

My Country: The World

by Howard Zinn

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Our government has declared a military victory in Iraq. As a patriot, I will not celebrate. I will mourn the dead -- the American GIs, and also the Iraqi dead, of which there have been many, many more.

I will mourn the Iraqi children, not just those who are dead, but those who have been be blinded, crippled, disfigured, or traumatized, like the bombed children of Afghanistan who, as reported by American visitors, lost their power of speech. The American media has not given us a full picture of the human suffering caused by our bombing; for that, we need to read the foreign press.

We will get precise figures for the American dead, but not for the Iraqis. Recall Colin Powell after the first Gulf War, when he reported the "small" number of U.S. dead, and when asked about the Iraqi dead, Powell replied: "That is really not a matter I am terribly interested in."

As a patriot, contemplating the dead GIs, should I comfort myself (as, understandably, their families do) with the thought: "They died for their country." If so, I would be lying to myself. Those who die in this war will not die for their country. They will die for their government. They will die for Bush and Cheney and Rumsfeld. And yes, they will die for the greed of the oil cartels, for the expansion of the American empire, for the political ambitions of the President. They will die to cover up the theft of the nation's wealth to pay for the machines of death.

The distinction between dying for our country and dying for your government is crucial in understanding what I believe to be the definition of patriotism in a democracy.

According to the Declaration of Independence -- the fundamental document of democracy -- governments are artificial creations, established by the people, "deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed", and charged by the people to ensure the equal right of all to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness". Furthermore, as the Declaration says, "whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it."

When a government recklessly expends the lives of its young for crass motives of profit and power (always claiming that its motives are pure and moral ("Operation Just Cause" was the invasion of Panama and "Operation Iraqi Freedom" in the present instance) it is violating its promise to the country. It is the country that is primary -- the people, the ideals of the sanctity of human life and the promotion of liberty. War is almost always a breaking of those promises (although one might find rare instances of true self defense). It does not enable the pursuit of happiness, but brings despair and grief.

With the war in Iraq won, shall we revel in American military power and, against the history of modern empires, insist that the American empire will be beneficent?

The American record does not justify confidence in its boast that it will bring democracy to Iraq. Should Americans welcome the expansion of the nation's power, with the anger this has generated among so many people in the world? Should we welcome the huge growth of the military budget at the expense of health, education, the needs of children, one fifth of whom grow up in poverty?

I suggest that a patriotic American who cares for his country might act on behalf of a different vision. Instead of being feared for our military prowess, we should want to be respected for our dedication to human rights.

Should we not begin to redefine patriotism? We need to expand it beyond that narrow nationalism which has caused so much death and suffering. If national boundaries should not be obstacles to trade -- we call it globalization -- should they also not be obstacles to compassion and generosity?

Should we not begin to consider all children, everywhere, as our own? In that case, war, which in our time is always an assault on children, would be unacceptable as a solution to the problems of the world. Human ingenuity would have to search for other ways.

Tom Paine used the word "patriot" to describe the rebels resisting imperial rule. He also enlarged the idea of patriotism when he said: "My country is the world. My countrymen are mankind."

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