



Discussion Guide

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Welcome to the YES! Discussion Guide Series

We're delighted that you've decided to take up some of the issues explored in YES! magazine in your class or discussion group. When people gather in groups to talk with mutual respect and caring about the critical issues of our time, they create a powerful avenue for constructive social change. The staff of YES! magazine has prepared this guide to help you get started. We hope you'll find it useful.

We've posted selected articles from YES! on our website at www.yesmagazine.org. You're welcome to download and photocopy them free of charge. If you'd like to purchase multiple copies of YES! or subscriptions for your class or group, please phone 1-800-937-4451 and ask for the Discussion Group Discount.

What Does It Mean to Be an American Now ?

As this issue of YES! is being mailed, "God Bless America" signs have proliferated in the wake of 9/11. But what is it about America that God, as the song says, blesses? What, we ask, does it mean to be an American now?

This is a question that can only be answered by drawing on America's history, and so a number of the articles in this issue investigate forgotten contributors to America. Others look to the present and the future of patriotism, and show us Americans struggling against government and economic forces to fulfill America's promises. What can we as Americans do both to save America's soul and keep ourselves safe? We encourage you to read the following articles to prepare for a discussion of this issue:

Jacob Needleman, "Founding America" pages 12-17

David Morse, "What Happens to Your Heart" pages 40-42

Amory B. and L. Hunter Lovins, "What is Real Security?" pages 50-51

Sam Smith, "How to Be a Patriot" pages 52-54



Founding America

Seeking what is worth loving in America, Jacob Needleman looks at the insights left by four men who, in too often overlooked ways, helped found the American experiment in democracy. Around 1000 A.D. (a time when Europe was still lingering in its war-ravaged dark age, and was about to embark on the murderous First Crusade), the Great Peacemaker of the Haudenosaunee brought peace and cooperation to the native peoples of the Great Lakes region, guiding the creation of a constitution that would later inspire the framers of the US Constitution. George Washington, Needleman celebrates for relinquishing power for the common good and thus beginning the American tradition of democratic electoral transition. Needleman honors Jefferson for his conception of democracy as a system that would support the pursuit of human reason and conscience, and, finally, sees in Frederick Douglass a call for America to live up to its great promises.

What did you grow up loving or hating about America? How did you express that love or hate?

How have your feelings about America changed over time? What experiences caused those changes? How have your feelings changed since 9/11?

Who are American heroes whom you look to for a sense of what makes America?

Needleman writes that the Haudenosaunee accept the message of peace because “..they glimpse a peace that is infinitely more honorable than war and more active. This peace demands a higher level of courage and sacrifice than war. It is neither static nor dull; nor is it a fantasy of endless pleasure.”

In many cultures, retaliation against one’s enemies in the form of war has been considered a right and honorable response to aggression. Has this changed? When *is* war honorable? Is it ever more honorable than peace? Why or why not?

What Happens to Your Heart

In “What Happens to Your Heart,” David Morse describes the efforts of individual Americans to redress the harm American economic sanctions and military actions are doing to the Iraqi people. The Bush administration is seriously debating a military attack on Iraq—by the time this reaches you, the attacks may already have begun.

What should the stance of the US government be toward Iraq’s government and people? Much of the discussion seems to center around how to “get rid of” Saddam Hussein. What rights do you believe the US has to unseat heads of state?

Sanctions have been applied to such nations as South Africa, Serbia, North Korea, and Cuba, yet the US government instead grants China “Most Favored Nation” status.

Under what circumstances are sanctions against a nation called for? What kind of sanctions should be applied and by whom?



How should the US deal with an oppressive regime? How do we define which government is “evil?” When is force, such as that used by the US in Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan, justified?

What steps can you take as an American to mitigate unjust effects of US government policy toward other nations’ people, or to empower people living under oppressive regimes?

What Is Real Security?

Security has become the word of the moment. Extraordinary infringements of American liberty are being called for in the name of security, along with a possibly endless war abroad, but as Amory and Hunter Lovins argue, our nation is looking for security in the wrong places.

Has your sense of personal safety changed a lot, a little, or not at all since 9/11?

More people died last year from ordinary murders and car accidents in the US than in the World Trade Center bombing. What makes you feel safe or unsafe, and what relationship does this have to actual statistical risk?

What steps do you want the US to take in light of 9/11 to increase US security? What steps can communities take?

To the Lovins, the key issue seems to be putting power back into the hands of communities and individuals. They argue that real security is found by fostering local, decentralized systems.

Does decentralization have any relevance to other areas of our lives? For instance, large booksellers and variety stores such as Wal-Mart have edge out many small, locally owned businesses. Is this inherently negative, or is it neutral, or positive? Why?

What, if any, are the advantages to large, centralized systems in general? If a large Wal-Mart-type store opened in your community, what would your reaction be?

Would you shop there or at local businesses? Why?

How to Be a Patriot

Sam Smith looks skeptically at the sudden popularity of patriotism in the wake of 9/11, noting the dark uses patriotism has been put to throughout history. He argues that true patriotism is an act of love, not hate. Some distinguish between patriotism – celebrating the best that a country has to offer – and nationalism – assuming a sense of national superiority and privilege.

How do you think we should balance security measures vs. freedoms?

What are the practical outcomes of this balancing?



Do you consider yourself patriotic? nationalistic? What patriotic acts have you committed, before or after September 11th?

What have you seen done in the name of patriotism that you think is patriotic or unpatriotic as you define it?

How have your feelings about patriotism changed since 9/11?

Sam Smith says: "There are few finer, albeit painful, expressions of loyalty than to tell a friend, a spouse, a child, or a parent that what they are doing may be dangerous or wrong. If our country is about to run into the street without looking, there is absolutely nothing disloyal about crying, 'Stop!'" Smith suggests we adopt the attitude of lawyer Paul Porter: "Called before a House Committee and asked if it were true that his firm had represented Communist, Porter replied, 'Yes sir, how can I help you?' We must meet the bullies and charlatans with both resolution and ridicule."

How might we do this?

What acts of what Smith calls true patriotism can you envision engaging in?

We welcome feedback on your experience in using our discussion guides. E-mail comments to Discussion Guides@futurenet.org. YES! is published by the Positive Futures Network, an independent, non-profit organization that supports people's active engagement in creating a more just, sustainable, and compassionate world.

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