

LIBERALS: TAKE BACK THE FLAG!

By Nick Gier

*Patriotism is not a short and frenzied outburst of emotion
but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime.*

--Adlai E. Stevenson, Jr.

It was May Day, 1967, and I was doing my daily run around the national stadium in Copenhagen, Denmark, where I was completing my year as a Rotary Fellow. There were thousands of Danish Communists, Socialists, and Social Democrats on the expansive lawns celebrating the world's most important leftist holiday.

Something struck me about what these people carried in their hands. For every bottle of beer, some of the best in the world, there were just as many small Danish flags. As an American I thought: "What a novel idea: patriots on the left."

This was not the first time I had noticed and admired Danish patriotism. At every major occasion--a birthday or a wedding--little flags are festooned everywhere and a big flag is flying in the yard. Danish homes, including their summer cottages, are not complete without a flag pole.

Danish patriotism culminates in a fervent devotion to Queen Margrethe II, a Cambridge trained archaeologist and accomplished artist, whose coronation I witnessed in January of 1972 and whom even today I consider my queen.

Let us turn to another country. The Sri Lankan flag contains two stripes, green embracing the Muslims and orange integrating the Hindus, thus validating their Sinhalese identity in the Country of the Lion (Sinhala). Buddhist nationalists have removed these colors from their own flag as a clear warning to Sri Lankan Hindus, Muslims, and Christians that they are no longer welcome in their own country. For these folks the upraised sword in the lion's paw takes on a much more ominous meaning.

Most Americans could not place Sri Lanka (let alone Idaho) on a map, but I still fear that some of our own nationalists might get wind of this. One might instruct his wife to sew a new American flag with all the Blue State stars removed, even though the Blues pay 71 percent of the taxes and the Reds, from 1991 to 2001, received \$800 billion more in goods, services, and cash from the feds than they paid in taxes. During the same decade the Blues paid the feds \$1.4 trillion. See John Sperling's *The Great Divide: Retro vs. Metro*.

An even more perverted possibility actually happened at a recent retreat of the Moscow Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber head Paul Kimmell has neo-Confederate tendencies, and he gave a **PowerPoint presentation** on Robert E. Lee in which the final slide was the Confederate flag (with 14 stars) given equal weight with the Union flag (with all 33 stars).

The cultural divide is indeed great: In the 2004 election 39 states gave Kerry 1.5 million more votes than Bush, while 11 states (the heart of the Confederacy) gave 5 million more votes to Bush. The neo-Confederates are urging these states to withdraw from the Union and govern themselves according to strict Calvinist principles and a "whites first" policy.

Speaking of colors, I just saw for the first time the bumper sticker "These Colors Do Not Run." This message is obviously a corollary to the slogan "Support Our Troops." My first thought actually was a warning that we must not mix good European stock with other blood to make a rainbow flag!

With only a few bad eggs, I believe that our military is the best in the world, but a true patriot would insist that we should not put these young lives in danger unless there is a direct threat to our country, at which time it would indeed be cowardly for us not to defend ourselves. But to invade a sovereign nation on the basis of "fixed" intelligence is bullying not retreating.

Buddhist and American nationalism are of course the exact opposite of true patriotism, which, like the Danes' example, is inclusive and embracing rather than exclusive and dividing. Genuine patriots are loyal to the principles of their country, not necessarily the government's current policies.

As Jim Hightower said recently: "Our democracy was forged in rebellion, crafted by mavericks and risk-takers who refused to salute authority. They rejected all autocrats who tried to suppress liberties in the name of providing security and order." American patriots should freely exercise their right to dissent and to resist the tyranny of a "moral majority." They should also make common cause with countries that share the same liberal democratic principles, and they remain true to the treaties that they've made with them.

Wise patriots would not be afraid to admit their country's mistakes, and they would not make exceptionalist and paternalistic claims about national destiny and obligation. God blesses all nations, not just ours.

True patriotism is not a narrow nationalism that goes its own way--“you are either with us or against us”--but one that embraces the UN charter, international law, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Geneva Conventions on the treatment of prisoners.

Some critics say that the virtue of patriotism is obsolete in our new world culture. They claim that the nation state is by its nature dysfunctional, just as destructive as the atomistic self of which the modern state is a projection. Proclamations such as “Live Free Or Die” or “Don’t Tread On Me” give lie to the fundamental truth that human beings are social and relational.

When Martin Buber wrote that “there is no I taken in itself, but only the I of the primary word I-Thou,” he was rediscovering that Buddhists and Confucians already knew 2,500 years ago. The diplomatic equivalent is of course that there is no nation “taken in itself.” The primary Confucian virtue *ren*--meaning humaneness or benevolence--is a character composed of the glyphs person and the number two. Being truly human is “two peopleness.”

Some say that self-assertive nationalism is a product of patriarchy, and patriotism should be replaced by, as Elousie Bell calls it, “matriotism” whose loyalty would be to the largest community possible. As Virginia Woolf declared: “As a woman, I have no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world.” Bell and Native Americans propose that Mother Earth herself become the object of our devotion. For Native Americans patriotism has meant the destruction of their lands, their languages, and their cultures.

Daoists celebrate the Dao as feminine and their fellow Confucians promote a universal fellowship of all nations, but the Confucian Mencius was also correct in saying that love is, first and foremost, local and personal. It is only natural that we love those who are closest to us more than those far away. Confucian love is a graded love that starts with the family and spreads in concentric circles to the nation and then to the biosphere around us. Mencius joined Buddhists and Jains in acknowledging our moral obligations to animals.

Elouise Bell is wise to insist that her matriotism does not necessarily eliminate a personal love for country and for one’s own land. Following Mencius, my love for Gaia is necessarily personal and local. I’ve traveled extensively on four continents but there is nothing like the mountains, lakes, and rivers of the Pacific Northwest that I call my home. The Palouse Hills surrounding Moscow have become an extension of my body.

The liberals that should take back their flag have a long distinguished tradition that goes back to the American and French revolutions. Against the divine right of kings and caste society of classical conservatism, these “classical” liberals have always stood for liberty, equality, and community (French *fraternite*) for all.

The American Wiccan community propose that the French *fraternite* be translated as the virtue of cooperation. They quote the great classical liberal Ben Franklin: “If we don’t hang together, we shall surely all hang separately.” The Wiccans rightly emphasize that the origins of democratic and republican ideals are pagan not Christian.

Today’s libertarians put liberty first at the cost of both equality and community. Conservatives and liberals embrace all three with an emphasis on community and traditional values for the former and equality for the latter. Following the Danish example, we should all respect each other’s love for the classical liberal principles for which this nation stands “with freedom and justice for all.”

Nick Gier taught philosophy and religion at the University of Idaho for 31 years. For more on classical liberalism see www.class.uidaho.edu/niger/liberlism.htm and www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/305/foundfathers.htm.