

GUEST COMMENTARY

'My Country Right or Wrong'

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Since the Bush administration launched the war against the

Taliban in Afghanistan, through the invasion of Iraq, and up to the present, we have all been called upon to be patriots. Many of us, though, have questioned President Bush's entire approach to terrorism, and for that reason millions of Americans who support the President accuse us of being unpatriotic.

But are we? That depends on which of the three major schools of patriotism you follow: the original version, the military/industrial version, or the peace and justice version. Each version made its debut well over a century ago.

The Original

Of the several stirring expressions of patriotic sentiment that underlie our national identity as Americans, "My country right or wrong" is perhaps the most widely accepted as definitive.

The original phrase was coined in April 1816, by Stephen Decatur, a daring and highly successful U.S. Navy officer. At a dinner held in his honor, Decatur raised his glass in a toast:

"Our country! In her intercourse with foreign nations, may she always be in the right; but our country, right or wrong."

As a military man, of course

appear that at the highest levels of America's warrior class, to forgo success in any endeavor, right or wrong, was unthinkable.

I do not know whether Decatur knew of the lie that this creative 19th century businessman put in his mouth, or whether he would have approved of it had he known. But it is virtually certain that this version of Decatur's toast earned the author 19th century "high fives" from his fellow entrepreneurs. Being economic realists, they of course knew that sticking to moral principle would not bring America the power, territory, and booty that enriched them. So, a subtle tweaking of the quote, from the most powerful sector of the American polity—the business class—would provide comforting pre-approval for whatever foreign enterprise the president might choose. As long as it was successful.

And that, of course, is just how our country's "intercourse with foreign nations" played

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out over the years. Had the French not sold the vast Louisiana Purchase to President Thomas Jefferson, we can bet that an excuse would soon have been found to win it by military conquest, in spite of France's solidarity and assistance during the Revolution. The Mexican-American and

right or wrong.' In one sense I say so too. My country; and my country is the great American Republic. My country, right or wrong; if right to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right." – Senator Carl Schurz, 1872

In 1899, Schurz reaffirmed his vision of patriotism at the Anti-Imperialistic Conference in Chicago, Illinois:

"I confidently trust that the American people will prove themselves . . . too wise not to detect the false pride or the dangerous ambitions or the selfish schemes which so often hide themselves under that deceptive cry of mock patriotism: 'Our country, right or wrong!' They will not fail to recognize that our dignity, our free institutions and the peace and welfare of this and coming generations of Americans will be secure only as we cling to the watchword of true patriotism: 'Our country—when right, to be kept right; when wrong to be put right.'"

This the patriotism I, and thousands of Americans in the peace and justice movement hold to. It is the patriotism that really does believe in liberty and justice for all—including the peoples of other nations—and does not sell out this sublime value to America's corporate community.

Nor does this patriotism seek to justify odious American foreign policy by the specious argument that other nations have behaved worse. We insist on setting our own highest moral standards, rather than setting the worst behavior of

wrong.

As a military man, of course, Decatur was obligated to obey his commander-in-chief's orders, ethically sound or not. In today's Navy, he would probably have been quietly forced into an early retirement for even suggesting the possibility that "our country" might sometimes be in the wrong "in her intercourse with foreign nations."

Military-Industrial patriotism

Not surprisingly, Decatur's heartfelt expression of love for his country was immediately seized upon by at least one businessman with an agenda surpassing that of the defense of the nation, or even the promotion of liberty and justice for all. Within a few days of the dinner, Niles' Weekly Register published a number of toasts raised by other attendees. Decatur's own toast appeared as follows:

"Our country-In her intercourse with foreign nations, may she always be in the right, and always successful, right or wrong."

The alert newspaper owner or editor realized that by raising the possibility that America might behave "wrongly" vis-a-vis foreign nations, Decatur also implied that in such morally suspect cases, America might not deserve to achieve its wrong-headed goal. Best to modify the toast to make it

The Mexican-American and Spanish-American wars were strictly imperialist ventures. In 1917, the communists replaced the Russian monarchy, and provided the U.S. with a perfect excuse for further "successful," and mostly wrong, "intercourse with foreign nations."

After the Soviet Union fell, traditional U.S. foreign policy was called into question by those who expected a "peace dividend." In response to this dilemma, a group of right-wing neoconservatives created the Project for the New American Century, wherein they boldly called for expanded American military power, and for unabashed U.S. global hegemony: America would become the law-maker and law-enforcer for the entire world.

There was of course some resistance at home to this vision of American empire. Then came 9/11. Soon, the U.S. military-industrial-foreign policy establishment was back to its imperialist agenda with a vengeance. (PNAC founders are the godfathers and policy makers of the present Bush administration.) Those who do not wholeheartedly ascribe to it risk being called traitors.

Peace and Justice patriotism

"The Senator from Wisconsin cannot frighten me by exclaiming 'My country

setting the worst behavior of other nations as the lower limit of our own. We believe that the behavior of the Nazis and the Stalinists has provided far too much wiggle room for American policymakers.

Finally, being a patriotic American is for us more than simply being a member of a particularly prosperous and powerful tribe, in which primitive tribal codes – e.g. contempt for other nations – are obscured by general prosperity and a tenuous tolerance for criticism of "the American Way" at home.

The Bush administration has played on the patriotic sentiments of millions of decent Americans to gain their support for America's role as the New Rome. This plan is destined to fail, and if it is not stopped, America will fall as Rome fell. Only if America's policy-makers are patient; only if they recognize the legitimate interests of other nations; and only if they invest our considerable moral capital in building a global community can America survive in any desirable form.

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