

Patriotic Pacifism

Based on David Cortright, *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 302-320.

During the Vietnam War media coverage sometimes portrayed antiwar activists as radicals and unpatriotic extremists. These misperceptions were less prevalent during the Iraq War debate. Opponents of the invasion were able to parry such charges by framing antiwar sentiment in a patriotic context. Win Without War positioned itself as a mainstream movement. Its press releases and newspaper ads featured a US flag, and its mission statement began with the words, “We are patriotic Americans....” By framing messages in this manner antiwar advocates were able to inoculate themselves against charges of anti-Americanism.

The emphasis on practical alternatives to war was part of this framing. Opponents of the use of force endorsed UN inspections as a means of disarming Iraq. They gave full support to international efforts to combat terrorism, although were always careful to avoid reference to Bush’s term “war on terror,” so as not to reinforce the militarized metaphor and policies.

As George Lakoff and other communications experts have noted, pro-war groups often commandeer patriotic language. They use the flag as an emblem of war and a symbol of support for the use of force. Scholar Jane Cramer identified militarized patriotism as a major factor in explaining the Bush administration's ability to override reasoned objections to the planned invasion. Faux patriotism played a role in the congressional vote of approval for the use of force in October 2002.¹ Prominent Democratic Party politicians, including John Kerry, Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden, were fearful of being labeled unpatriotic and joined others in giving Bush a free pass for war.

Patriotic framing is more than a strategy for antiwar communications. It is also a matter of principle. Advocates for peace refuse to concede patriotism to militarism. They strive to redefine the concept of loving one's country.

Patriotism implies values of sacrifice, duty, honor, selflessness, and generosity toward others. Nationalism, by contrast, evokes images of domination, militarism, and xenophobia.

George Orwell wrote that nationalism is not to be confused with patriotism.² The former is inseparable from the desire for power, while the latter means devotion to a particular place or way of life. The former is inherently expansionist, while the latter is merely defensive and does not seek to force itself on others.

Howard Zinn said that it was necessary to redefine patriotism as “loyalty to the principles of democracy,” to “expand it beyond that narrow nationalism that has caused so much death and suffering.”³ For Americans, true patriotism lies in supporting the values the country is supposed to cherish: equality, life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness.

Genuine patriotism also differentiates between loyalty to country and support for specific policies. It is right to love one’s country and community, but it is also necessary to speak out against unjust and illegal uses of force.

Some of the greatest and most eloquent peace advocates in US history have been passionately patriotic. Martin Luther King junior spoke often of the greatness of the United States and the grandeur of the American dream. He extolled the Constitution of the United States as a marvelous foundation upon which to build a just society. His objection to the Vietnam War was rooted in a desire to return the country to the noble principles which made it great. “I oppose the war in Vietnam because I love America,” he famously declared in his April 1967 sermon against the war. He wanted the United States to stand as a moral example to the world. “I speak out against this war because I am disappointed with America. There can be no great disappointment where there is no great love.”⁴

Rev. William Sloane Coffin Jr. also expressed a patriotic passion. Like King he wanted to see the United States live up to its ideals. He said that the real patriots in every country are those who carry on a “lover’s quarrel with their

country.” The true patriot is one who takes risks to speak for truth, who is not complacent in the face of unjust war but is prepared to act and sacrifice for peace.

¹ Jane Cramer, “Militarized Patriotism: Why the US Marketplace of Ideas Failed Before the Iraq War.” *Security Studies* 16, No 3, 2007, 489524.

² George Orwell, “Notes on Nationalism,” May, 1945, <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/notes-on-nationalism/>

³ Howard Zinn, “Thoughts of a Patriot,” *The Harvard Crimson*, April 18, 2003, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2003/4/18/thoughts-of-a-patriot-our-government/>

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Why I am Opposed to the War in Vietnam,” April 30, 1967, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, <https://therealnews.com/mlkspeech>