On Being a Traitor

Hilton Obenzinger

"It is by the goodness of God," Mark Twain wrote, "that in our country we have those three precious things: freedom of speech, freedom of conscience—and the prudence never to practice any of them" ("New" 201). When one speaks out, especially during times of war, you risk all prudence: you risk reputation, your job, and under the terms of the Patriot Act you may even risk your liberty, even in our purportedly democratic country.

Prudence is the active, conscious enforcement of the all-seeing TV-eye; it is the proper response to cultural and political hegemony spiked with fear. Once violence begins rhetoric ends, and in terms of purely verbal debate this is the case. But I would argue that war itself is fought as a form of rhetoric, as well. Battles and actions take on symbolic or semiotic import meant to persuade the enemy to surrender before ultimate destruction; psychological warfare and propaganda are deployed to undermine or bolster morale; great geopolitical arguments are drawn in blood. Dropping atomic bombs on mainly civilian cities in Japan, for example, can be viewed as a rhetorical as well as military strategy: a deadly, new trope of ultimate weapon aimed at quick, unconditional surrender, with yet another argument directed at the Soviet Union, still an ally, that it may be next.

But dissent during the execution of your own country's war means that some people will object to the decision before and even after it has been taken. Of course, only a democratic society, faulty as ours may be, can even entertain the idea of open dissent during a war; and this dissent persists. Every American war has fostered dissent, even the most popular wars, such as World War II. But particularly since the Vietnam War, dissent has become an inevitable feature of any American war; and no administration can go to war without significant opposition, mainly because the arguments for war, any war, have become increasingly suspect.

Still, for those who opposed the post-9/11 hysteria and the invasion of Iraq, for those who continue to criticize Middle East policy and the new terms of U.S. preemption and world domination, we have had to be very imprudent, indeed. Dissenters during war run the risk of being treated as enemies, of giving aid and comfort to the enemy; dissenters face the threat of repression and state violence. We have had to sustain charges of being "unpatriotic" at the same time that we have had to witness rapid, radical transformations of the discursive landscape: not just the familiar equations of jingoism with love of country, but the rapid acceleration in the use of apocalyptic language, such as "shock and awe," of doctrines of "preemptive" war, of allusions to "crusades" and "civilizations," of the crude exercise of imperial power papered over by a "coalition of the willing," of elusive "weapons of mass destruction"—a barrage of distorted conceptual frameworks joined to a nonstop public theatrical performance of fear, energized by some of the most transparent, self-serving lies in history, all in the service of the greatest empire the world has ever known.

Only a few years ago, if you described the United States as an imperialist country, you would have been regarded as someone on the political fringe; and many would simply deny or ignore such a characterization. "Empire" was reserved for "The Evil Empire," not for the cowboys in the white hats. Today, the terms "imperialism" and "colonialism" are suddenly considered, accepted, even hailed within dominant discourse, even by liberals. In the U.S.-Iraq war and what threatens to become the endless War against Terrorism, debate is so enveloped in assumptions of empire and of the War of Civilizations that the legitimacy and ethics of those who speak out in opposition are constantly impugned. If you are an American citizen, you are challenged to prove that you are a patriot, particularly after 9/11—and in the eyes of demagogues like Ann Coulter, almost anyone even daring to read this essay is a traitor for even considering dissent. If you are not a citizen, you face prison without any charges and deportation.

Anti-war protestors have called upon American traditions of dissent to proclaim that opposition to war is a completely legitimate exercise of democracy. Our "patriotism" is very different from what Mark Twain called "monarchical patriotism," a loyalty that blindly, irrationally follows the ruler, the monarch, the government, as opposed to "republican patriotism," which involves "the individual's right to oppose both flag and country when he (just *he*, by himself!) believed them to be in the wrong" ("Monarchical" 190–91). We have asserted that our patriotism is of the Tom Paine variety: "My country is the world. My countrymen are mankind"—and protestors became, and remain, part of what *The New York Times* coined "the other superpower," world public opinion, in the days leading up to the invasion of Iraq (qtd. in Zinn).

At the same time, we have drawn upon the same rhetorical strategy presented by Twain in his essay "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" in which he satirized the U.S. invasion and annexation of the Philippines. A little over a hundred years ago was the last time that "American imperialism" was projected as a common good for the United States and those we sought to colonize. Twain's strategy flows from the idea of two Americas: "One that sets the captive free, and one that takes a once-captive's new freedom away from him, and picks a quarrel with him with nothing to found it on: then kills him to get his land" (33–34).

The circumstances are not identical—although the Bush administration does have fresh designs on the Philippines—but the trope of two Americas persists throughout our history. Two Americas: one of colonial conquest and one of liberty, one of slavery and one of freedom, one of corporate domination and the other of human rights. When Twain spoke out against the American annexation of the Philippines, many of the pro-imperialists dismissed him as "merely" a humorist, even though he was vice-president of the Anti-Imperialist League. He observed that if he had to choose between being ignored as "merely a humorist" and reviled as a traitor—"Mark Twain a Traitor" one newspaper headline put it simply (Foner 359)—he would much prefer to be a traitor. Today, progress has been made in our cultural practices, and there is no need to choose: even humorists can be traitors, as Bill Maher can attest.

However, the trope of two Americas—which Senator John Edwards energetically employed in his campaign—is just that: a trope. There are more than two Americas, to be sure: we contain Walt Whitman multitudes; we cultivate multicultural gardens; we entertain multiplicities of viewpoints and experiences and contradictions. Still, the tendency to see the world in a Manichean fashion of good and evil is an old American tradition, one readily deployed by Bush, even though dissenters recoil at such simplistic binaries. Yet, as many have pointed out, there has been an increasing polarization in this country around a number of issues, and that polarization is a political reality; and those who have been castigated as traitors are resisting to "take our country back" from the radical usurpation by an extremist fringe.

Polarization is a step removed from dialogue, from exchange of views or debate, and it is one step closer to open conflict, to civil war. Polarization can clarify but it also complicates and often distorts arguments, promotes fallacious reasoning and manipulation, such as: "If you are against invading Iraq, you must then be a supporter of Saddam Hussein." In a polarization, both sides run the danger of demonizing each other, of forgetting that opinions generate from flesh, and we take on the dehumanizing characteristics of "the enemy" in each other's eyes. While it is important to welcome sharp distinctions, we need to struggle to minimize the coercive, corrosive effects of polarization; and critics of war are in far more danger of repression and state violence than supporters.

Like Twain, many of us have experienced being called traitors. During the civil rights movement, white activists were cursed as "traitors to their race"—an insult worn by some as a badge of honor. Martin Luther King was targeted as a subversive, and Black Panthers were murdered by agents of COINTELPRO. During the anti-Vietnam War movement, protestors were reviled because they did not "support our troops," despite the fact that a key element of the anti-war movement *was* our troops and Vietnam vets, as the ironic presence of John Kerry in the presidential campaign as both war hero and war protestor attests.[1]

I am used to being labeled a traitor. I have been an outspoken Jewish critic of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians and its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza for over thirty years, and I have been regularly called a traitor or a self-hating Jew or even an anti-Semite, the fact that almost my entire family was murdered by the Nazis notwithstanding. I have spent years projecting an ethos that Jewish culture does not conflate with the interests of the Israeli state, that it is highly "Jewish" to criticize the colonial expropriation of the Palestinians, just as it is highly "American" to criticize imperial conquest. But it is difficult—and imprudent.

I want to examine some of these difficulties, because the dynamics of being a critic of Israeli expansion and American foreign policy intertwine. Recently, there have been expressions of dismay about what has been called the New Anti-Semitism because there is more criticism of Israeli colonialism than ever, particularly on campuses. To be sure, there are critics of Israel who *are* anti-Semitic, those whose criticisms flow from an antipathy to anything Jewish. Anti-Semitism in words and in practice is real, even though it is often exaggerated.

Anti-Semitism, however, completely permeates *all* discussions of the conflict, and many well-intentioned people who criticize Israel inadvertently reproduce anti-Semitic formulations. For example, when a state that announces itself as "the Jewish state" attempts to speak in the name of all Jews—of whom most do not live in that state—those who oppose that state's actions easily end up criticizing "the Jews" and not the colonizing policies of a government.

At the same time, even supporters of Israel, such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, trade in anti-Semitic discourse. Conservative evangelicals like Falwell and Robertson ardently support Israel because, according to their end-days scenario, the gathering of the Jews to Israel is required for the return of Jesus. Israel will be consumed by a great conflict, Armageddon, during which most Jews die, and to save the small remnant Jesus will arrive as the Jewish Messiah, the handful of Jews left alive will convert, and the thousand years of peace and justice will ensue. It is highly disturbing, as a Jew, to be the object of someone else's religious fantasy—particularly when that involves dreams of mass murder. Arguably, this is also anti-Semitic, albeit clothed in philo-Semitic support for Israel, but because rightwing Israeli leaders find conservative evangelical political support valuable, they are willing to look the other way (although most American Jews are hardly so opportunistic and remain queasy if not outright hostile). The confusion mounts because some expressions characterized as anti-Semitic are acceptable, while others are not: criticism of Israel's colonial policies of segregated housing projects built on stolen land are condemned, while religious fantasies that end in mass murder are ignored. Untangling these webs of concepts and formulations takes attention and skill against a constant barrage of often intentional obfuscations.

For example, Harvard President Lawrence Summers has bemoaned the rise of criticisms of Israel: "Serious and thoughtful people are advocating and taking actions that are anti-Semitic in their effect if not their intent," and certainly he's correct in distinguishing intent from effect (qtd. in Butler). But according to Summers, while there are legitimate criticisms of Israel, any substantive criticisms—or actions such as divestment campaigns taken to protest Israeli policies—are "in effect" anti-Semitic. Judith Butler has dissected the faulty rhetoric yet chilling effect of Summers' statement in an article in the *London Review of Books* entitled "No, It's Not Anti-Semitic." I will only repeat part of her conclusion:

> In holding out for a distinction to be made between Israel and Jews, I am calling for a space for dissent for Jews, and non-Jews, who have criticisms of Israel to articulate; but I am also opposing anti-Semitic reductions of

> Jewishness to Israeli interests. The "Jew" is no more defined by Israel than by anti-Semitism. The "Jew" exceeds both determinations, and is to be found, substantively, as a historically and culturally changing identity that takes no single form and has no single telos. Once the distinction is made, discussion of both Zionism and anti-Semitism can begin, since it will be as important to understand the legacy of Zionism and to debate its future as to oppose anti-Semitism wherever we find it.

Some will think that I am making a blunder by addressing American dissent and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the same time, particularly because there are so many confusions and pitfalls in speaking about the conflict. Why not leave Israel out of it? Time and time again the peace movement in this country has been silenced because of confusions, the pressures of pro-Israel apologists, and the sometimes egregious failures of the Palestinian movement. Now, with the United States so embroiled in the Middle East, dissenters must grasp the significance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as central to the region and to engage in that debate; and many of us have insisted for decades on the centrality of the Middle East to all of American foreign policy.

Here, too, Twain has something to add. In *Tom Sawyer Abroad*, published in 1894, Twain carries Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, and Jim in a balloon ride across Africa to Egypt. Before their arrival, however, Tom attempts to recruit Huck and Jim to join a Crusade in a characteristic logomachy or word-war, a sort of brilliantly absurd, reversed Socratic dialogue. "A crusade is a war to recover the Holy Land from the paynim," Tom asserts, against the questions of Huck and Jim.

> "What do *we* want of it?"
>
> "Why, can't you understand? It's in the hands of paynim, and it's our duty to take it away from them."
>
> "How did we come to let them git hold of it?"
>
> "We didn't come to let them git hold of it. They always had it."
>
> "Why, Tom, then it must belong to them, don't it?"
>
> "Why, of course it does. Who said it didn't?"
>
> I studied over it, but couldn't seem to git at the right of it, no way. I says:
>
> "It's too many for me, Tom Sawyer. If I had a farm and it was mine, and another person wanted it, would it be right for him to—"

The deadpan comic dialogue, similar to the exchanges between Huck and Jim in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, skewers the logic of colonial aggrandizement and civilizing mission. Eventually, Tom explodes in frustration to counter Huck and Jim's assertions that it would be theft to steal someone's land: "They own the land, just the mere land, and that's all they *do* own; but it was our folks, our Jews and Christians, that made it holy, and so they haven't any business to be there defiling it. It's a shame, and we ought not to stand it a minute. We ought to march against them and take it away from them." Tom, thoroughly stymied, ultimately quits arguing with people who "try to reason out a thing that's pure theology by the laws that protect real estate" (21–25).

What Tom presents is the rationale for the "Peaceful Crusade," the movement of Europeans and, to a lesser degree, Americans, whether or not they were sanctioned by their respective governments, to participate in the Eastern Question through fervid Christian intervention and colonization in Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century. Published at the dawn of Herzlian Zionism, the dialogue could also be seen as critiquing that latest form of "recovering" the land for "our Jews and Christians." Three years earlier, in 1891, Reverend William Blackstone had already presented a "memorial" or petition, titled "Palestine for the Jews," to President Benjamin Harrison. "What shall be done for the Russian Jews?" the petition asked. "Why not give Palestine back to them?" (1). Although couched in liberal secular terms, Blackstone's memorial was founded on new theological formulations that radically revised the doctrine of Jewish Restoration according to a pre- instead of post-millennialist interpretation that called for Jewish return to the Holy Land *before* rather than after Jewish conversion to Christianity. This revision of Christian eschatology began to be projected in the first of the Niagara Prophecy Conferences in 1878, which Blackstone had elaborated in his popular tract *Jesus Is Coming*, published that same year. This revision removed a qualitative hindrance to support for secularized, political Zionism, since conversion, which Jews stubbornly rejected, would come after and not before colonial appropriation. The revisions articulated by Blackstone laid the groundwork for today's evangelical conservatives—our Falwells and Robertsons—to become ardent supporters of Israel.[2]

But for Twain, "the laws that protect real estate" are those of democratic relations. One of Twain's favorite burlesque techniques was to take a high-minded spiritual value, such as "pure theology," and render it in terms of mundane, commercial language. But as Tom asserts, and Twain satirizes, religious and national narratives can counter even property rights, just so long as a "higher" right, notably the need of empire, is asserted. Twain's satire is directed more broadly than only the appropriation of Palestine—rather, it targets *all* imperialist rationales, such as those that would soon lead the United States to expropriate the Philippines after its war with Spain. In *Tom Sawyer Abroad*, he employs commonsensical, bourgeois "property rights" to strip away the aura of the "natural" from the religious rationales of imperial ideology.

There has been a longstanding fascination with the Holy Land in American culture that predates modern political Zionism. But never before have religious-ideological identification combined with raw geopolitical calculations to the degree that they have today, particularly since the Bush and Sharon administrations have become so wedded, so closely identified, even sharing or exchanging some of the same personnel. Israel is not simply a client, and it certainly does not control U.S. foreign policy—the tail does not wag the dog—but there has been such a rapid merging of interests that I have no clear term to describe this special relationship.

But coming up with clear terms, with "framing" the debate, as George Lakoff puts it, is essential, and there are many similarities in the distinctions Judith Butler and I attempt to draw between the categories of "Jew" and "Israel" and "American" and "United States government." Critics of American policy are labeled anti-American and a new pathology of "anti-Americanism" is being analyzed, as if it were some mystery why people around the world resent imperial domination. Domestic critics are castigated as "America haters" because we do not trumpet the same chauvinism, and academics, in particular, are targeted as insufficient defenders of civilization or worse. Joel Beinin, professor of Middle East history at Stanford and at that time president of the Middle East Studies Association, issued a statement soon after 9/11 stating that, "If Usama bin Laden is confirmed to be behind the attacks, the United States should bring him before an international tribunal on charges of crimes against humanity." This statement, along with one-hundred and sixteen other statements by faculty and students after the attacks, including "Ignorance breeds hate" and "There needs to be an understanding of why this kind of suicidal violence could be undertaken against our country," was targeted by Lynne Cheney and others in the American Council of Trustees and Alumni as proof that "our universities are failing America" in the task of "defending civilization" (Martin and Neal). Beinin had not called for blood, so his rational insistence on the norms of justice was questioned, as were the other statements probing the causes for the attacks. Since then, the assault on critical thinking about the Middle East has expanded, with concerted campaigns in Congress and elsewhere to "monitor" Middle East Studies programs (H.R. 3077), since most scholars do not seem to defend civilization—that is, Bush and Sharon's imperial version of it—enough.[3]

If science can be distorted by political policy and right-wing ideology, as the Council of Concerned Scientists has pointed out, so can Middle East studies, despite the traditions of universities as arenas for unhindered thought and research. Butler, in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, calls for "a public space in which such issues might be thoughtfully debated, and to prevent that space being defined by certain kinds of exclusion and censorship." Only recently has Butler turned her attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but I can attest that for decades there was hardly any public space, even in the universities. For years, I would regularly have my life threatened for advocating ideas that today are considered commonplace (such as the need for negotiations with the PLO or the establishment of a Palestinian state). It was an ordeal just to crack open a very small public space where it was, indeed, legitimate to criticize Israel without being attacked as an anti-Semite or self-hating Jew. Such difficulties are always part of what it means to dissent during times of war, but they were especially severe in regard to the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For a number of reasons—particularly the persistence of "the Vietnam Syndrome"—it has been a little easier to create this public space when it comes to opposing American imperialist policies than it has been to question Israel's policies. Nonetheless, there are constant attempts to close up that space, whether from the rants of politicians or the threats of inspecting our reading habits through the Patriot Act.

Rhetoricians play an important role in keeping that space open and widening it at universities and all venues for discourse. We are skilled at analyzing the terms of the debate, such as Butler does, of exposing the nuances of chauvinism, of delusion, of revealing the mechanics of manipulation and propaganda, and the more we shine bright lights on the absurdities of Cheney, Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld, and the rest, the better. There has been great imagination and humor in the attempts to explode pretense and to project alternatives up to now—for example, the creativity and gusto of the women's group Code Pink, and the courage of Code Pink's Medea Benjamin to enter the lion's den of Fox News to talk down Bill O'Reilly was a thrilling moment in the days leading toward war; there was the powerful worldwide movement to perform Lysistrata, and the courage of arms-inspector Scott Ritter to persist with the truth about weapons of mass destruction despite vicious character assassination was inspiring. Jon Stewart of Comedy Central's *Daily Show* is not exactly a rhetorician, yet he is able to present some of the most effective rhetorical opposition in the country through ridicule and satire that Mark Twain would have admired.

But the times demand more. We must *create* the terms of debate, despite the powerful apparatus ranged against us. We are also writers, and in the various venues available to us, we must be the ones to pose a counter-discourse, we must create the needed framing, and we must do this intelligently. The extremists who have usurped control of this apparatus are well aware of this. Recently, Disney released yet another version of "The Alamo," a myth often trotted out for questionable "patriotic" purposes. Certainly, the earlier John Wayne and Fess Parker versions made serious contributions to Cold War mentality. However, a representative of Oliver North's "Freedom Alliance" condemned the recent version for "destroying a traditional American hero" because Davy Crockett was depicted as getting executed on his knees after the battle was over instead of dying in combat. No one is certain about the exact circumstances of Crockett's death, but historians have agreed that there is evidence for that possibility. Nonetheless, according to North's group, "Heroes such as Davy Crockett must be vigorously defended by all patriotic Americans in the culture war" (Waxman 2). North is aware of the power of myth to mobilize war-fever—and he is unequivocal that there is actually a "culture war." He is well aware that artists and writers and, yes, rhetoricians can fashion the imaginations of vast numbers of people.

So, we need to be creative, shrewd, constantly fine-tuning how we engage the debate. For example, "War is Not the Answer," one slogan goes—and slogans are important, despite their limitations. But in this instance it all depends what the question is. War *is* the answer if, indeed, your question is: how does this country dominate the oil regions of the Middle East so as to control the international economy, particularly the petroleum that Europe and Japan rely on, and therefore remain the centerpiece of all "globalization" dynamics and prevent the creation of a real multipolar world? (Remember the term "multipolar world"? That went the way of the "peace dividend" and other terms during that brief moment at the end of the Cold War when many of us entertained what now must appear to have been utopian possibilities.) Saying "War is Not the Answer" is not enough: we must "frame" debate with new terms based on thought-out conceptions of what global solidarity and an international system of cooperation, environmental survival, and human development could entail to replace the paradigm of unilateralist empire. We must risk all prudence to protect ourselves from those who seek to destroy us and our planet through violence of any kind.

And we must not be afraid of being scorned as traitors. Those who object to current policies are traitors only to the arrogance of empire.

Stanford University
Stanford, California

Notes

1. In *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, Wayne Booth has one prescient passage: "Nevertheless, I must say that the critics of the war have long since earned a resounding yes, the defenders of the policy a resounding no. Those of you who doubt me will, I hope, read the statement published in all the papers yesterday (April 25, 1971) by veteran John F. Kerry, as one of thousands of anguished appeals that to me can only be answered with a yes—which means, of course, a no to U.S. policy" (6).

2. See Blackstone, *Jesus*. For more discussion of Blackstone's theological innovation in Christian Zionism, see my, "Shadow."

3. For more on the attacks on Middle East studies in universities, Beinin.

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