A Note on Anti-Americanism

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CZESLAW MILOSZ USED THE TERM "political correctness" to describe the collapse of metaphysical and political levels of argument into a singular "New Faith." This fusion seems to be going on in American intellectual circles. I refer to the multiplying uses of the phrase, "anti-American."

To be "anti-American" seems to mean to violate decency, to do violence to absolute truth. Understood in this way, the phrase realigns the conventional left-right groupings in the United States around the axis of state power. Thus does Norman Podhoretz range liberal internationalists, Republican realists, and the "anti-American left" into "de-facto allies" merely because each group doubts the wisdom of the Iraq occupation.

Podhoretz views modern American history as a succession of noble wars, a view that has the advantage of simplifying things into good and evil, winners and defeatists, patriots and subversives, free societies and "swamps" that must be "drained." Since violence, in his view, is the instrument of historical change, diversity of opinion is the main threat. "Facing a conflict that may well go on for three or four decades," Podhoretz writes in his recent book, *World War IV.* "Americans of this generation are called upon to be more patient than 'the greatest generation' needed to be in World War II, which for us lasted only four years; and facing an enemy even more elusive than the Communists, the American people of today are required to summon at least as much perseverance as the American people of those days did — for all their bitching and moaning — over the 47 long years of World War III."

Why morale should be so important to a war that is so manifestly just and necessary Podhoretz never quite explains. But Milosz would have recognized the cast of his thought. In contrast to republican and democratic thinkers, who usually do not consecrate political authority, Podhoretz conflates the practical necessities of national security with the preservation of the national honor. This conflation, so common in conservative political thought, discourages the analysis of institutions in favor of the flattery of a charismatic leader. Podhoretz writes of "the amazing leader this President has amazingly turned out to be." He praises President Bush for his heart, stomach, and will, all the military virtues. Intelligence is tasked with moral surveillance of the many-sided opposition.

Those who are still willing to think freely about such matters might recall the old distinctions between country, government, and state. As Randolph Bourne wrote, the country comprises the social and cultural life of the people. It bears the common memories, habits, and values which make an American different from a Canadian, and an Englishman different from an Irishman. The idea of the country embraces these differences without rancor or rivalry. The government is the practical machinery by which the country conceives, debates, and agrees upon its laws. It comprises the temporary administrations, parliaments or coalitions. The state constitutes the apparatus of coercion, the monopoly of the means of violence. It collects the taxes, polices the territory, makes the wars.

On the strength of these distinctions we can reply to those who use "anti-American" as

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a slogan of abuse and intimidation that they mix up attitudes toward country and nation with attitudes toward state. They make themselves

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deputies in the state's campaign of propaganda against its citizens. This in itself is no surprise. As consumers turn themselves into salespeople for the corporations that jilt them, so do the state's most fanatical agents emerge from the formally free institutions of the country.

What is surprising is that contemporary elites have abandoned the vocabulary of obligation. Talk of national duty once eased the transformation of the free intellectual, who owed the highest obligation to culture itself, to the political ideologist willing to obfuscate for the sake of ends over which he exerted little direct control. Today the state does not even have to ask for such blind allegiance, though news from American journalism indicates that it is willing to pay cash for it, and there are buyers aplenty.

Reviving this link between popular sovereignty and mental freedom means refusing to be intimidated by allegations of "anti-Americanism," and, equally so, refusing to be baited by the division of intellectuals into "soft" and "hard" with respect to state enemies. It is worth remembering how long this distinction has poisoned debate. Waldo Frank and Lewis Mumford used it to knock around John Dewey's pragmatism in the pages of *The New Republic* in the late 1930s. Frank and Mumford charged then that pragmatic attitudes weakened the capacity to recognize the threat of European fascism. Their caricatures helped put two generations of liberal opinion on war footing, and drove Dewey into gloomy forecasting. "It is quite conceivable that after the next war we should have in this country a semi-military, semi-financial autocracy, which would fasten class divisions on this country for untold years," Dewey wrote in 1939. "In any case we should have the suppression of all the democratic values for the sake of which we professedly went to war."

Dewey's mood recovered, but his influence did not. The attacks of the late 1930s helped kill off the moral and political relevance of radical democratic thought for twenty years. By the 1950s the landscape of moral argument about foreign policy lay barren. Reviewing the work of Reinhold Niebuhr and Walter Lippmann in 1957, the philosopher Morton White complained, "It seems to me a sad commentary on the social thought of today that two of the most popular social thinkers on the American scene can produce nothing more original than the doctrines of original sin and natural law as answers to the pressing problems of this age."

The attacks on pragmatism in the late 1930s, the attacks on New Leftists in the 1960s, and the attacks on "relativists" and "postmodernists" by liberal magazines in the weeks and months after September 11 betray a common anxiety. What they share is panic in the presence of free thought, as indicated by widely circulated but perfectly ridiculous notions that to try to understand a mass murder is tantamount to excusing or apologizing for it. Let us hope that we can move beyond a discussion in which one party continually rediscovers the loss of the republic, while the other continually rediscovers the birth of the empire. All parties may soon discover that they have no clue.