IN THE AMERICA OF GEORGE BUSH AND JOHN ASHCROFT, FOX NEWS TELEVISION and Clear Channel radio, political dissent has not been criminalized, but it has been widely stigmatized. The master trope of the Bush administration is that of loyalty: criticism and dissent, for this White House, are simply forms of disloyalty and must be punished. This trope governs the Bush administration’s approach to governance regardless of whether its critics are former cabinet members and counterterrorism experts like Paul O’Neill and Richard Clarke, political independents like Vermont senator Jim Jeffords, or popular entertainers like the Dixie Chicks. In the Bush lexicon, it would appear, the phrase “loyal opposition” is filed under “oxymorons,” as if the interests of the Bush-Cheney White House were coextensive with the parameters of patriotic political speech in the United States. Accordingly, some dissenters in the United States have given up on the language of patriotism altogether, on the grounds that it is owned by the political right and articulated to discourses of American exceptionalism, religious fundamentalism, and frenetic public flag-waving. As an academic field, American studies has long had a productively ambivalent relation to discourses of patriotism. In the current political climate, however, ambivalent relations to discourses of American patriotism, no matter how productive, risk being construed by the state as disloyalty to the state. The question of loyalty has thus taken on a new urgency in American studies.
For the past quarter century or more, American studies has been closely identified with the political left in the United States. And for the past quarter century or more, Republican administrations and conservative intellectuals in American civil society have made a point of disparaging and harassing scholarly fields associated with the political left. I need not rehearse that history here, but I do want to note that the harassment of scholarly fields and organizations has taken a variety of forms—for instance, the Reagan State Department’s refusal to allow Wole Soyinka to attend the 1986 Modern Language Association (MLA) convention (invoking the McCarthy-era McCarran-Walter Act) and its subsequent refusal to recommend MLA members for United States Information Agency fellowships abroad after the MLA awarded Soyinka an honorary membership; Lynne Cheney’s 1994–95 crusade against the National History Standards and the National Endowment for the Humanities, both of which she herself had overseen prior to 1993; and, most recently, the October 2003 passage by the House of Representatives of the International Studies in Higher Education Act of 2003 (H.R. 3077), one crucial provision of which would establish an “advisory board” that would have the power to investigate individual faculty members and specific classes on campus, and, in the language of proposed section 633(d)(2), to “annually monitor, apprise, and evaluate the activities of grant recipients” under Title VI of the Higher Education Act of 1958.

As I write, it is unclear whether H.R. 3077 will pass the Senate. But regardless of what happens to Title VI programs in the next year, it does not take much to imagine that Congress—and freelance right-wing culture warriors like Stanley Kurtz and Daniel Pipes, who have been instrumental in generating Congressional opposition to the work of the Middle Eastern Studies Association and its leadership—might take a similar interest in the “activities” of American studies should the Bush administration return for a second term. We are not yet in the realm of loyalty oaths and mass firings of dissident faculty; at the moment we are not even close. But there is no question that, over the past few years, conservatives in government and in civil society have fostered new initiatives in the academic culture wars. In the case of the attacks on Middle Eastern studies, and in David Horowitz’s recent calls for the hiring of conservative scholars in order to foster “diversity” among college faculties, such initiatives seek openly to deploy the legislative power of the state in the service of a conservative political platform—
and often in the language of patriotism and national obligation. The present administration, for its part, has shown itself to be quite willing to interfere in scholarly matters involving “sensitive” areas and languages, and conservative U.S. administrations in the future might very well target American studies scholars as aggressively as Middle Eastern scholars have been targeted by the right since September 2001.

Very recently, for example, it became illegal—for five bizarre weeks—for U.S. scholars to edit manuscripts from certain countries. In late February 2004, the Bush Treasury Department declared that scholars who edited manuscripts from “disfavored nations”—specifically Iran, but also Cuba, Libya, North Korea, and other nations under U.S. trade embargo (nations with which trade is banned without a government license)—could face “grave legal consequences.” As the *New York Times* reported:

Anyone who publishes material from a country under a trade embargo is forbidden to reorder paragraphs or sentences, correct syntax or grammar, or replace “inappropriate words,” according to several advisory letters from the Treasury Department in recent months.

Adding illustrations is prohibited, too. To the baffled dismay of publishers, editors and translators who have been briefed about the policy, only publication of “camera-ready copies of manuscripts” is allowed. . . .

Nahid Mozaffari, a scholar and editor specializing in literature from Iran, called the implications staggering. “A story, a poem, an article on history, archaeology, linguistics, engineering, physics, mathematics, or any other area of knowledge cannot be translated, and even if submitted in English, cannot be edited in the U.S.,” she said.

“This means that the publication of the PEN Anthology of Contemporary Persian Literature that I have been editing for the last three years,” she said, “would constitute aiding and abetting the enemy.”

Regulatory edicts this preposterous, like Secretary of Education Rod Paige’s declaration that the National Education Association has behaved like a “terrorist organization,” may serve ultimately to outrage reasonable people and damage further the Bush administration’s credibility with regard to national security. It is perhaps in part for this reason that the Treasury Department’s edict was reversed on April 4. 2

But these edicts point also to the contempt with which the current administration regards some of the basic operations of open, democratic societies—even as it claims to be bringing the blessings of democracy to Iraq. Moreover, conservatives’ current assaults on scholarly programs and practices do not generate public outrage, partly
because previous conservative assaults on academe have been largely successful in attempting to delegitimate universities as sites of political dissent. In some political circles, it is axiomatic that college faculty are aging, un-American Yippies who deserve every form of political harassment visited upon them. The actual scholarly needs of translators and Title VI program directors could not matter less to those who guide their lives by that axiom. The possibility of greater governmental “involvement” (though under the present circumstances I prefer to use the word interference) in scholarly affairs seems to me to provide the occasion for asking just what kind of “American” values American studies might plausibly remain loyal to, if in fact we do not want (as I presume we will not want) to be reconfigured as a scholarly adjunct to a neoimperialist foreign policy.

* * *

The range of political positions represented by scholars in American studies is a good deal wider than conservative ideologues in government or in civil society are ordinarily willing to credit. Still, it seems safe to say that over the past quarter-century the field has aligned itself with an anti-imperialist intellectual tradition in which U.S. history and culture are viewed critically with regard to the United States’ history of conquest in the Western Hemisphere and with regard to its assumption of global power since World War II. Indeed, one wing of American studies has practically devoted itself to exposing the complicity of an earlier generation of American studies scholars—who might have appeared to their contemporaries as liberals, progressives, and socialists—with the ideological machinery of the Cold War. To put this another way, there is to my knowledge no such thing as a pro-imperialist American studies.

But in the years since September 11, as the Cold War has been superseded by a much vaguer and more nebulous war on “terror,” it has become surprisingly difficult to specify the contours of U.S. anti-imperialism. Opposition to the Bush-Ashcroft domestic agenda with regard to civil liberties, from the USA-Patriot Act to Guantánamo, seems to be nearly universal among liberal, progressive, and leftist scholars in all fields. With regard to American affairs abroad, however, there is no similarly near-universal agreement about what constitutes legitimate or productive opposition to U.S. neoimperialism. To put this
another way, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have paradoxically confused the terms of anti-imperialism in the United States. On the one hand, the Bush administration has conducted itself arrogantly and appallingly in world affairs, not least in war, but, on the other hand, not every one of Bush’s opponents abroad deserves the support (even the “critical” support) of U.S. anti-imperialists.

To say this is to provoke serious debate among anti-imperialists on the American left, and perhaps among many American studies scholars as well—which is, of course, what I mean to do. Even among American progressives who, with varying degrees of reluctance or enthusiasm, supported U.S.-led wars in Kosovo and Afghanistan (many of whom, like myself, are willing to concede that both wars were badly conducted on moral and/or tactical grounds and therefore more easily justified in theory than in practice), there is no support for the neoconservative and explicitly imperialist Project for the New American Century (PNAC). (PNAC, formed in 1997 and chaired by second-generation neoconservative intellectual William Kristol, is dedicated to the proposition “that American leadership is good both for America and for the world; that such leadership requires military strength, diplomatic energy and commitment to moral principle; and that too few political leaders today are making the case for global leadership.”) Rather, such progressives disagree with intellectuals to their left about what constitutes an “imperialist” war. My own grounds for supporting a military rather than a police/intelligence response in Afghanistan were that the attacks of September 11 demonstrated that Al Qaeda and the Taliban, as its ally and state sponsor, had attained a level of global reach that made it imperative that the Taliban be overthrown and its terror training camps destroyed. (Since then, the Al Qaeda attacks in Bali in 2002 and in Madrid in 2004 have demonstrated that the removal of the Taliban was, by itself, not a sufficient means of opposing the spread of Al Qaeda’s global reach and that exclusively military responses to terrorism are ineffective and possibly counterproductive.) I acknowledge that for some critics the overthrow of the Taliban was another exercise in American imperialism and therefore indefensible. Additionally, many critics of the war in Afghanistan have argued that the Taliban have not in fact been routed and are regrouping. But it appears to me that the cogency of the second argument undermines the credibility of the first. What the United States can plausibly be charged with in Afghanistan is not imperialism, but a long-standing pattern of criminal
negligence: far from propping up a client state of the empire in Afghanistan, we have, by turning to invade Iraq in 2003, allowed Afghanistan to drift back into state failure—precisely the condition that made possible the emergence of the Taliban in the mid-1990s and the partial Talibanization of Pakistan before 2001 as well. A similar charge of criminal negligence can be made with regard to our more recent conduct in Liberia, whose pleas for U.S. intervention after the fall of Charles Taylor confounded both the Bush regime, bent on invading Iraq, and hard-left anti-imperialists, bent on construing all such interventions as illegitimate.

I am well aware that there are those critics for whom no use of U.S. power can be considered legitimate so long as the U.S. is a global hegemon. Such critics insist there is no way to remain loyal to the anti-imperialist traditions of American studies while supporting a military operation in Afghanistan that killed some thousands of innocent civilians and extended the United States’ global reach more deeply into Central Asia (entwining us further with unsavory regimes in Pakistan and Uzbekistan in the name of promoting “freedom”). But serious anti-imperialists must, I think, draw a clear line between a legitimate struggle against Al Qaeda and an illegitimate project of remaking the Arab world by force. Those of us who supported the overthrow of the Taliban did not thereby commit ourselves to the idea that the U.S. can act wherever, whenever, and however it wishes; nor did we commit ourselves to a course of action in which the primary response to Al Qaeda is always and everywhere a military response. On the contrary, after the Taliban were overthrown, the best course of action for the U.S. would have been to pursue international police and intelligence action against Al Qaeda; war in Iraq constituted one of the worst possible courses of action. This position is not inconsistent with condemning the U.S. bombing of the wedding party in Kakrak in July 2002—an atrocity even if (again, if) unintended—and not inconsistent with arguing that the Bush/Cheney program in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban has proceeded as if it were designed to produce a resurgence of Al Qaeda in that part of the world, and a resurgence of the Taliban itself in Afghanistan. On the contrary, it is merely to say that the fight against Al Qaeda is a legitimate fight, pursued by the Bush administration in a dangerously incompetent and counterproductive manner.

The war in Iraq, by contrast, represents a decisive and perhaps irreversible step in U.S. foreign policy: over that threshold, we are
explicitly engaged in a preemptive, imperialist, and potentially neocolonialist enterprise, even if, like Paul Wolfowitz or Robert Kaplan, one sincerely believes that we are doing it for the good of the planet. To oppose the neoconservative program, as many liberals did, by suggesting that Iraq was a distraction from Al Qaeda and Afghanistan was to miss the point. For Cheney, Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld, and the PNAC crew, it was the other way around: for them, after September 11, Afghanistan was a distraction from the redrawing of the Middle East beginning with Iraq. Indeed, for PNAC, Al Qaeda itself was not even so much a pretext as a distraction. I want to stress this point, not least because it indicates which war was an imperialist war. Iraq was the priority from the very start, as is made clear by the 1998 PNAC letter to President Clinton calling for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein; for PNAC, Afghanistan was and is a sideshow.6

* * *

As I noted at the outset, American studies participates in these debates at a time when most of its leading figures are identified with the academic left in the United States, and for this reason, sociologist Alan Wolfe did not restrain himself from calling the field anti-American, despite the gravity of the charge, in the pages of the *New Republic.*7 It is possible to narrate the recent history of American studies quite differently, as Amy Kaplan has recently done in noting that the contemporary discourse of American empire “aggressively celebrates the United States as finally revealing its true essence—its manifest destiny—on a global stage.”8 Ten years ago, when scholars in American studies spoke of “cultures of United States imperialism,” they were made—by critics like Wolfe—to sound as if they were crazed Leninists festooning New York’s Upper West Side with wheat-paste posters testifying to the Trilateral Commission’s hand in the death of Bruce Lee. Now, however, American studies of the 1990s simply looks like it was ahead of the curve, talking frankly about U.S. imperialism years before anyone else caught on.

In December 2003 *Slate* magazine’s Timothy Noah wryly noted: “Within the mainstream of American political discourse, it’s perfectly acceptable to criticize pre-emption and unilateralism, but by silent agreement, the word ‘empire’ is understood to be beyond the pale. It’s one of those words, like ‘servant,’ that Americans refuse to utter
because it’s too difficult to reconcile with American ideals. The only people rude enough to use the word ‘empire’ to describe the United States are foreigners, hard leftists, and Buchananite conservatives. Oh, and one more: Vice President Dick Cheney.”9 Noah’s column concerned the Cheneys’ Christmas card for 2003, which featured Benjamin Franklin’s question, “And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can arise without His aid?” (American studies scholars will not be surprised to learn that it was Lynne Cheney, according to her husband, who had selected that line.) In Davos in January 2004 Cheney was asked about the line by World Economic Forum founder Klaus Schwab, whereupon he replied, “If we were a true empire, we would currently preside over a much greater piece of the Earth’s surface than we do.”10 It may be that Cheney is working with an outmoded, late nineteenth-century idea of imperialism; it may just as well be that he was expressing not a disavowal but a desire. Either way, American studies, to its credit, can rightfully claim to have been debating the question for two decades and more. The challenge for the field for the foreseeable future is how to oppose imperialism without aligning “imperialism” with every kind of international intervention, such that American studies scholars would wind up in the position of reflexively defending the state sovereignty of every last brutal dictator and mass murderer on the planet if and when that state sovereignty is threatened by the United States.

I do not believe that this form of anti-imperialism would involve a form of disloyalty either to the United States or to American studies. Surely there is nothing “disloyal” about mounting critiques of U.S. imperialism, whether in Cuba, the Philippines, Iraq, or Guantánamo. I think of it as I think of disloyalty to the Bush regime: as another form of patriotism, of marking the country’s betrayals of its democratic ideals precisely in order to affirm those ideals. But there is nothing in the history of the founding of American studies that requires any of its practitioners to understand themselves as loyal Americans. The history of the funding of American studies is another matter: the CIA’s past (covert) support for American studies suggests that there might well be, in the future, forms of official, state-sponsored American studies for which security clearances and loyalty oaths might be prerequisites for participation, particularly with regard to the screening of American studies scholars sent abroad under the auspices of the U.S. Information Agency.11 Yet those who would exact such loyalty oaths from all
American studies scholars ought first to reflect that some scholars in
the field are not in fact U.S. citizens. Surely, scholars who criticize the
U.S. and its imperialist adventures from the perspective of (for
example) Latin American nations that have long been the objects of
those adventures are not to be expected to profess their love for the
United States before they proceed with cultural analysis. Even among
U.S. citizens, however, American studies should be understood as an
academic discipline and not as a pledge of allegiance; if it is more loyal
to the unfinished project of critique than to the unfinished project of
America, so be it. American studies does not need to be loyal to the
Bush administration, nor need it be loyal to American national inter-
est. For instance, it can, while taking “America” as its object, declare
a loyalty to liberal internationalism. It can dedicate itself more to the
ideal of universal human rights than to the dictates of state sovereignty,
and more to a cosmopolitan expression of the ideals of egalitarian
democracy and participatory parity than to their defense as uniquely
“American” ideals. And it can, if it wishes, do all or none of the above.

Perhaps, to paraphrase a recent essay by Leo Marx, scholars in
American studies need not “believe in America” in order to profess a
loyalty to the strongest traditions of American dissidence over the past
225 years. As Marx writes:

The discourse of American studies had been inflected from the beginning by
the doctrinal “doubleness” of the adversary culture. That culture evolved to
serve the ideological needs of virtually all of the nation’s dissident social
movements including, for example, the transcendentalist, feminist, and
abolitionist movements of the antebellum era; the populist movement of the
1880s and 1890s; the pre-World War I progressive movement and—in the
case at hand—the left-labor, anti-fascist movements (and cultural front) of
the 1930s; and, to come full circle, the dissident Movement of the Vietnam
era. To mobilize opposition to slavery, egregious forms of capitalist exploi-
tation and injustice, and unjust wars, leaders of these dissident movements
affirmed their provisional belief in the idea of America. It was a compelling
means of exposing the discrepancy between a real and an ideal America or,
as Melville put it on the eve of the Civil War, between the world’s foulest
crime and man’s fairest hope.12

Marx would leave us in the ambiguous position of Ralph Ellison’s
hibernating invisible man, wondering whether his grandfather meant
“to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men,
or at least not the men who did the violence. . . . Did he mean to affirm
the principle, which they themselves had dreamed into being out of the
chaos and darkness of the feudal past, and which they had violated and compromised to the point of absurdity even in their own corrupt minds?"13 While I can profess loyalty to the “principle”—that is, the echo (which resounds throughout Marx’s essay) of Lincoln’s Gettysburg invocation of the “proposition” to which the nation was dedicated—I must confess that I am not sure what to do with Marx’s grandfatherly advice for American studies, any more than the invisible man knew what to do with his grandfather’s injunction to live with one’s head in the lion’s mouth. Over the past twenty-five years, American studies has sometimes been charged with fostering national disunity by critiquing the postwar “consensus” model of American history and developing a multicultural and explicitly conflictual understanding of American society. Scholars in American studies have responded by producing a wave of scholarship that has demonstrated powerfully that the assertion of a “common American culture” is in no way necessary for the cohesion of the American nation-state, and that indeed the conflation of “culture” with “nation” does considerable violence to American history while naturalizing the violence of American history.14 In retrospect, however, this debate—in which, iconically, I picture liberals like Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and E. D. Hirsch on one side and the past fifteen or twenty presidents of the American Studies Association on the other—looks to me like an overwhelmingly domestic dispute about whether to stress the pluribus or the unum, and how to defend the relative autonomy of “culture” from “society” within the boundaries of the United States. The post–September 11 global landscape, by contrast, would appear to require of American studies scholars that we apply the traditions of American dissidence to new fields of inquiry in which the internationalization(s) of American studies, and the new discourses of American empire, are understood to be inescapable features of the world our work engages. My provisional—propositional—suggestion is that scholars in American studies re-embrace the “doubleness” of U.S. adversary culture, its capacity to denounce and defend, confirm and affirm; that we avoid the mechanical equation in which all who oppose America deserve the name “anti-imperialist”; and that we entertain the possibility that, in opposing the Bush regime and its equation of dissent with disloyalty, we cannot but remain loyal to the liberal, egalitarian ideals our current government traduces every time it invokes them.
NOTES


3. Joel Pfister’s discussion of this flattening out of the history of American studies scholarship is as trenchant today as it was when it was published, in 1991; see his “The Americanization of Cultural Studies,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 4, no. 2 (1991): 199–229.


5. As to the oft-rehearsed argument that the attacks of September 11 constituted “blowback” for American policies in the Middle East or during the Cold War (with regard to the United States’ support for the Afghan mujahideen two decades ago), some populations around the globe have good reason to consider the United States their enemy on the basis of past and present U.S. policy, and some of them would find ready sympathizers within the United States, also for good reason. But, by any standard I can credit, Al Qaeda is not one of them.

6. Counterterrorism expert Richard Clarke has recently offered a dramatic and compelling confirmation of this argument; see his *Against All Enemies: Inside America’s War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004). The 1998 PNAC letter was signed by, among others, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, William Kristol, Richard Perle, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, and Undersecretary of State for Disarmament John Bolton.


