

LIBERALS: TAKE BACK THE FLAG!
Flag Day, June 14, 2013

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. On the expansive lawns there were thousands of Danish Communists, Socialists, and Social Democrats 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 from all political factions for 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), formerly the British colony of Ceylon.

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. Recently Sri Lankan Christians have suffered widespread persecution and violence. For these folks the upraised sword in the lion's paw is taking on a 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 replacing the "Old Glory Blue" behind the 50 white stars with "Old Glory Red," the official colors of the flag according to the Standard Color Reference of America. One irony is that 22 of the 29 states that receive more government hand-outs than they pay in federal taxes are Old Glory Red.

Speaking of colors, I'm reminded of a bumper sticker that reads "These Colors Do Not Run." Is this a warning that we must not mix good European stock with other blood to make a rainbow flag? It most likely means that true patriots don't run when the country is in danger, and I would hope that the author meant that both the Reds and the Blues would stand together against legitimate threats to the nation.

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.

Patriots freely exercise their right to dissent and to resist the tyranny of an irrational majority. As Jim Hightower once said: "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."

True Patriots also make common cause with those in other countries who share the same liberal democratic principles, and they remain true to the treaties that they've made with them. They would embrace the UN charter, international law, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Geneva Conventions on the treatment of prisoners and the prohibition against torture.

True patriots do not support a narrow nationalism that goes its own way—"you are either with us or against us"—and they would not be afraid to admit their country's mistakes. They would not say "Love it or Leave It"; instead they would say "Change It or Lose It." They would also not make exceptionalist and paternalistic claims about national destiny and obligation. God blesses all nations, not just ours.

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 once declared: "As a woman, I have no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world." Bell and some 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.

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 the Earth 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 true home. The Palouse Hills surrounding Moscow, Idaho have become an extension of my body.

Political liberalism has a long distinguished tradition that goes back to the American and French revolutions. Against the divine right of kings and the caste society of classical conservatism, these "classical" liberals have stood for liberty, equality, and community, my own interpretation of the French word *fraternité*.

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, both should respect each other's love for the classical liberal principles for which we all stand "with liberty and justice for all."

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