

Patriotism to Fascism

Given the patriotism of the population, the strength of the ideology guiding policymakers, and the powers accruing to the executive, the US has the makings of fascism. By Allan Abraham

Patriotism and nationalism are strong emotional feelings towards one's country. But as the British novelist Richard Aldington wrote in *The Colonel's Daughter* (1931): "Patriotism is a lively sense of collective responsibility. Nationalism is a silly cock crowing on its own dunghill and calling for larger spurs and brighter beaks". Patriotism can be a positive force if it is also intellectual and conscientious. Nationalism, on the other hand, is an emotional allegiance to a mythic entity. It is a dangerous God-substitute, as Archbishop Robert Runcie pointed out. It claims the love and loyalty religious people reserve for God. And it has the power to lead people gladly to war.

However, patriots and nationalists have something powerful in common. Both take part in outward shows of allegiance to the state: patriots dutifully, nationalists fervently and proudly. At public events, they are indistinguishable from each other. If the event is high in symbolism it provides the impression of greater numbers championing the state. A powerful sense of solidarity and collective strength imbues such events. The image of the strong state prospers, and nationalism, which waxes and wanes with its perception of the collective support it has, grows more confident and more boisterous.

In recent times, we have seen the rise of nationalism in two strong democracies: India and the USA. In India, nationalism surged in the Nineties and the first years of the new millennium on the perception that overwhelming and increasing majorities supported the notion of a strong Hindu state. That perception was laid low in the general elections of 2004. The ruling Hindu nationalist party was soundly beaten by the secular Congress party. And Hindu nationalism in

India has since been on the wane. As with the statue of Ozymandias, round the decay of that colossal wreck, only the lone level sands stretch far away. Hindu nationalism in India was a bad idea. It sustained itself on the illusion of collective strength. When that strength proved illusory, the idea collapsed.

The idea of the United States as a land for immigrants of diverse cultures was an attractive one for people fleeing persecution in their homelands or seeking opportunity and a new life elsewhere. America was a land of opportunity. It was an idea of America that was noble and good. But in the late Nineties things started to change. American conservatives started to define the nation's "values". Like those of the Hindu nationalists in India, these were narrower than accorded with the original conception of the state. But since they coincided with the interests of corporate America, they became influential in the corridors of power. The conservative values now championed by the administration in Washington strike at the heart of the idea of America as a liberal and free land. But the conservatives are eager to realize their vision. They have taken the fight to the liberals, cleverly shrouding their ideology in the flag of patriotism.

The patriotism that conservatives profess hides a drive for a strong police-military state built on conservative values. In this state corporations will be minimally regulated, and their interests will be the state's interests. It is the kind of totalitarian and authoritarian state that the Italian Fascists envisaged. It is the state that American conservatives appear to want to build. It is the state they have started to build with the help of American patriots, conservatives and liberals alike.

Everywhere you turn in America today, you see symbols of patriotism, most commonly the flag. The flag shows up as lapel buttons, ties, bikinis, and even in windows of smalltown shops gone bust. At all kinds of events, from motorbike rallies to pensioners' meetings, the flag is omnipresent. The flag symbolizes the state, and its display signifies love and loyalty for the state. At public events, the symbolism of row upon row of flags can be hypnotic and powerful: the state borne in proud procession

by the citizens, like a golden calf or ancient pagan god, with due pomp and ceremony. It's the next best thing to a full dress military parade with tanks, guns, and flypast. It is in this din also—cheering along with fellow-patriots, calling for larger spurs and brighter beaks—that people stop thinking. They surrender their minds and consciences to the state. The state takes over. It is empowered to do what it will. The first thing it does is stamp its authority on the people; the next, go to war.



Greg Schmiguel

Above, New York City firefighters marching in a parade after the 11 September 2001 bombing of the WTC towers. Below, members of the *Sturmabteilung* of the German National Socialist (Nazi) Party at a parade in 1933. Both were powerful shows of allegiance to the nation in the buildup to military invasions and war.



In conclusion, then, the following. Patriotism is not rushing for the nearest flag and waving it madly. Patriotism is responsibility—not to

your state, but to humanity. Patriotism is thinking. Patriotism is standing up and telling your country that it is getting vicious and mean-spirited. Patriotism is not wanting to see the human spirit being cowed. Patriotism is living unoppressed in a free country that is part of a free world.

If all that is too much, go ahead: reach for a flag.

12 August 2004.

SIDEBARS

Thoughtful Patriotism

What do we mean by patriotism in the context of our times? I venture to suggest that what we mean is a sense of national responsibility...a patriotism which is not short, frenzied outbursts of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime.

– *Adlai Stevenson, The Nature of Patriotism, speech 1952, pub 1953.*

Critical Patriotism

The greatest patriotism is to tell your country when it is behaving dishonourably, foolishly, viciously.

– *Julian Barnes, Flaubert's Parrot (1984)*

SIDEBARS

Great for Fascism?

I have often thought that if a rational fascist dictatorship were to exist, then it would choose the American system.

– *Noam Chomsky, Language & Responsibility (with Mitsou Ronat, 1979)*

Getting There

Fascism is not in itself a new order of society. It is the future refusing to be born.

– *Aneurin Bevan, quoted in Aneurin Bevan, vol 1, ch 10 by Michael Foot.*

No Faith in Peace

Fascism, the more it considers and observes the future and the development of humanity, quite apart from political considerations of the moment, believes neither in the possibility nor the utility of perpetual peace.

– *Benito Mussolini, The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism (1932)*

Obedient Chap

George Bush is the president; he makes the decisions.... Wherever he wants me to line up, just tell me where. And he'll make the call.

– *Dan Rather, The David Letterman Show, 17 September 2001.*

SIDEBARS

Patriotic News

We'll do whatever is our patriotic duty.

– *Rupert Murdoch, owner of Fox Network, after 9/11.*

Counselling Required

In deciding what to air, CNN will consider guidance from the appropriate authorities.

– *Ted Turner, owner of CNN, after 9/11.*