

True patriotism: Healthy skepticism

From the Editors in the [June 19, 2002](#) issue

Many Americans have become born-again believers in patriotism since September 11, some to their own surprise. Writing the “My Turn” column in *Newsweek*, for instance, 20-something Rachel Newman confessed that before 9/11 she and her girlfriend had been talking about moving to another country because of the perceived inequalities in the U.S. All that changed after the terrorist attacks: then she realized she had taken American freedoms for granted. Though she would never have classified herself this way beforehand, now she calls herself a patriot.

This is natural: when under attack, we find security and solace from within our family, clan or nation. But the circling of the social wagons brings its own problems—as the culture of terrorism shows. Eric Hoffer once said that a movement doesn’t necessarily need a god to survive, but it needs a devil. We can respond to threats by sealing ourselves off from the “other,” or demonizing those who seem like outsiders. When people feel under siege, they tend to feed off each other’s anxieties. And they become more compliant toward authority, looking to their leaders to comfort and protect them. This can lead to sacrificing individual rights and the legal safeguards of due process for the promise of security.

Contempt for one’s own country is never an adequate position. We are naturally attached to our neighbors and our neighborhood. We need what Wendell Berry calls the “complex, never-completed affection for our land and our neighbors that is true patriotism.” At most, however, loyalty toward one’s homeland should be a secondary commitment, if not a tertiary one. Christians belong to a body without borders, an international church; and all people are members of a global human community. This is a difficult truth for Americans, who tend to oscillate between a self-satisfied isolationism and a “do it our way” imperialism.

In a time of genuine threats to “homeland security,” the church’s “yes but” voice is needed more than ever. The church’s patience, vision and hope for an alternative world can counter the tendency to find a military solution to all conflicts.

A true patriot is skeptical about appeals to national interest. So the next time someone in the Bush administration complains about criticism when our country is at war, be a true patriot: reassert your skepticism. Let's run that tradition up the flagpole this Fourth of July and salute it.