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Happy Flag Day

Kevin Carson

June 14, 2005

Since this is the High Holy Day of American Fatherland-worship, I thought I'd say something about how utterly un-American the Pledge of Allegiance is.

Not only is America one of a very few countries in the world where swearing a loyalty oath to the State is a regular quasi-religious ceremony in the government schools, but the Pledge is a radical departure from America's previous political culture. Until the mid-19th century, the U.S. flag figured on a relatively minor level compared to other patriotic symbols, like Columbia and the goddess of Liberty. Even the Gadsden Flag, for that matter. The first few generations after the Revolution saw "liberty and justice for all," not as something granted by a benevolent government, but something to be safeguarded against it. Captain Shays and the Whiskey rebels were a lot closer to the mainstream of American patriotism than a bunch of school-kids stiff arming the Roman imperial salute to a flag.

Like the American Legion and the rest of the religion of "100% Americanism," the cult of Old Glory came about at a time when plutocrats like J.D. Rockefeller and Jay Gould were terrified of losing power over the State that guaranteed their profits. The 1890s, the decade of the worst depression the country

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had yet seen, had produced the Pullman Strike, Coxey's Army, the Western Federation of Miners, and a farm populist movement that came dangerously close to victory. Gould, an unofficial spokesman for the plutocracy, at one point issued panicky warnings of a capital strike and lockout in the event the People's Party won the election of 1896. A religion of artificial "national unity" was just the ticket for getting people's minds right.

The very concept of "Americanism," as synonymous with "loyalty" (to the State, of course), is fundamentally ANTI-American. For that matter, it's hard to understand why fundamentalists quibble about whether "under God" is included in a loyalty oath to Caesar, instead of getting mad as hell about the Caesar-worship in the first place.

For a better idea of what real Americanism is all about, read Voltairine de Cleyre's brilliant essay "Anarchism and American Traditions." Among the high points:

To the average American of today, the Revolution means the series of battles fought by the patriot army with the armies of England. The millions of school children who attend our public schools are taught to draw maps of the siege of Boston and the siege of Yorktown, to know the general plan of the several campaigns, to quote the number of prisoners of war surrendered with Burgoyne; they are required to remember the date when Washington crossed the Delaware on the ice; they are told to "Remember Paoli," to repeat "Molly Stark's a widow," to call General Wayne "Mad Anthony Wayne," and to execrate Benedict Arnold; they know that the Declaration of Independence was signed on the Fourth of July, 1776, and the Treaty of Paris in 1783; and then they think they have learned the Revolution—blessed be George

Washington! They have no idea why it should have been called a “revolution” instead of the “English War,” or any similar title: it’s the name of it, that’s all. And name-worship, both in child and man, has acquired such mastery of them, that the name “American Revolution” is held sacred, though it means to them nothing more than successful force, while the name “Revolution” applied to a further possibility, is a spectre detested and abhorred...

To inculcate this proud spirit of the supremacy of the people over their governors was to be the purpose of public education! Pick up today any common school history, and see how much of this spirit you will find therein. On the contrary, from cover to cover you will find nothing but the cheapest sort of patriotism, the inculcation of the most unquestioning acquiescence in the deeds of government, a lullaby of rest, security, confidence—the doctrine that the Law can do no wrong, a Te Deum in praise of the continuous encroachments of the powers of the general government upon the reserved rights of the States, shameless falsification of all acts of rebellion, to put the government in the right and the rebels in the wrong, pyrotechnic glorifications of union, power, and force, and a complete ignoring of the essential liberties to maintain which was the purpose of the revolutionists. The anti-Anarchist law of post-McKinley passage, a much worse law than the Alien and Sedition acts which roused the wrath of Kentucky and Virginia to the point of threatened rebellion, is exalted as a wise provision of our All-Seeing Father in Washington.

Such is the spirit of government-provided schools. Ask any child what he knows about Shays' rebellion, and he will answer, "Oh, some of the farmers couldn't pay their taxes, and Shays led a rebellion against the court-house at Worcester, so they could burn up the deeds; and when Washington heard of it he sent over an army quick and taught 'em a good lesson"- "And what was the result of it?" "The result? Why-why-the result was-Oh yes, I remember-the result was they saw the need of a strong federal government to collect the taxes and pay the debts." Ask if he knows what was said on the other side of the story, ask if he knows that the men who had given their goods and their health and their strength for the freeing of the country now found themselves cast into prison for debt, sick, disabled, and poor, facing a new tyranny for the old; that their demand was that the land should become the free communal possession of those who wished to work it, not subject to tribute, and the child will answer "No."...

And now, what has Anarchism to say to all this, this bankruptcy of republicanism, this modern empire that has grown up on the ruins of our early freedom? We say this, that the sin our fathers sinned was that they did not trust liberty wholly. They thought it possible to compromise between liberty and government, believing the latter to be "a necessary evil," and the moment the compromise was made, the whole misbegotten monster of our present tyranny began to grow. Instruments which are set up to safeguard rights become the very whip with which the free are struck.