With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me;/ As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,/ While God is marching on.” In fewer words, Howe comes right out to say, “let us send our men to the battlefield to free the slaves and preserve the union.”

¹³ Julia Ward Howe, "Battle Hymn of the Republic," Civil War Trust, accessed December 7, 2016, civilwartrust.org.

While many Americans recognize the *Battle Hymn*, that is likely due to the Union victory. Had the South been successful, the country's anthem may sound like George Miles under pseudonym, Earnest Halpin's *God Save the South*.

“God save the South, God save the South,/ Her altars and firesides, God save the South!/ Now that the war is nigh, now that we arm to die,/ Chanting our battle cry, "Freedom or death!" / Chanting our battle cry, "Freedom or death!"¹⁴

Halpin's words are much more pleading. While Howe's words seem to celebrate the North and assure justice will be the outcome, Halpin appears to be begging God to deliver the South from the plague of war. Later Halpin compares the Confederates to George Washington saying,

“Rebels before, our fathers of yore./ Rebel's the righteous name Washington bore./ Why, then, be ours the same, the name that he snatched from shame,/ Making it first in fame, foremost in war./ Making it first in fame, foremost in war.”

Halpin begs the same question of what makes the Confederacy different than the Revolutionaries? He proclaims that rebellion is a righteous act. The clash of doctrines raged on throughout the war and beyond. The songs mentioned are only small examples of the dichotomy between malice and morality over which the war was fought. Trying to find a moral high ground

¹⁴ George H. Miles, "God Save the South," Civil War Trust, accessed December 7, 2016, civilwartrust.org.

was never an easy task, and unfortunately for President Lincoln, the divided nation looked to him for direction.

Throughout his presidency, Lincoln fought to defend the sanctity of the *United States*. Yet, even his own agenda was not entirely political as he too believed in the idea of American exceptionalism. Much of Lincoln's iconography came from his ability to speak with unmatched eloquence during one of the most difficult eras for the nation. As the war raged on, Lincoln reminded the people that they were supposed to be setting an example. In one of his greatest speeches, he said,

“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that ‘all men are created equal.’ Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure.”¹⁵

Lincoln was standing on the battleground of the turning point in the war, with the whole world watching him, and he knew that. He alludes to that when he says that this war was a test for the nation and for any nation. He says that our civil war will determine the future of the world, essentially.

¹⁵ Abraham Lincoln, "The Gettysburg Address," Internet Archive, (accessed December 7, 2016).

To support his exceptionalism, Lincoln does refer back to the God that made the nation so perfect. But even Lincoln cannot explain the contradiction of both sides of the war claiming sanctity in their actions. Two years after Gettysburg at his second Inauguration, Lincoln says, “Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other.”¹⁶ He points out the confusion he feels himself as to what has transpired during the war. Though the war was nearly over at this point in time, Lincoln still seemed as perplexed as anyone as to how two regions can claim the same God is commanding two completely contradictory actions. As the war ended, the reunited nation entered a period nearly as calamitous as the war itself. With both the ideas and the physical effects of Reconstruction in progress, historians were again faced with the issue of common memory. How was a nation to move forward from this time while still claiming to be a model for the rest of the world? Thus the nation returns to patriotism, but under a new light. If the war decided the fate of the union, the remembrance of it would define her citizens.

Many of the holidays, songs, and memorials that are cherished as a part of American identity today were born out of the period following the Civil War. Yet, deciding those hallmarks was in and of itself a new battle to be fought. As mentioned, Americans today are much less familiar with Confederate memoriam due to the fact that they lost. Part of the prize for winning the war was the agency to control the nation’s memory of it. Cecilia O’Leary attributes much of the growth of post-war nationalism to the formation of the Grand Army of the Republic, an organization of veterans that “provided an institutional framework for the concept of an *armed*

¹⁶ Abraham Lincoln, "Abraham Lincoln: Second Inaugural Address. U.S. Inaugural Addresses. 1989," Bartleby, 1989 (accessed December 7, 2016).

*democracy.*¹⁷ She goes into the full history of the organization, but most importantly they had established themselves on the national stage by the end of the 1880s and made the huge push for the following decade to be “America’s age of patriotism.” O’Leary writes,

“Beginning in the 1880s, organized patriots initiated campaigns to establish new national anniversaries; lobbied for additions to the nation’s pantheon of heroes; urged the teaching of US history and civics in the public schools; agitated for flag reverence and the daily pledge of allegiance; ushered in the greatest era of monument building, established national shrines and mapped out historical pilgrimages; and organized petition drives and congressional hearings to legislate patriotism.”¹⁸

Slowly the kind of nationalism still alive today began to take shape, and it sounds quite strange. It is understandable that men who fought for the country would push for the people to respect that, however the movement was admittedly militaristic. This invited in a new devil. They had just fought a war about what it meant to be a united nation, and now the winning side wanted to rule the land with a red, white, and blue fist. However, the patriots were faced with the issue of identity. While they fought for this love of an American identity, they had yet to define what exactly that meant. O’Leary explains,

“Nation-states have never developed neatly, coherently, or homogeneously. The United States is no exception. Although nations promote the theory of ‘one

¹⁷ O’Leary, 29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

people,' social, cultural, and linguistic heterogeneity is the norm... the United States turned to slavery and immigration to populate its expanding economic and geographic frontiers. The construction of national culture, therefore, was by necessity selective, imaginative, and provisional... the GAR set out to create rituals and invent traditions capable of bolstering the social order and inculcating allegiance among a population not yet unified into a single nationality.”¹⁹

Once again, Americans faced this contradiction that they set up for themselves from the birth of independence. How was a nation who was founded by immigrants, built by slaves, and haunted by the genocide of millions of natives to create a narrative of a unique and autonomous identity? The answer was erasure. The champions for patriotism had to mold history from the most positive perspective so as to convince the rest of the world that their nation was still that shining city upon a hill.

In order to accomplish this narrative, the GAR and other patriots returned towards the more religious aspects of their nationalism. O’Leary continues,

“The Grand Army moved away from an older conception of the Union as a ‘legal creation of contractual rights and obligations’ towards one that identified the nation as a living entity with a body and soul, capable of offering its citizen moral regeneration.”²⁰

¹⁹ O’Leary, 51.

²⁰ Ibid.

The movement marked the beginnings of the sensation known as civil religion, though that term would not be established for another century. The nationalists wanted to create such a love for the country that people could experience it the way they experienced Christianity, essentially. O'Leary quotes GAR Chaplain Lovering saying,

“‘Love of country’ was the ‘religion of patriotism.’ ‘Its altars are the graves of the un-forgotten and heroic. Its symbol is the flag of the Union.’ Its priests were GAR veterans whose ‘manliness today beats in hearts which have known no throb but that of courage.’”²¹

When the nation believed they would be in peacetime for a while, they had to create another outlet for their passion. The monuments still held in marvel today were erected as icons to worship the country. The men who died fighting to preserve the union became like martyrs like the revolutionaries who paid for freedom with their lives, and were honored appropriately. Still, the sensation of patriotism seemed to be masking a more unfavorable history. To tell stories of the Civil War as a necessary fight for the sanctity of the nation is to forget that the Union was just as guilty for the sins of slavery. Though in the moment, they recognized that sentiment, the erasure of the Confederate narrative implies their total guilt with no accomplice. Patriotism becomes synonymous with idealism, and that is no way to portray history.

²¹ O'Leary, 52.

The idea of nationalism as a religion is one that would seem dangerous to many Americans. A nation that prides itself in its religious freedom should think very critically of the way it imposes its own religion on its citizens, but that depends solely on the assumption that nationalism is its own religion. Carolyn Marvin and William Ingle contend that very statement going so far as to say that “nationalism is the most powerful religion in the United States.”²² The statement and belief is dangerous because of the contradiction between America’s freedom of religion and the way the country somewhat forcefully imposes the religion of nationalism on its citizens from the day they are born. Standing for the National Anthem, reciting a Pledge of Allegiance, flying a flag on one’s home—all rituals that mirror religious practice. If being a Christian means going to church, singing hymns, and praying, then being an American means going to parades, singing *My Country ‘tis of Thee*, and signing up for the draft.

At face value, none of these rituals seem like inherently negative practices. Community is a positive experience that helps individuals gain a sense of safety and belonging. However, the problem with American nationalism is that it is filled with too many contradictions to really be a healthy environment for anyone. The foundations of nationalism are rooted in racism, sexism, and overall outdated thinking. When studying the history of nationalism, the bigger picture has to be considered. One can examine the Revolution and say it was a necessary war fought for progress, and without it the nation would not exist as it does today. Yet the way historians of the time wanted the war to be remembered was to say it was in God’s will, it was just to expel the sinful Loyalists, and the United States was always meant to be a political sanctuary for God’s

²² Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle. "Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64 (1996): 767.

oppressed children. That changes the basic narrative because it gives an obvious edge to Christians, and makes the nation seem not as religiously free as it is supposed to be.

Then one can explore the Civil War, and say it was necessary to keep the Union together and emancipate the slaves. Yet, historians twisted it to be a glorious spiritual battle fought as a punishment for both sides for the sins of slavery. Again, this puts a religious bias in the narrative that pretends as though slaves only needed to be freed because it was un-Christian, ignoring the fact that the practice was plainly inhumane. Why, then is this myth still burning? Why do people still get infuriated by flag burners, athletes kneeling during the national anthem, citizen who do not support war? Is this nation really supposed to be the greatest in the world, and have we let everyone down?

American history on the whole is filled with contradictions that make it incredibly difficult to pass judgement on modern society. It is funny because the facts are present, but there was a precedent set long ago that decided what kind of narrative we as a nation wanted to put forward, and it stuck. There exists a love for this country that flows through and through. That is not a fantasy— Americans do love their country and are proud to bear that name. The problem is, too often it is a love built on false pretenses and a Christian faith that is not unanimously accepted, especially now. The root of the problem with nationalism seems to be that it is outdated. There are plenty of examples where Americans did great and amazing things that we can be proud of. Yet, we can no longer pretend that this nation is the greatest in the world or that that title was bestowed upon us from the heavens. History and the reaction that comes out of

studying it should be based in unbiased facts. It is okay to be proud to be an American, so long as we understand exactly what that means.

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