In the days following the tragic events of September 11, U.S. peace movement organizations (PMOs) found themselves operating in a difficult political climate. For the government, the mainstream media and the general public, “citizen,” “patriot” and “retaliation” merged into a single “American” identity so that many felt that the nation and its way of life were at risk and that war was an appropriate response to the “new threat.” Since then the mistaken hyperbole of an “everything has changed” approach to understanding September 11 has permeated most discussions of the event. While the extent of change is exaggerated, it is nonetheless true that significant shifts occurred in the political landscape in both domestic and foreign policy. In addition, relatively simplistic understandings of patriotism gained even more credence than usual in the U.S., and policy dissent was denigrated and more easily branded as unpatriotic.

A long-range and comparative approach to history shows that many of these political developments are predictable and relatively common when a state comes under attack on its home soil. But owing partly to the United States’ placement as the world’s lone military superpower and its imperial policies in a globalized economy, the attacks of September 11, 2001 also deeply influenced how Americans understand themselves and perceive their relationships to the rest of the world. For example, the false insularity that most Americans had long taken for granted was suddenly threatened. The Bush administration easily exploited this, rallying support for a policy of a permanent war economy, aggressive military retaliation, pre-emptive attacks abroad and civil liberty suppression at home. At the core was a call to intensely nationalistic patriotism.

In a televised speech to a Joint Session of Congress, President Bush stated, “Tonight we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. Our grief has turned to anger, and anger to resolution. Whether we bring our enemies to justice, or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done.” In the same speech, the President praised Republicans and Democrats alike for singing “God Bless America” on the steps of the Capitol along with approving U.S.$40 billion to “rebuild our communities and meet the needs of our military.”

The general public responded to the events of 9/11 with intense national pride. According to a study conducted after 9/11 by the National Opinion...
Research Center, 97 percent of respondents agreed “they would rather be Americans than citizens of any other country.” The same study also offers evidence that elites successfully used this heightened nationalism to increase their own legitimacy. In the wake of the fiasco of the 2000 presidential election, public confidence in the executive branch of the Federal government had dropped to 13.5 percent. In the first survey taken after 9/11, confidence in the executive branch had risen to 51.5 percent. Confidence in the military nearly doubled from 39.7 percent prior to 9/11 to 77.4 percent afterwards. There was less room than ever for critical thinking about domestic and foreign policy decisions made by the power elites. Patriotism was over-simplified, as the “other” was made stark and dangerous.

Given these changes, we set out to discover how American peace groups responded discursively to the challenges that 9/11 posed to their activism. We collected and coded official statements about September 11, 2001, the so-called “War on Terrorism” in Afghanistan and elsewhere, and the PATRIOT ACT from nine organizations: the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC); the Black Radical Congress (BRC); the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR); the New York Labor Coalition Against the War (NYLAW); Pax Christi (PaxC); Peace Action (PA); the War Resisters’ League (WRL); Women’s Action for New Directions (WAND); and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).

Most of the 56 statements collected were issued between September 11, 2001 and December 31, 2001. We defined “official statements” as press and media releases, printed statements, editorials and public calls to action from an organization’s national office, issued in the name of the organization. These statements create a partial historical record of an organization’s words and actions, and demonstrate how organizations contribute to discursive processes that shape the construction of patriotism.

Peace movement organizations have at least two options in responding to the use of widely and deeply resonant cultural materials by power elites to secure mass consent to war (what Antonio Gramsci termed “hegemony”). On the one hand, they can create counter-cultures that directly challenge hegemonic concepts and practices. Norms that encourage deference to the state are questioned, resistance is celebrated and new practices are lived out.

Alternatively, groups can take a more complicated and subtler approach by employing cultural materials from the political mainstream that are likely to increase both bystander support and sympathetic media coverage by modifying, reclaiming or rewriting those materials. In this way, knowledge that is familiar and that resonates with a wide range of potential and actual constituents is turned to new purposes: the creation of oppositional knowledge that challenges government actions and supports political change. This oppositional knowledge may place pressure upon targeted elites to meet movement demands. We refer to this work by PMOs of co-opting symbols and meanings as “harnessing hegemony.”

Our study suggests that peace activists both challenged hegemony and harnessed hegemony in the months following the September 11 attacks. For
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instance, one sign at a demonstration to protest the war in Afghanistan declared that “Patriots are Idiots: Matriarchy Now,” while another read, “Loyalty to the Country Always; Loyalty to the Government When It Deserves It.” The first directly challenges the conformist nationalist identity, suggesting that it uncritically accepts the status quo system of hierarchy, and calls for an alternative approach to power and order. In contrast, the second sloganeer harnesses patriotism, attempting to redirect its potency on behalf of the peace movement by decoupling the nation from the state.

Herein, we analyze the discursive techniques used by PMOs in their project of creating an alternative understanding of 9/11, the bombing of Afghanistan and the passing of the PATRIOT ACT. Overall, we found that the nine peace groups studied responded to the changed political landscape facing opposition movements in a post-9/11 United States by calling on bedrock American themes to critique the government’s responses.

One area of discursive engagement was the role of September 11 in testing the United States’ “true character” as a nation. In a televised address on the War on Terrorism, President Bush stated, “During the last two months, we have shown the world America is a great nation. Americans have responded magnificently, with courage and caring.” The President went on to equate this true “American character” with the War on Terrorism. In contrast, peace groups claimed that opposing war was most consistent with the true character of America.

Some of the organizations counseled that September 11 and the national crises it unleashed should be understood as a testing period, a “crucial moment” that created an opportunity for the U.S. to rely on its true values and to uphold its most deeply held constitutional principles. They clearly saw that the definition of what it meant to be an “American” was being contested. They also insisted that the stakes were even higher insofar as this was not just about how peace activists view themselves, but also about how others view them. For example, WILPF suggested that “the people of the world are watching” to see how the U.S. would respond, and counseled, “Let us demonstrate that our strength is in our resolve to maintain a democratic and free society and break the cycle of violence and retribution.”

Similarly, Pax Christi issued statements designed to tap into reservoirs of relatively benign national pride by consistently calling forth from fellow citizens “the best of [the] U.S. tradition” and the “best of who we are.” Pax Christi even drew upon maternal metaphors to inspire Americans to show their true character and honor traditional values through their opposition to retaliatory violence: “Our unspeakable grief and pain has, like a woman in labor, also given birth to a new sense of unity and has given the nation an opportunity to show its true character.”

The usage of American identity themes was strongest in countering the war in Afghanistan. Peace movement organizations constructed a notion of American identity that turned traditionally nationalistic themes into the service of peace, human rights and military moderation in the War on Terrorism. For instance, while there was broad popular support in the United States for bombing
Afghanistan and the larger effort to hunt for al-Qaeda members, AFSC, FOR, WILPF and PaxC each flatly rejected the equation of patriotism with support for U.S. policies and refused to join in the wave of blind patriotic nationalism.

For example, WILPF writing in response to the PATRIOT ACT and the U.S. intent to bomb Afghanistan suggested,

> We urge our fellow citizens to at least listen to those who, out of love of country, dare to say what many do not wish to hear. Our government, too, has in the past supported terrorists—including some of the very groups we fear today—and used the methods of terrorism to unseat democratically elected governments in the service of our own perceived “national interest.”

The New York Labor Coalition Against the War harnessed American identity, proclaiming, “we are proud to be American trade unionists against the war,” thus linking a traditionally pro-American image of the “trade unionist” to the anti-war movement.

Harnessing “American identity” thus redefined patriotism to mean dissent, including dissenting from a War on Terrorism that, while it may have had a just cause, was nonetheless being waged in an unjust manner, according to FOR. This was an important alternative in a political context described by FOR as leading “to an unquestioning patriotism that equates dissent with unAmericanism.” Protest became defined as a legitimate means of showing love for country. Pax Christi tried to turn the tables on those who used patriotism to silence policy critics when it claimed that the highest form of patriotism is criticism itself: “There will be those who will try to tell us that criticizing our national policies in time of crisis is unpatriotic. But as William Fulbright, the former Senator from Arkansas reminds us, ‘Criticism is more than right; it is an act of patriotism, a higher form of patriotism, I believe, than the familiar ritual of national adulation. All of us have the responsibility to act upon the higher patriotism which it to love our country less for what it is than for what we would like it to be.’”

Collective identities generally involve commitments to common principles. In the case of nationalism, patriots uphold the core values that unite the nation. In trying to mobilize the American public to support the War on Terrorism, President Bush sought to heighten patriotism by vilifying the enemy as the antithesis of American values, saying, “We value life; the terrorists ruthlessly destroy it. We value education; the terrorists do not believe women should be educated or should have health care, or should leave their homes. We value the right to speak our minds; for the terrorists, free expression can be grounds for execution.”

Once again peace groups sought to harness hegemony by associating dissent with the national principles articulated by the President. They saw Bush’s policies actually limiting rather than upholding traditional American freedoms, and they insisted that the job of the true patriot was to protect the Bill of Rights. The AFSC enumerated a long list of constitutional rights whose use would form a bulwark against the new dangers facing the U.S., concluding, “Working in your communities to use and protect these rights in the weeks ahead will
guarantee that terrorism has not destroyed the fabric of liberty or undercut our Constitution.”

The point of such statements was not to engage in remedial civics lessons with a public whose allegiance to America was clearly uncontested. Instead, these organizations contested something else—the actual meaning of national allegiance in a post-9/11 world, where much is thought to have changed. Recalling what they see as the original definition of a patriot, they argue that citizens who want to be true Americans must continue to speak openly, associate freely, assemble often, dissent freely and protect their privacy. As far as the War Resisters’ League was concerned, this applied to members of the armed forces as well: “We encourage members of the armed forces to consider carefully their own role in a war which, despite its wide popular support at the moment, is a violation of our own constitution and of the charter of the United Nations.”

Harnessing hegemony shifts the critical spotlight, holding power elites accountable to the same values that they reference to bolster their legitimacy. The AFSC invoked foundational American principles to challenge the government’s policies: “The very principles on which this country was founded do not support the erosion of civil liberties or the … discrimination of entire groups of people for individual actions.” The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom argued that the war in Afghanistan will not only make Americans less safe in the long run, but it will also destroy civil liberties and democracy, those values Americans hold most dear, and which are the United States’ “greatest gift” to the world.

In addition to calling for the protection of civil liberties, peace groups also appealed to Americans’ commitment to tolerance, social equality and democracy. While addressing the scapegoating of immigrants of color that the September 11 attacks had unleashed in the country, FOR asked rhetorically, “Will we determine to carry out special acts of kindness by reaching across lines of difference with goodwill and compassion? Will we seek to overcome evil with good?” The Black Radical Congress associated anti-racism with true Americanism and with personal risk-taking on behalf of those threatened: “True anti-racism may require us to put ourselves at risk physically in order to defend Arabs and Muslims from unwarranted attacks.”

Putting oneself at risk on behalf of others became an important touchpoint for rousing nationalism in post-9/11 America. For the media, the government and society in general, those who lost their lives in the bombings became symbols of a besieged nation. Politicians and White House spokespersons repeatedly referenced the victims in association with the administration’s plans for war. In his first speech after the attacks, President Bush pledged to carry the police badge of an officer who died at the World Trade Center. In this charged political context, those who challenged the plans for a global War on Terrorism were not only deemed traitorous to the nation, but also callous and unsympathetic to the suffering of America’s innocent civilians. This discursive turn of events created unique challenges for a peace movement already laboring under difficult conditions. How did the peace movement respond to the use of victims and heroes of 9/11 to promote militarism and war?

Peace groups began by immediately making clear their sympathy for the victims. For instance this compassion and sense of commonality was voiced by
WAND: “We are deeply shaken by the horror inflicted on our country yesterday … Like the rest of the world, we searched for hope and assurances of the safety of loved ones. Our deepest sympathy and our prayers are with the victims, their families, and the emergency response teams.” Within days peace groups uniformly condemned the attacks, making statements such as: “The Black Radical Congress (BRC) strongly condemns the horrific terror attacks which occurred on September 11th, 2001. The brazen murder of countless thousands of civilians cannot be supported or condoned.” In the process, peace activists discursively insulated themselves from allegations of being unpatriotic.

Peace groups also linked themselves to the heroism of firefighters and police officers who risked and lost their lives in desperate efforts to save others. For example, calling the actions of the emergency workers examples of the country’s “finest hour,” Pax Christi expanded traditional notions of both heroism and of nationalism centered on the defeat of opponents on the battlefield to include heroes who sacrifice to save and protect lives, at the expense of only themselves:

We have witnessed countless acts of heroic self-sacrifice, love and compassion for those caught up in this tragedy. A new kind of American hero has been forged in the sweat and blood of countless fire fighters, police officers, emergency workers, doctors, nurses and volunteers who gave all they had, including their lives, for the sake of others. And in those instances when the ugly face of racism showed itself, countless numbers of people of faith stood in the breach and offered protection for our Arab neighbors. In many respects this has been our finest hour.

This image of the 9/11 hero was further put forth by Pax Christi as a “parable” by which Americans could live their lives and conduct their domestic and foreign policy, “preventing further victims, attending to vulnerable ones, sheltering from harm.”

The attacks of September 11, 2001 challenged peace activists seeking to open space for critical analysis. As PMOs accommodated the political climate and used discussions of patriotism to call for peace, the question remained—was the peace movement better off harnessing hegemony or directly challenging it? On the one hand, social movements’ research suggest that during low ebbs in levels of protest within a society, mass movements are not likely to form unless organizers can discursively tap into widely and deeply resonant identities, beliefs and values. Statements that directly challenge resonant cultural materials (for example, that racism and capitalism constitute the driving forces behind U.S. government policies) are unlikely to attract participants beyond those already convinced.

What perhaps has most distinguished the post-9/11 peace movement in the United States from its predecessors is the diversity of its participants. In recent anti-war demonstrations, people from all walks of life came to their first protest. The U.S. Civil Rights Movement amply demonstrated that demanding a state’s policies to truly reflect the principles that underpin its legitimacy places enormous moral pressure upon the state to respond. We have also seen evidence that, in the post-9/11 context, harnessing hegemony not only insulated peace activists from censure and repression, but also has promoted dialogue. For instance, on
one college campus, towards the end of official hostilities with Iraq, ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) cadets and associated fraternities decided to hold a "Proud to be an American Day." The event offered both free hot dogs and live rock music. Sitting in the thick of things, two students held a poster that simply read, "Peace is Patriotic." When asked, neither of the students reported being intimidated or threatened. Rather they said that several people approached them to discuss what the war was about and what would happen next.

Those who favor challenging hegemony argue that the quality of peace activism matters more than its quantity. If one assumes that the U.S. political system is corporate dominated and, therefore, largely beyond the influence of ordinary citizens engaged in low-risk activism, then building a mass movement may be less effective than organizing a committed cadre of activists willing to incur high personal costs to raise the costs of war to the state.

In addition, one might wonder whether harnessing hegemony ultimately reproduces existing power relations. In the context of the peace movement, nationalism contributes to war by devaluing the lives and rights of those who are not part of the nation. By feeding into the logic of nationalism, efforts to reconstruct nationalist identities may be counter-productive. Moreover, by failing to challenge capitalism, racism and patriarchy, appeals to patriotism simply divert attention away from the underlying sources of militarism, possibly limiting the transformational potential of social movements.

Proponents of harnessing hegemony counter that the staple materials of mainstream political culture are flexible enough to be combined in ways that offer poignant and systematic critiques of existing power relations. For instance, the principle of democracy can be enlisted in cogent critiques of capitalism, racism, patriarchy and militarism. Moreover, the love of one’s nation is not inherently incompatible with respect for and even identification with others beyond the nation. In fact, some of the peace groups studied constructed the “good American” in terms of cooperation with other states and respect for international law, enlisting democracy, civil liberties, tolerance and social equality on behalf of the cause.

Whether to harness, or challenge, or attempt to combine both strategies will result in a global shift towards peace and justice remains an open question, which only history will solve. But the resilience of PMOs to adapt to U.S. culture in the post-9/11 context is both striking and impressive, even if it did not bring an end to all support for military might. What our data reveals is that in recognizing the shifts in the political landscape, peace groups in the months following the attacks of September 11, 2001 sought to create political and cultural space for opposition to war by avidly claiming ownership of an American identity and patriotic goals.

Each organization we studied condemned the terrorist attacks, but then used the shift in the American psyche to invoke a deeper discussion of what it means to be patriotic and what defines the core of American identity. Truth, social justice, compassion, democracy and an unswerving belief in the need for dissent emerged as the critical characteristics that these organizations identified as the backbone of being American. Thus the protection of civil liberties, opposition to
unjustified military retaliation, and the affirmation of U.S. membership in the world community were for the moment transformed into definably patriotic acts.

RECOMMENDED READINGS


