

## **Patriotism in Time of War**

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Patriotism is a word of power, compounded of duty and of love. Patriots carry the word as a shield and wield it as a sword against the unpatriotic. So it is important to say what patriotism is and who can legitimately claim it.

Among the concepts of patriotism in America, there are two that are strongly opposed to one other. One is militantly nationalistic and requires faith-like support of our country (by which is generally meant our leaders and their policies). It's captured by the phrase, "My country, right or wrong," and by a reluctance to consider that the country might indeed be wrong.

The other version of patriotism calls upon America to be the best that it can. It's captured by the phrase "with liberty and justice for all," and unflinchingly considers America's shortcomings in those areas. We might call this second kind of patriotism prophetic, after the Old-Testament prophets, whose mission was not so much prediction as calling the nation to task for its errors.

At this point, I should confess to an ulterior motive. The prophets had allegiances that transcended the nation, and the same is true today...think of the content of the Seven Principles of Unitarian-Universalism. So the label "prophetic patriotism" is meant to recognize a certain qualification of loyalty to one's nation. But that's the subject of another sermon.

My sermon today centers on the frequent conflict involving different concepts of patriotism, which is to say over the meaning of America. I'll focus on two wars in which that conflict was severe, World War I and the Vietnam War. To bring things closer to home, I'll concentrate on the Unitarian and the UU congregations in Palo Alto.

Let's go back in time nearly a century, to the eve of World War I. It is a time of pluralism about patriotism and the meaning of America. The nation is sharply divided about whether to enter the war, and if to fight, then on which side.

A Unitarian congregation has recently been organized in Palo Alto, and it has built a church on the corner of Channing and Cowper. Rae Bell has spoken eloquently about the history of Unitarianism in Palo Alto, and I'm indebted to her for some of the information I've used in this talk. There is significant pacifist sentiment in the early Unitarian church here. People of German heritage are well represented in the congregation.

When America declares war on Germany in April of 1917, the nationalistic form of patriotism becomes the only acceptable form. It is a very bad time to be a pacifist or to be of German extraction. The pacifist minister of the Palo Alto Unitarian church, the Rev. William Short, Jr., resigns his position within three months of the declaration of war.

Over the next year, Congress passes a series of laws aimed at curtailing dissent, including the notorious the Sedition Act of 1918. Imagine the effect on people like us of a law that states "Whoever, when the United States is at war, shall (*and here I leave out a long litany of banned dissenting activities*)...shall... by word or act oppose the cause of the United States therein shall be punished by a fine of not more than \$10,000 or imprisonment for not more than twenty years, or both...."

Freedom of conscience being such an important part of Unitarian identity, surely Palo Alto Unitarians can look to the American Unitarian Association for support. Not so. With the forceful advocacy of William Howard Taft, the last Unitarian President of the U.S., in 1918 the A.U.A. passes the following resolution: "Any society who employs a minister who is not a willing, earnest, and outspoken supporter of the U.S. in the vigorous and resolute prosecution of the war

cannot be eligible for aid from the association.” The Palo Alto congregation did depend on the A.U.A. for part of the salary of its new minister, who fortunately by this time was not a pacifist.

Official records give us scant insight into the human cost of the war for the members of the Palo Alto congregation, and we know next to nothing about conflicts between pro- and anti-war members. But there are hints that it is a very rough time. A letter to the A.U.A. a year after the war ended, speaks of a lingering weariness due to the war. In the same year the minister resigns and the congregation seriously considers disbanding. It finally does disband 15 years later, in the midst of the Depression. When our present congregation is organized in the late 1940s, several members of the former congregation want nothing to do with the new one, because of their experiences during World War I.

Now let me take you back thirty-nine years from the present, to the summer of 1965. What's it like in the country? Many of you can remember. The Cold War is raging. Less than three years earlier, a nuclear war nearly started over the Cuban Missile Crisis. I remember that time, and it's hard to describe the feelings that go with the knowledge that you and everyone you love might be incinerated within the next few days. The Free Speech Movement has erupted on the Berkeley campus, and the social norms of the 1950s are starting to be swept away.

And in 1965 the big buildup of the Vietnam conflict is underway. About as many Americans have died in combat in Vietnam as will have died in Iraq by the summer of 2004. Dan Lion is minister at the Palo Alto Unitarian Church—our church, on this site—and Jane Glauz is chair of the congregation's World Affairs Committee. Dan, Jane, and others have become very worried about the situation in Vietnam, and they have started anti-war activities in earnest. I gratefully acknowledge the help that Jane and several other congregation members have given me in reconstructing the events of the Vietnam era at our church, for I was half a continent away at the time.

The ministers take leading roles in anti-war activities. Those of you who have this book <show book> *“Palo Alto: A Centennial History,”* will find on page 309 a picture of Dan Lion leading a thoroughly middle-class protest march down Waverley Street. Our Assistant Minister, Mike Young, participates in nonviolent civil disobedience. He is among those who are arrested and jailed for obstructing the Oakland Induction Center.

Meanwhile, anti-war lay members of the congregation have organized and are desperately searching for ways to help end the war. They have begun a strong effort that is sustained throughout the war, nearly a decade. Their activities are too many and varied to describe in detail, but let me give you a brief list:

- They raise money
- They hold panel discussions.
- They organize letter-writing groups.
- They do draft counseling.
- They discuss J. William Fulbright's book, “The Arrogance of Power” (now, there's a title that's fit for the present day).
- They hold silent vigils.
- And, of course, they demonstrate. They demonstrate in Palo Alto, in Oakland, in San Francisco, and at the napalm factory in Redwood City.

As I look back from 2004, it's apparent that Palo Alto UUs were powerful voices against the war in Vietnam. Powerful and early voices, raised long before popular sentiment turned against the war. It was hard to speak out against the policies of our country in 1965, much harder than it is today. Intimidating nationalistic patriots were in control of powerful government agencies even though they did not have the legal apparatus of World War I to suppress dissent.

What about the members of our congregation who supported the war? We can get an idea of the divisions in the congregation from a survey on attitudes about the war that was conducted in April of 1968. For some context, 1968 was the time of the most intense fighting during the war, with forty or fifty Americans being killed each day, to say nothing of the Vietnamese.

About a third of the congregation responded to the opinion survey. Among the people who had definite opinions about the war, about one in five supported the administration regarding getting involved in Vietnam.

Having gotten into the war, what should we do now? The survey asked whether the U.S. should withdraw its troops from South Vietnam now. About 40% said yes, 40% said no, and 20% were undecided. Many of the people who thought we shouldn't have gotten into the war in the first place were not in favor of an immediate withdrawal.

How did the pro-war minority feel they were treated? Did they feel able to speak up and receive a respectful hearing? That's hard for me to say. But there was an illuminating exchange of letters in the church's newsletter during the summer of 1967, three letters for the war and three against it. The letters were a mixture of passion and reasoned argument. Let me read you some excerpts:

"There is a fairly large number of the members of our church who support the U.S. government actions in Vietnam. Those who feel as I do and support the U.S. position have been, up until now rather quiet...I feel that under very difficult conditions [my government] is doing the best humanly possible job. HOW MANY OTHERS OF YOU FEEL THE SAME WAY? Let's make our positions known, both to one another and to the membership at large!"

"Why are we there? It's not as our leaders would have us believe to guarantee Democracy and Freedom, although many of them are mistakenly convinced that this is our purpose. We are there to protect raw materials which we consider vital to our economy, such as tungsten."

"We hear references in sermons and read statements in the Newsletter that assume that all moral people are opposed to the war...We [the letter writers] would like to see the issues in Southeast Asia raised in this church from some viewpoint other than the holier-than-thou attitude that war is evil. We abhor war and killing, but we do not believe that this country spares the world from either by retreating to an isolationist position."

"We must indeed re-examine our priorities. Rebellion, insurrection, riots, have been manifest across our land. Our armies have been firing upon our own people in the streets of our cities. Other members of our armies are seeking out and killing other civilians in a rebellion in Vietnam. It is time we sought the reasons for the awful discontent here and abroad, and offer to help, not destroy, the aspirations of people everywhere in their search for a decent life."

We are seeing conflict within a congregation that is predominantly, but far from unanimously, against the Vietnam war. But as far as I can tell from reading church documents and interviewing members from the Vietnam era, there was no large-scale exodus of pro-war members over that issue. On balance, our church was able to encompass a wide range of views on the war.

Now it's time to try to draw lessons for the present from these sketches of the past. I think that the experience of World War I teaches us the frightening power of passionate nationalistic patriotism and the vulnerability of dissenting prophetic patriotism.

I think that prophetic patriots play into the hands of their opponents when they fail to couch their criticisms in pro-American terms. Although not particularly at our church, this certainly happened to the nationwide anti-war movement. Todd Gitlin was an early president of Students for a Democratic Society. I think he made an important point when, shortly after 9/11, he wrote:

"In the 1960s I, like most radicals, felt the furious fire of national sins and crimes burn away love of country. Even then, I thought the flag-burners stupid and self-defeating, but I watched, paralyzed, as the war supporters ran away with the flag -- and thus with the aftermath of the '60s. Many Americans were willing to hear our case against the war, but not to forfeit love of their America. The terrible paradox of the late '60s and early '70s was that as the war became less popular, so did the anti-war movement. Partly because of the movement's cavalier anti-Americanism, pro-war Republicans emerged triumphant."

During the Vietnam war, we see a complex conflict within our congregation. The motivations of those opposing the war were squarely within the realm of prophetic patriotism. I would guess that few members supported the war purely on nationalistic grounds. They believed that we were helping the Vietnamese people. And they thought we were fighting communism, which was truly oppressive and imperialistic. It was as true then as it is today that patriotism partly motivated by a fear of our country's enemies is not automatically jingoistic.

Early in 2003, when war with Iraq threatened but had not yet begun, our congregation passed a resolution opposing a preemptive war by a 96% to 4% vote. That was closer to unanimity than anything of which I'm aware from the Vietnam era. Now that we're in the war, though, I suspect that opinions on what to do about the mess are much more varied, just as they were in the survey in 1968.

We're in for some difficult times over Iraq, as a country and maybe also as a congregation. A few days ago I talked with our former minister Dan Lion, who is now approaching 90 years of age but is still mentally sharp. I asked him for advice to today's congregation based on his experience with us during the Vietnam war. He urged us to get our ideas out into the open. He said we should believe in the integrity of each person and in the importance of the democratic manner, and we should respect each other in spite of and during conflict.

I think that's great advice, and it's mostly the way we have been behaving. I would add to it an injunction to respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person. That includes our opponents on the national and international scene, as hard as that may be.

If we succeed in that, then I think that we, too, will share in the final lesson I take from our congregation's experience during Vietnam: The enduring satisfaction of having stood up for and worked for your beliefs during one of the major crises of your time.