

# On Deciphering Ameriglish as a Cultural Tool (Part Three)

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This article, the third about how contemporary Ameriglish provides insights into mainstream America,<sup>1</sup> examines selected vocabulary items pertaining to popular political discourse.

The United States has long been advertised as “the Land of the Free” and a “free country,” both of which can be interpreted in more than one way. In typical “patriotic” and even casual discourse, however, the word “free” is often considered to characterize a condition of individual people, generally American citizens but also – at least to a reasonable extent – legal permanent residents (LPRs), and this is grounded in the concept of “rights” accorded through the national and state constitutions as well as through the historical experience of Americans and settlers in the United States when contrasted to their possibilities in their ancestral homelands, mostly in Europe. In a comparative, and especially historical, context there is no need to contest this sentiment, and neither is there any need to do so when the United States today is contrasted with existing “dictatorships” and other countries where people face substantial restrictions on how they go about life. What often appears to be overlooked by some “patriots” who consider themselves to be “conservative” is that despite their fear of previously nonexistent rights being created for (in want of a better expression) nontraditional or unconventional social groups, and their fear of cherished rights being taken away,<sup>2</sup> the very concept of “freedom” has become so apparently narrow in a de facto sense that it is difficult to characterize Americans as actually being “free.” In many instances, they certainly cannot, or ought not, do whatever they please: laws, selective law enforcement, lawsuits, and threats of lawsuits take care of that possibility – especially when they are special-interest, remedial, or reactionary (to events) in the case of laws and trivial or virtually flippant in the case of lawsuits – as can secular and religious peer pressure.

When compiling the Ameriglish dictionaries,<sup>3</sup> it was necessary to come up with at least one definition for “freedom” because of its importance as an American value,

and the best simple explanation which could be thought of was “polite captivity” on the grounds that complete freedom does not exist and that this might reflect the situation which Americans are generally in. The illustrative entry for this word, a brief conversational exchange in the *Second Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary*, was written to get this across:

[1] “Immigrants flock to American shores in the hope of living in *freedom*.” “I suppose everything is relative.”

That “freedom” is a relative concept need not be moot, but a reasonable person would be able to judge that such relativity is implied in general usage of the word in American discourse, simply because Americans are aware of at least some checks on their independence of action. The same may be said for the word “liberty,” which essentially means “freedom” except in hair-splitting cases, and the main means of placing checks on independence, that is of restricting freedom, are legislation and, especially, enforcement of selected legislation.

The other sense of “freedom” and “liberty,” which can be squeezed out of the concept a “free country” despite its not normally being meant when the United States is referred to as one, is independence from another polity. In the American case, this would be independence from Britain, something which was famously declared in July 1776 and subsequently ensured by a sequence of events in 1781 (end of hostilities in the War for Independence), 1783 (the Treaty of Paris), 1787-88 (composition and effective ratification of the United States Constitution), and 1815 (end of the War of 1812 against Britain). That “freedom” and “liberty” were thought of in a collective light, as well as an individual, can be discerned from a few extracts from the two most important documents of this period, the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the United States Constitution (1787), the italics being provided for emphasis here:<sup>4</sup>

→ A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of *a free people*. [Declaration]

→ We ... the Representatives of the united States of America ... do ... solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be *Free and Independent States* .... [Declaration]

→ We the People of the United States, in Order to ... secure *the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity*, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America. [Constitution]

Granted that the United States Constitution has permitted the concept of individual

“rights,” originally to be acquired through the states and/or by the people and later via some amendments, it might be adjudged that the elite and others have not placed much emphasis on these, meaning that in a sense it has been an approximately twenty-four-decade project of “the people” to secure rights and, through them, define some vague concept of “freedom.” The recent “Tea Party” movement is one manifestation of this popular (of/for/by the people) project.

Strongly linked to freedom, liberty, and the exercise of rights is the concept of “democracy.” Although the United States claims to be a “democracy” in terms of political structure and spirit and propagandizes the virtues of “democracy” throughout the world, it is clear that its etymology – the people + rule (*demos + kratos*) – has proved to be more of an intellectual curiosity than a credible paradigm, and this is alluded to in the *Ameriglish Dictionary* by this “originally supposed to be” observation:

[2] a form of government in which the people of a country were so important that their sentiments and such like were to be respected to the extent that the people running the country actually had to do more than just pay lip service to them.

Because thoughtful Americans have generally seemed to understand that a true, pure democracy is exceedingly idealistic, and perhaps impossible to attain, the expression “representative democracy” has long been used to qualify America’s political system. “Representative democracy,” however, is not a terribly practical expression for use in domestic or international propaganda, partly because of its length (nine syllables), but mainly because it clearly can lead to such paradoxes as a “dictator” and cronies claiming to represent the people in whose interest and on whose behalf they are ruling. Hence, the question of representation, which the “in recent history and in our day and age” definition of “democracy” in the *Ameriglish Dictionary* leads a reader to consider:

[3] a vague political philosophy or entity which seems to emphasize free markets and capitalism and to be against dictatorships.

Putting aside sophisticated arguments which would argue that reality is more complex than this, this is essentially what “democracy” in America can be reduced to. A dictatorship – “a form of government in which society is controlled rather to very strictly according to the ideas of the people in charge of it” – is considered to be a bad thing, perhaps with good reason, while capitalism is “an economic system which [has] to do with ... what these days is called a free market,” itself “a place where sellers and buyers and observers can do their business without any obstacles” (all

three from the *Ameriglish Dictionary*). Notably, things such as participation of ordinary people through the likes of voting, participating in rallies, and corresponding with politicians were not mentioned in the definition of “democracy” because they have bordered on the tangential and “the vote” – often considered the most important right conferred upon an American citizen – “is quite often exercised by inaction” (*Ameriglish Dictionary*), an allusion to the fact that the majority of potential voters in the United States, whether from disinterest or from a sense of impotence, abstain from their most feasible means of participating in the political process.

In a representative democracy, obviously, “representation” is an important concept, and this is explained in the *Ameriglish Dictionary* as being

[4] an entitlement which allows somebody to talk and to vote and to do other appropriate things on your behalf in a government.

This occurs at various levels of government, and the extremely local level offers the closest opportunity for representation to be acquired by a politically interested or motivated citizen of humble means and intellect, although often enough even at the lower levels a bit of wealth is quite useful for garnering credibility, respect, and votes. Rising from the extremely local level upward toward that of the country, however, not only do people become more abstract – eventually to being lumped together as “the American people” – but so also do they have less and less of an opportunity as individuals to become somebody who acquires the “entitlement” to represent others, meaning that the people who can (election winners) or who could have (election losers) must have special abilities and privileges that have somehow been conferred by somebody else, which brings attention back to “capitalism” and the “free market” in item [3] above. People with access to amazing sums of money – the captains of industry or, as better expressed today, the corporate world – have come to exert such influence on politicians that it would not be beyond reason to say that the entire political system has been bought out by masters of contemporary capitalism, who have managed to nudge politicians into giving more and more freedom to “the market.” This has led to the declining regulation of the domestic market which set up the current economic crisis, vocal resistance to “socialism” as an evil system which would “redistribute the wealth” and take away freedoms, and promoting “globalization” as an economic paradigm for no other apparent reason than that it seems cool the whole world is involved.

In essence, when politicians speak up for “the market” and “globalization” as well as speak out against “socialism,” they are doing so as paid agents of what

has come to be known as Corporate America, the summation of big businesses which to a meaningful degree set the parameters for how people in America lead their lives. Perhaps this is much better than a dictatorship run according to what become far-fetched, even unbelievably ideal, or according to the self-preserving interests of certain people, but the recent behavior of so-called Corporate America has come close to mirroring such a dictatorship. Standards of living have been falling inside the United States, and as people experience greater economic – read “financial” – stress, they will become more willing to sacrifice “rights” and freedom for lower-paying jobs, something which surely has long been obvious to the upper managerial class and their political proxies, but something which promises to become an increasing reality as Americans face the consequences of a “democracy” that seems to have deflated the interests and potency of the *demos* element.

Hence, this is what “globalization,” taken from the *Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary*, means to most people in America:

[5] a modern-day capitalist movement which is taking place throughout the world with the apparent intent of evening out the differences in standard of living between the common people in the richer and the poorer countries and also with the apparent intent of making a small elite throughout the world richer than they are and thereby keeping them in a position to control billions of exploitable souls.

Since protests, riots, and even talk of revolution could be in the future, the past couple of years have witnessed the “conservative” elite and their “red-meat,” lower social echelon supporters already going after the most likely political paradigm to pose a challenge to “the American way of life,” socialism. In the *Ameriglish Dictionary*, this is explained as:

[6] a secular political philosophy which is a milder form of communism and about a hundred years ago even of anarchism and which is considered to be distasteful by most important people and even others in America because it emphasizes social welfare and therefore is not useful for governing the country.

Since 2008, when the word became quite noticeable in political discourse, “socialism” has come to be equated with President Barack Obama, Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi, and whatever the Europeans do in terms of economy and politics, and generally the semiotics reveal a rather negative sentiment. Never mind that since the 1930s the United States has operated quite well with a fair dose of socialism – elderly “conservative” anti-socialists, as a starter, ought to be reminded that pensions and related health benefits are an enduring legacy of governmental

attempts to make life less painful for the working class (capitalism, red in tooth and claw, would prefer to consign such charity to the dustbin of history) – it is a concept that somehow has been revived, after an approximately fifteen-year period of celebrating the end of ideological history, to fill the conceptual void of political evil which has been left since the demise of Soviet-style communism. What seems to be crucial in the vocal, popular dislike of socialism is that it is “the government” – “an imaginary or not imaginary entity which makes life difficult for you” (*Ameriglish Dictionary*) – which promises to be in the position of making decisions and setting the parameters concerning the distribution of wealth, and it is “the government” which many Americans have grown up to learn to distrust, if not to hate, and some of this has to do with concepts handed down from the 1770s.

Socialism and communism emphasize society, elevating the welfare of the group above that of the individual, which is where the rub is. Americans have long promoted the concept of individualism, which the *Ameriglish Dictionary* explains as being

[7] a way of life in which a person struggled primarily through its own efforts on the road to success (or failure).

This can be interpreted to mean allowing people to work their way through life without being shackled by others if they so choose, something which is important because human nature has evolved in such a way that a good number of people are into exerting or trying to exert control over others, often enough for the sake of having power or influence or fame or something such like, and this perversity is worth limiting if not eradicating. One broad philosophy which addressed this head-on was the anarchism that flourished from the middle of the nineteenth century into the twentieth – and strains of anarchism have returned to the American political fringe in the last couple of decades, including within the “Libertarian” and “Tea Party” movements – yet the unfortunate plight of many anarchists not only has illustrated the perversity of people and institutions (run by people of course) into control but also what happens when people who do want to follow the beat of their own drum (and/or that of their communal or collective associates) demand what would seem to be a fundamental human right, if not a right of any sentient being.<sup>5</sup> Freedom from control – whether exerted by the likes of dictatorships or absolute monarchies, by representative democracies, by large corporations or companies of various sizes, or by other forces of wealth and ideas – has been the fundamental principle overriding anarchism in its various theoretical and implemented manifesta-

tions, and the reverberations of this for the American political class is hinted at in the *Ameriglish Dictionary*, which notes that anarchism was

[8] a secular political philosophy that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was opposed to the modern state and capitalism and which served as America's first major irritant after slavery was abolished ...; a philosophy which was particularly despised by people in American government late in the nineteenth and early in the twentieth century because it threatened their privileges by taking American ideals about limited government too far.

Given that freedom is the central theme of anarchism, it places great emphasis on the individual as a discrete unit worthy of dignity and respect, something which American proponents of "individualism" would likely support. Individualism is, however, never absolute but always relative within a social context, and idealists and "red-meat" conservatives are likely to suffer the same fates as anarchists past if they pursue, or try to pursue, lifeways that are not burdened down by vain authority. Still, those who exercise the vain authority are bright enough to twist concepts like freedom, liberty, and individualism to their benefit, often by trying to make their underlings think they are free, at liberty, or individualistic, hence this cynical explanation of "individualism" from the *Ameriglish Dictionary*:

[9] a philosophy which encourages inflation of the ego so that it may be taken advantage of by assigning it responsibility.

And being assigned responsibility – "something which a person acquires that is exclusively its own problem" (*Ameriglish Dictionary*) – is not necessarily a good thing.

It ought to be noted that in the definitions of "socialism" and "anarchism" (items [6] and [8]) the word "secular" precedes "political philosophy," which is also true for "communism" ("a secular political philosophy akin to socialism ... which served as America's main irritant during the Cold War" in the *Ameriglish Dictionary*) but not for "democracy" ("a vague political philosophy" in item [3]). This is important because Christianity has wielded symbolic and even ideological influence on American politics, not least of all because it continues to play an important role within the popular culture by propagating intellectual and behavioral frameworks and by territorial expressions, often very clear, throughout the cultural landscape. Political careers can be made or destroyed by higher-ranking ecclesiastics whose access to financial wealth, generated from common people and businesses of all sizes, puts some of them not far behind the captains of industry in terms of influence over

politicians, none of which should come as a surprise because religion the world over has far more often than not turned into a form of institutionalized politics.

Still, the present-day United States was conceived in part of becoming a polity in which no particular religious institution would play a significant role, mainly because various Protestant denominations, the Church of England, and the Roman Catholic Church had become established within the colonies before independence from Britain, none of them approximated an official church as did the Church of England after its creation by Henry VIII, and there were people who were not inclined toward religion anyway. The commonly used expression for identifying a boundary between spiritual and secular spheres of influence is the “separation of church and state,” which in the *Third Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* is explained as being

[10] a principle which dictates that spiritual or religious affairs and governmental affairs are not supposed to interfere with each other.

At the national level, the source of this principle is to be found in the United States Constitution, not in the original publication (1787) but in Amendment 1 (1791), which specifically says this, and only this, about religion: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”<sup>4</sup> These two clauses have been parsed and interpreted not only by the judicial branch of government but also by people of all levels of applied intelligence, and in the end all they say is that the United States Congress is not allowed to make any law – favorable, detrimental, or somehow combined – that has anything to do with “an establishment of religion” and that it cannot make any law which prevents or forbids “the free exercise” of religion. They do not mention any other legislative body at the state or local level, so sentiments toward religion and its relationship with government at levels below the national (usually called “federal” in the United States) have to be found outside these clauses.<sup>6</sup> Still, these clauses in Amendment 1 clearly allow for religious influence in the popular culture, in the political culture, and for all intents and purposes even in Congress itself (e.g. if Congress cannot prohibit the free exercise of religion, it cannot prohibit the free exercise of religion in Congress itself, which means that things like saying a prayer, wearing religious clothing, or using religious paraphernalia within Congress would be acceptable).

Of course, a key problem with the clauses about religion in Amendment 1 is what the word “religion” actually means. Dismissing for the purposes of this and related articles – which focus on how vocabulary is interpreted and used in ordinary life – the

fact that legal and other technical definitions exist, over many years of listening to Americans speak and reading what Americans have written, it occurred that there are three distinct meanings of “religion,” which are entered in descending order of apparent frequency in the *Ameriglish Dictionary*:

[11] any form of Christianity; (once in a while) all of Christianity; (less frequently) religion.

This is not abject cynicism, even in regard to the third definition which might very well come across as extremely condescending, but a reflection of word usage. It is very common to hear answers such as “Baptist,” “Methodist,” or “Catholic” to the question “what is your religion?” because those qualifications have historical and substantial meaning among Christians, so in a sense “religion” has become shorthand for “denomination of Protestant Christianity” (e.g. the first two examples) and “branch of Christianity” (e.g. the third) among speakers of Ameriglish because for most intents and purposes theirs has been, at least until the recent generation, fundamentally a Christian country, and the commonness among the various forms of Christianity is not as important for most people as are the differences. Still, Christianity itself is known to be a religion, hence the second definition, and in the past couple of decades the number of religious, yet not Christian people has been steadily increasing in the United States, hence the third definition – a reference, notably, to Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Amerindian spiritualism, and New Age spiritualism – is creeping into discourse. What this means for politics and government, however, is quite disturbing for American traditionalists or “conservatives” because if such things as Islam or New Age spiritualism are accorded the status of “religion,” they too can become a part of the body politic, complete with influence over politicians from their ecclesiastics and public symbolism and activities, including perhaps conducting the likes of ritual prayer within Congress. Eventually, this can have repercussions on how life can be or ought to be led.

Concern that religions other than Christianity, especially Islam, are increasingly gaining influence within American society and politics appears to complement the fear that atheism, inspired by communism and science, might develop into a mainstream philosophy which would consign Christianity to the cultural fringe. There are a few streams within the world of politics where people who might be described as Christian conservative patriots have been defensively vocal, and these include attempts to protect the Pledge of Allegiance from change and even banishment from some public venues, to display the Ten Commandments from the Old Testament

of the Bible in places like courthouses, and to argue for Creationism or Intelligent Design to be taught alongside the natural-science paradigm of evolution and for prayer to be openly allowed in public schools. Given that there are Christians and even “patriots” who do not get too worked up over any of these, it is clear that it is an aggressively active minority within American Christendom which weaves such issues into the body politic, and this minority has been termed the “Religious Right,” which the *Ameriglish Dictionary*, tongue not completely in cheek, explains as being

[12] Christians (typically Protestants) who would love to do with the United States what the ayatollahs have done with Iran since 1979 and especially in the 1980s.

Perhaps this assessment comes across as being a bit harsh, but it need not be off the mark because Christianity does have a violent history and both the English and the Spanish engaged in their fair share of it on territory that now belongs to the United States, while Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* (1953) is sufficient reminder of what could transpire were the “Religious Right” ever to be in position to control American society.

Of the examples of issues that interest Christians in the previous paragraph, for some readers the reference to “the Pledge of Allegiance” need not be as obvious as the others. It is a solemn statement of patriotism which often enough is not recited in a completely voluntary fashion, but importantly has been questioned about its suitability because of the clause “under God” that was inserted into it early during the Cold War to distinguish Christian America from God-less communism. In the *Second Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary*, the Pledge of Allegiance is defined as

[13] a solemn and virtually sacred oath declaring loyalty to the American republic and which is memorized by nearly everybody in America as “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

The *Ameriglish Dictionary* also notes that it “is memorized but often not thoroughly understood,” which is especially true of the young children who recite it at school morning after morning, and this is where the danger is because – just as Roman Catholics used to recite things in Latin without really knowing what they were saying – reciting the Pledge can become a ritual which traps people into an all-or-nothing scenario. This statement clearly means that the republic comprises one nation under God, and that by reciting it the reciter essentially affirms the existence of God, which through the common culture and historical meaning is the God of Christians. The

other examples of issues that have fallen within the domain of political discourse given previously do not require any elaboration here, but it is worth wrapping up this commentary about religion by citing these clauses and statements in the Declaration of Independence,<sup>4</sup> the italics being provided for emphasis:

- the Laws of Nature and of *Nature's God*
- [people] are endowed by their *Creator* with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness
- appealing to *the Supreme Judge of the world* for the rectitude of our intentions
- with a firm reliance on the protection of divine *Providence*

In the first of these citations, “Nature’s God” is to be read with the understanding that it was God who created Nature, while in the remaining three, “Creator,” “the Supreme Judge of the world,” and “Providence” are synonyms for God. Given the existence of these expressions within the document that essentially created the United States of America, “conservatives” certainly have plenty of reason to demand that Christianity maintain a leading role within American culture, including within the domain of politics and government.

Despite the concept of the “separation of church and state” existing in both popular and technical discourse, then, it is highly questionable that complete separation has existed throughout American history. Religious personnel and institutions have been active in politics and public affairs in which governments at all levels have had an interest – prayers, convocations, sanctioned holidays, displays of sacred people and scenes, and the frequently uttered “God bless America” for example – and often enough tradition is cited as a justification for allowing many activities, as in not seeing them as being in conflict with the principle of separating church and state. “Church” itself is given three meanings in the *Ameriglish Dictionary*, and without repeating previous observations, it is the third one which in conjunction with the third definition given above in item [11] that causes consternation within “conservative” America:

- [14] a place where Christians go to meet other Christians and to do various things associated with Christianity; (often with “the”) Christianity; religion.

As for “state,” the two definitions given in the *Ameriglish Dictionary* are straightforward:

- [15] one of the fifty major political divisions of the United States and which theoretically could become an individual country; an independent country.

And just as “church” has taken on symbolic meaning – first for Christianity and

more recently for any religion – so too has “state” come to symbolize secular government.

That being obvious, all that is left to say about the role of “religion” in “democracy” is that there is a tension within the so-called “culture war(s)” over the extent to which the “separation of church and state” exists, has existed, and ought to exist within America. Many people who identify themselves as “patriots” (lovers of the fatherland), “conservatives” (traditionalists), and on the “right” (orthodox, following the correct path) have reason to argue that the “separation” has always been superficial and simply operates as a device to stop the United States from becoming a tyrannical theocracy, while opponents can take different approaches such as there should be complete separation which forces religion into a completely private, almost hidden niche, or the separation can remain superficial as long as other religions get to participate with “equal opportunity” as Christianity. With a bit more economic, political stress in the United States, it ought to be said, this issue might turn out to be more than words in the wind. While it might be true that the so-called Christian right is a minority, albeit a loud one, issues within a democracy such as America’s can be decided by persistence on the part of a minority, and in this case, given the scatteredness of the opposition, this minority has the potential to become the deciding plurality.

Shifting away from “democracy” and the role of “religion” within it, there are other pieces of common political vocabulary that a student of Ameriglish ought to be aware of, especially since there are occasions in which popular usage need not be in agreement with technical or specialist usage or could be confusing. Throughout this article, an important word which has been used is “patriot,” and it would be within common sense to label anybody who harbors an appreciative attachment to his or her country as such. Although this usage does exist, and expressions along the lines of “you can still be a patriot and ...” are encountered, it appears that a certain group of Americans has coopted the label for purposes of pursuing an agenda and attempting to belittle people who oppose them. Briefly, the *Second Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* identifies a “patriot” as

[16] an American or a potential American who never criticizes the United States and who never complains about the United States and who always supports the American military.

And being a patriot has essentially come to mean also being a “conservative” or

[17] a sympathizer with whatever happens to be the mainstream sentiment of the

Republican political party[.]

The last item comes from the *Ameriglish Dictionary*, which also includes “a tough person” for “conservative” and a cross-reference to “liberal,” considered to be “a weak person” and more importantly

[18] a sympathizer with whatever happens to be the mainstream sentiment of the Democratic political party; somebody who wants to make life easier or more meaningful for people as a whole or at least for selected people[.]

These are the two main categories of people with political inclinations, and “liberals” are often drowned out or somehow dismissed whenever they try to assert that they too are patriots.

A “patriot” not only loves the United States, but also is very likely to accept a skeletal history that paints the country in a very good light and to wrap himself or herself in a variety of pictorial and verbal symbols. Chief among these symbols is “the flag,” which the *Second Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* describes as being

[19] the official and sacred banner of the United States of America which has seven horizontal red stripes and six horizontal white stripes and a blue rectangle and fifty white stars inside the blue rectangle.

Unlike many national flags, this one combines history (the thirteen stripes) with the current situation (the fifty stars) and is a constant reminder of America’s successful territorial march through time, one of settlement and creation of the main political entities that comprise the union. The flag is the ultimate symbol of the United States, and of the three nicknames given for it in the *Ameriglish Dictionary* – the Star-Spangled Banner, the Stars and Stripes, and Old Glory, which are all referred to as “the American national flag” – the first has a second definition which, like the Pledge of Allegiance mentioned earlier, demonstrates that the flag occupies a central place in secular mantra:

[20] a song about the battle for Fort McHenry which has for a very long time been America’s national anthem[.]

The story behind Francis Scott Key’s writing the verses for “The Star-Spangled Banner” in 1814 and the courageous challenge that the flag over the fort offered to the British ships is relatively well known, and despite the fact that many people do not understand all the lyrics, when they sing this song, they are not only honoring a flag but also recalling the importance of the War of 1812 in guaranteeing America’s independence. Not being able to capture the fort on the approach to Baltimore – as the battle raged throughout the night, “our [America’s] flag was still there” – the

British retreated and razed Washington on the way out of Chesapeake Bay, but never again has American independence been in danger as it was “through the perilous fight” for that relatively small piece of real estate.

The War of 1812 has, however, been relegated to the dark recesses of collective memory, well behind the Revolution (or War for Independence), the Civil War (1861-65), World War II (1941-45), “Vietnam” (sometime in the 1960s until 1975), and the two current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is from the War for Independence that the United States gets its ultimate day of remembrance, and an occasion for displaying the Stars and Stripes galore, whether as a flag per se or in the form of bunting or something else that captures the essence of the stars on a blue field and the red and white stripes; this is the Fourth of July or, as noted in the *Ameriglish Dictionary*,

[21] the day when fireworks are legally set off to celebrate independence from Britain.

There are also barbecues and other celebratory events, but it all comes down to commemorating the drafting, signing, and announcement of the Declaration of Independence in early July 1776, which marks the beginning of the American calendar (the 234th year ended in July 2010) and the sequence of events that took the new American nation “from sea to shining sea,” a dramatic sweep from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean as immortalized in the song “America the Beautiful” (1895),<sup>7</sup> and beyond. “Manifest Destiny,” an ideological justification for conquest and purchase, need not be an historical concept since the so-called American “hegemony” in today’s world not only has imperial overtones but also could lead to further states (Puerto Rico and Guam occasionally debate their status) and formal territories.

War maintains an important hold on the American psyche, and “patriots” can easily come across as being overly enthusiastic about it. This is one area where the “conservative” image of being tough – contrasted with the “liberal” image of being weak – gets painted in vivid colors, the red, white, and blue of the flag plus the, by now “traditional,” yellow of ribbons that could be tied around trees and such like, but which mainly appear as artistic renditions that are stuck on cars, windows, or whatever. Support for “the military” is unquestionable, and bumper stickers, posters, and their ilk with statements such as “support our troops” are commonly displayed as a patriotic endeavor. As for the “yellow ribbons,” they symbolize a longing or desire for the military personnel to come back safely from the war theaters, although it might be said that there seems to be no rush about it. For “patriots,” war tends

to come across as something done to defend America and its freedoms, to protect the “American way of life,” and to spread “democracy” and “freedom,” yet another interpretation – perhaps that of cynical “liberals” and annoying “radicals” – is that, as the illustrative sentence for the entry in the *Second Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* argues, war has become

[22] a means to test weaponry, to see how worthy the troops can be, and to provide business for a variety of firms connected to the military-industrial complex.

In a sense, then, war is a government-inspired economic stimulus package, but it also provides reasonably surreptitious opportunities for establishing military bases and “hegemonic” (imperial) influence beyond the United States.

In the previous paragraph, the word “war” is used with the conventional meaning of hostilities between countries, or “the most important international sport” according to the *Ameriglish Dictionary*, but it sometimes has a meaning which can be as much domestically oriented as it is internationally. The same book describes “war” in this sense as “a series of battles against something which has been considered not good within the United States,” and the two entries following that for “war” are the best examples from recent decades, “the War on Drugs” – “a very lengthy and costly series of battles against illegal medicines and their users and retailers and wholesalers and manufacturers” – and “the War on Terror,” which, because of its having established a political paradigm that is notably attractive to “patriots,” is worth an indentation:

[23] an unspecified series of battles which are supposed to eradicate an unpleasant feeling or emotion or condition and which justifies limiting freedoms and using scare tactics to control people so that the controlled people will support these battles against at least one other set of people who might very well be trying to do the same thing or at least something similar.

Whereas that explanation was published in 2007, it ought to be noted that some things did change when Barack Obama became president in January 2009, hence the entry for the “War on Terror” in the *Third Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* is an update, reading “an activity which many Americans thought they were engaged in while George W. Bush was president.” The intriguing thing, however, about the War on Terror is that “patriots” see it as the most important ideological justification for the American military being in Afghanistan and Iraq – not to mention such anticipated theaters of war as North Korea and Iran – yet do not seem to understand its domestic consequences of reduced liberties that come part and parcel with such things as the

USA PATRIOT (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism) Act of 2001, perhaps because they do not envision any of it pertaining to themselves.

It would seem, then, that being “a tough person” (one of the definitions for a “conservative” given between items [17] and [18]) is more important than defending civil liberties, which might be expected of a thoughtful American who is interested in conserving individual freedoms and rights that have been determined to exist by reading or interpreting the Constitution. If this is true, it would follow that “conservatives” and “patriots” are more interested in the “freedom” of their country than in the “freedoms” and “rights” of themselves, their fellow citizens, and (a viable extension in many cases) other people who happen to be in the United States, although claiming and defending some rights is sacrosanct on the “conservative” cum “patriot” agenda, the best known example being that to possess firearms for self-defense (the *Heller* reference in note 2). This example of course comes back to the “tough person” image, and in all due respects, “patriots” can easily come across as rather forceful when expressing their national sentiments or instructing others to behave as they see fit (“show the flag respect,” “get your hat off and cross your heart,” “stand up or I’ll beat the ---- out of you”), something which is not going to be delved into here because it is tangential to say the least.

Still, there are three entries in the dictionaries which ought to be extracted to bring this essay to a conclusion because they provide appropriate insights into the role of Christianity in American political discourse and the forcefulness of the freedom-loving “patriotic” establishment. The first is “God Bless America,” which is explained in the *Ameriglish Dictionary* as

[24] the title of a song which has become extremely popular since the event known as “Nine Eleven” occurred and which is nowadays used more often than “The Star-Spangled Banner” to demonstrate patriotism[.]

Almost as if it were preordained, “God Bless America” (1938) became the national theme song after the airliners-as-missiles attacks on New York and, although foiled, Washington on September 11, 2001, yet the choice is mind-boggling since its title and – even though the author was Jewish – Christian overtones provide fuel for conducting religious warfare (yes, there are Americans who feel that America is or ought to be at war with Islam). The seriousness with which this song is taken is such that people have been known to be evicted from sports venues for daring to sit down or to walk away (e.g. to the toilet) while it was being played.

Such people who do not at least go through the motions of tolerating “God Bless America” can easily be viewed through the “patriotic” prism as not demonstrating appropriate pride in their country, which “patriots” do whenever possible, including 24/7 (= all the time) through the expression “Proud to be American,” explained in the *Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* as being

[25] a slogan that is usually found on a bumper sticker or somehow displayed on a home or in a yard and which advertises very clearly one’s attachment to being a citizen of the United States.

It can also be evidence that the influence of Christianity on patriotic Americans is rather selective, being that pride is one of the seven deadly sins of Christianity, as well as the one which sets the foundation for the other six. Given the irony embedded in the juxtaposition of “God Bless America” and “Proud to be American,” it is worth wondering whether enough “liberal” sentiment for an impending “war on pride” exists on the political horizon; it is, after all, a promising theme for some pranksters at a place like the University of California at Berkeley who could get the ball rolling, move on to something else, yet sit back and watch it unfold as a twenty-year fad to succeed “political correctness.” Of course, one of the backlashes from the “patriots” would be the final entry for this article, the commonly encountered refrain of “Love it or leave it!” – “it” being America – which the *Ameriglish Dictionary* identifies as

[26] a common threat to people in or somehow meaningfully connected to America who are being too critical of the United States.

Although it is rather stark, and such an all-or-nothing demand can hardly be enforced, might this not be the ultimate expression of “freedom” in popular American political discourse?

## Notes

1. The first two, both with the same title as this article, are in *Gengo Bunka Ronshû (Studies in Language and Culture)* 31, 1 (2009): 173-191 [Part One] and 31, 2 (2010): 3-19 [Part Two].

2. Examples are, of the first, the controversy over whether “same-sex marriages” (i.e. ♂+♂ or ♀+♀) are to be allowed by law and, of the second, being able to have firearms for self-defense. Although the former is still under debate, the latter right was affirmed to exist by

the United States Supreme Court in *District of Columbia et al. v. Heller* in 2008.

3. *Ameriglish Dictionary* (2007), *Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (2008), *Second Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (2008), and *Third Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (2009), all printed at Nagoya University.

4. The cited passages, although available through other sources, were copied from these two websites in August 2010: [www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html) for the Declaration of Independence and [www.usconstitution.net/const.html](http://www.usconstitution.net/const.html) for the United States Constitution.

5. The literature is vast, but a good introduction is Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (Oakland, Cal.: PM Press, 2010), originally published in 1992.

6. The following statement in Amendment 14 (1868) is considered to apply the “religion” clauses of Amendment 1 to the states: “No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States” (from the source in note 4 above).

7. Despite its pleasant melody and idyllic imagery, “America the Beautiful” trails “The Star-Spangled Banner” and “God Bless America” in terms of being sung, and these days one has to wonder if it has anything to do with the “socialist” undertones in the lyrics “America! America! God ... crown thy good with *brotherhood* from sea to shining sea” (italics added for emphasis).

“Freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose.”

– Janis Joplin in the song “Me and Bobby McGee” (released 1971)