



The Last Best Hope? Understanding America from the Outside In

## The 'Don't Tread on Me' Episode

Series I (Trinity term 2020)

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### TRANSCRIPT

*NB the text below was transcribed automatically by <https://otter.ai>.*

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#### **Adam Smith 0:20**

Welcome to the Last Best Hope, a podcast from Oxford's Rothermere American Institute in which we look at America from the outside in. My name's Adam Smith. In this episode we're asking why Americans seem to be so much angrier than other people about the government lockdowns to contain the spread of COVID-19. We've seen armed men enter the Michigan State Capitol. An angry woman in a large car yelling go to China at healthcare workers in Denver, who were standing in the road to block an anti-lockdown demonstration. The dominant message is it there's something particularly un-American about the restrictions in place to fight the virus. Above all, we've seen protesters adopting the language and images of the American Revolution. Especially prominent has been a version of the flag created in 1775 by Christopher Gadsden, a South Carolinian officer and the rebel Continental Army, depicting a rattlesnake on a yellow background and the somewhat menacing slogan, Don't Tread on Me. Conservative media has championed the spirit of rebellion they see in these protests.

#### **Recording 1:39**

Fox News Host: Born of rebellion and revolution, we are ready to fight.

#### **Adam Smith 1:44**

Protesters have also used a French Revolutionary slogan adopted by Anti-federalists in America in the 1790s, and now the motto of the State of New Hampshire – Live Free or Die – which as wags have pointed out, might more appropriately be rendered Live Free and Die in the current circumstances. There is a long tradition of protesters in America channelling the rebellion of the 1770s

#### **Recording 2:10**

Tea Party Protestor: Bring the country back to its founding principles.

**Adam Smith 2:13**

During the Obama presidency, right-wing protesters calling for deeper tax cuts and opposing the extension of access to health insurance called themselves the Tea Party movement, a reference to a bizarre episode in 1773, in which merchants dressed as Native Americans boarded in East India Company ship in Boston harbour and dumped the cargo of tea overboard in an anti-tax protest. It was the Tea Party movement in fact, which resurrected the Gadsden don't-tread-on-me flag from 200 years of relative obscurity. The revolutionary example of popular armed resistance to central authority has informed decades of advertising by the National Rifle Association, but also opponents of desegregation, the leaders of workers' movements in the early 20th century, and even anti-liquor protesters who smashed up bar-rooms to liberate the people from alcohol while invoking the spirit of 1776. And back in 1861, southerners seceded from the Union and triggered the Civil War, while draping themselves in the mantle of the Revolution. Just like their forefathers who seceded from the British Empire, white Southerners claimed a justification for that act of rebellion in the alleged tyranny of Yankees.

**Recording 3:47**

The Confederate States of 1861 are acting over again, the history of the American Revolution of 1776. The administration of Mr. Lincoln has waged an open war upon every principle of freedom, which the declaration of 1776 asserted, and the revolution won. *New Orleans Picayune*, July 5, 1861.

**Adam Smith 4:20**

So, is a country that's had a successful revolution doomed to endlessly re-enact it? Joining me now to discuss the anti-lockdown protests is Margaret Weir, the Wilson Professor of Political Science and International and Public Affairs at Brown University, and this year, the John G. Winant Professor of American Government here at Oxford. Thank you so much for joining me on the podcast, Margaret.

**Margaret Weir 4:49**

It's a pleasure to be here.

**Adam Smith 4:51**

So what is driving these protests that we've seen?

**Margaret Weir 4:57**

Well, I think you have to see the protests as largely astroturf.

**Adam Smith 5:02**

So when you say astroturf just explain what that means. That's, that's a way of saying these aren't really grassroots, it's not real grass. It's been laid down to look like grass.

**Margaret Weir 5:12**

Right, absolutely. These are, they're movements that have very few number of people associated with them. They have initial money to start things on the internet. And they use social media to try to rally people to come to these protests. So some of these groups are

like Freedom Works, which is an old Tea Party group, Tea Party Patriots. They're funded by wealthy conservatives, the protests in Michigan, which got a lot of attention, they were funded by a very conservative Michigan group associated with education secretary, Betsy DeVos, long-time conservative family in Michigan. So these are astroturf in the sense that they didn't bubble up from below, automatically or spontaneously. Instead, they're sort of the seed planting in social media by these groups to see, can we get something going? Using the Tea Party movement of 10 years ago as a model.

**Adam Smith 6:28**

I've watched videos of protesters saying that they've lost their jobs, that they can't pay their mortgage. There's real hardship on display here, too, isn't there? I mean, is part of the story that in the United States, unlike in most other first world countries, there's no mandated six, sick-pay leave, unemployment benefit is difficult to acquire. There isn't the same kind of safety net. So there are more Americans who are, as it were, one crisis away from real economic hardship.

**Margaret Weir 7:01**

I think it is totally true that this has hit Americans much more, that Americans have suffered much more economically from this, because the federal government has done so little to assist people and state unemployment systems are so weak. But the majority, the vast majority of people at these protests are not economically suffering. That's not why they're at the protests. They're there from a more libertarian impulse. We don't like government. We don't need government to tell us what to do. And so in some ways, some ways this is an opportunity for groups from all, very fringe groups, from all different issues to come together and express their dislike of government.

**Adam Smith 7:56**

The vast majority, not all, but the vast majority of people I've seen from the footage I've watched have been white, they seem to be predominantly male. There doesn't seem to be an equal gender balance so far as I can see. What are your thoughts about that?

**Margaret Weir 8:12**

Well, a lot of the groups that these protests are drawing from, and I want to I want to make it clear, though, that even though Americans are suffering economically, the great majority of Americans, up to between 60, 70, up to 80% are in favour of the lockdowns. Now, that's kind of that's, you know, going to erode over time as people get tired of it. So I, I think it's important to stress that these are, the protests themselves are fringe groups. So they draw from groups that attract traditionally mostly men, gun rights groups that are to the right of the National Rifle Association, gun rights groups that are to the right of the NRA. Groups like the Proud Boys, which is a group that's associated with the defence of Western values, one of their goals is that they support housewives. So it's also an expression of sort of, you know, macho, we can do everything, we hate government, we can do things on our own. So I think that sort of, um, that's kind of why you get more men, but they're very fringe groups. And I would highlight that even a group that is most associated with the Koch brothers, which was the big bankroller of the Tea Party, Americans for Prosperity, has not supported these protests.

**Adam Smith 9:49**

You mentioned the protests in the Michigan State House, which went, to use a phrase that we'll never be able to use again with the innocence we did before, went viral, around the world. And they went viral because the central image was of a bunch of white guys with semi-automatic weapons standing inside a democratic legislature. And that's threatening and frightening. Now, we've seen anti lockdown protests in other places around the world. But why does it take that particular form, at least at times, in the United States?

**Margaret Weir 10:30**

Well, one thing is just the strength of the so-called gun rights movement in the United States. That is a distinctive feature of American politics. And it started with the, the NRA, the National Rifle Association that has become more and more right-wing and you know, it started from being just a recreational gun usage organisation, but over the last 20 years or so has morphed into a political movement that is more and more extreme. And then there's groups on the fringes even of the NRA. So these are, you know, they're rural groups, they see themselves in opposition to what they see as elites in cities, and they resent anything that infringes on the capacity, their capacity to have any kind of guns. And some of this started being mainstreamed in a sense when Sarah Palin was made of the vice presidential candidate to John McCain, and she –

**Adam Smith 11:41**

That was in 2008.

**Margaret Weir 11:44**

In 2008, and one of the things that she was sort of known for doing was to go in a helicopter and shoot an AR-15 rifle at elk in Alaska. I mean, this was her idea of hunting. So I mean, these groups have become, they're so much more distant from their origins as sort of, you know, rural hunting guns, and so many people have signed on to features of that. But it's also true that many people that belong to the NRA would be, never think of joining a movement like what we saw in Michigan. I mean, that was intimidation. It was something that was goaded on by President Trump, who kept – it's not probably not an accident that was a female governor – who kept saying, that woman in Michigan. So I think there's a gender aspect to this kind of intimidation. They borrow the slogan in the hallway as they were all bunched up without mask. They you borrow the slogan that was used against Hillary Clinton. Lock her up, lock her up, they could be seen chanting, so there's a gender piece to it. But it has to do I think the thing that fundamentally it's different about the United States is this growth of a gun rights movement that you just really don't have a counterpart to anywhere in the other Western countries.

**Adam Smith 13:20**

The politics of every country is, is distinctive in one way or another. What seems to be true in the United States is that this constant reference back to the founding era, both to the rebellion, to the successful revolution, and to the Constitution, to that 18th century document written in 1787, which continually frames political debate. Why does appeal to those, to that founding era, why does it work so well?

**Margaret Weir 13:53**

Well, I think one, one reason that it works so well is the power of the courts. In the United States and the power of the Supreme Court, so that, you know, judicial review, which was established early in American history, if there are doubts about what's legitimate, it goes to the Supreme Court. And so if you have a, an issue that you want to, to make sense of, going to the Constitution, and and you can achieve what you want going through the courts. So one is the power of the courts. The other is just this power of being rebels and this idea of being rebels and that's especially those gun rights groups the people you see in that Michigan protest. This idea that we're rebels and that there's something fundamentally American about that. It also, it provides a certain legitimacy, at least they think it provides a certain legitimacy to what they're doing. So I think it's both something real, which is the way the American political system works and the importance of the courts, but also something symbolic, that has to do with kind of cultural legitimacy, that is distinctive in the US.

**Adam Smith 15:22**

Is there a certain irony in that, on the one hand, these appeals to the second amendment are appeals to the status quo, or at least the status quo ante or about defending an existing order. But on the other hand, as you just said, the rhetoric is one of rebellion and revolution. So it's, it's continual revolution, in favour of a document that was adopted at the end of the 18th century, it seems, there's a certain irony there, at least viewed from outside

**Margaret Weir 15:55**

There is an irony because in fact, it is conservative groups that are kind of dressing themselves up as rebels. But this also goes to something that is, has a wide kind of appeal in the United States and that the right has built on it, which is this anti-elitism. There's this very strong anti-elitism that is part, not just of the super-fringe groups like those in Michigan, but much more widely shared on the right and, and is a staple of the Republican Party appeal. Although, in fact, the Republican Party policies, in fact, support elites, but it's a kind of a style of elites and elite science, the mainstream media, government, they all get intertwined together. And so there's this idea that we rebels against this elite establishment, when in fact in any other way of looking at them, especially from the outside in, they would appear to be conservatives who are not in favour of what we would think of as liberal public policies or liberal government.

**Adam Smith 17:23**

Margaret, what can we learn from the visual symbolism on display in these protests? The Confederate flag is there, for example, even in, even in protests in Michigan.

**Margaret Weir 17:36**

The Confederate flag, of course, is much more of a flashpoint. But another flag that you see at these demonstrations is less of a flashpoint and is less openly seen as being racist. And that's the Gadsden flag. This is a yellow flag that says, don't tread on me, and it has – [Adam Smith: With the rattlesnake] – yeah, and that in a way has become a less fraught symbol of these groups. There are a number of states where you can get a Gadsden flag on your licence plate. There have been challenges where African Americans have said that the, in

workplaces, the display of the Gadsden flag is racist. So there's different kinds of flags, the Confederate flag, but increasingly the Gadsden flag, because most people don't really know what it is, and they don't associate it with racism in the same way they associate the Confederate flag. But I would say, you know, and just to the, to the point of how fringe these groups are, there were also swastikas and nooses at these places and I think there is something of a conflict on the part have the right to you know, like forget the swastikas because we're, you know, that will undermine our legitimacy. So, you know, you have this sort of line, like, how far can you go and it's legitimate and I think there's, except for on the far right, the Confederate flag is seen as legitimate, but increasingly among suburbanites who may be Republican, who may be conservative, that makes them uncomfortable.

**Adam Smith 19:33**

Just going back to the, the Gadsden flag, you're saying that that flag has acquired racist overtones. And is that really because, is that anything to do with the message on the flag? Or is it because of the people and the contexts in which it's been used?

**Margaret Weir 19:53**

I think it's clearly the context and the people that have used it. I mean, to the extent that it's, that the message of don't tread on me, is associated with an anti-government message, and the government is the one that is seen as promoting racial equality. There may be an explicit association but I think it's more of the context. I mean, certainly the flag itself was an anti-British flag, don't tread on me was towards towards the British Empire. But but the context of the Tea Party, gave it a much more, that this is associated also with being against minorities.

**Adam Smith 20:49**

So, it emphasises rebellion and resistance with the at least implicit threat of violence. Don't tread on me, rather than all men are created equal.

**Margaret Weir 21:01**

Right. And that's, it is a very selective reading of what the American Revolution was about. Taking the pieces of it that have to do with rebellion, that have to do with being against against taxes, that have to do with being against oppression from a powerful and distant government. But none of the content about equality is there. The emphasis on rights is there, but it's a very also selective rendering of rights.

**Adam Smith 21:41**

My guess would be that the Venn diagram of the people who have the so-called authoritarian personality type, and the Venn diagram of the people who are engaged in these anti-lockdown protests and protesting against what they see as authoritarian government, is a pretty close one. That strikes me as a great paradox.

**Margaret Weir 22:01**

I think it's a very interesting observation. And I haven't seen any surveys to that effect, but it would not surprise me at all that they would be, that they would score high on those kinds

of authoritarian measures. And so again, it's a selective reading of who are the authorities? And what are they actually trying to do with their authority?

**Adam Smith 22:35**

So, the tyranny that matters, what matters is who is behaving in a so-called tyrannical way rather than the actions themselves?

**Margaret Weir 22:45**

Yeah, when it's a federal government, supporting civil rights of African Americans or the rights of people who speak different languages, those, those are not the rights that they would be in support of. So it's a selective reading of what rights are the appropriate rights and what's also a legitimate use of government authority. I think that might be the way to think about it, that some uses of government authority are legitimate and others aren't.

**Adam Smith 23:24**

There was an Axios-Ipsos poll which I saw the other day, which found that 49% of Republicans are, quote, very concerned about the Coronavirus, compared to 80% of Democrats, I mean that's, that's a really striking difference.

**Margaret Weir 23:40**

Down the line there are partisan differences in how people view the virus. There was a poll done in California that found extremely large partisan differences on whether you should wear a mask, on how much of a threat you feel, view the Coronavirus. Another poll that just came out yesterday also showed that Republicans were more likely to say that the number of deaths are exaggerated. And that, of course goes along with all of the suspicion of science, the suspicion of mainstream media, but Independents and Democrats were far more likely to say that they were either about right or they were actually underestimated. So there's a partisan element that has to do with where people get their information. Fox News is a critical player in all of this and helps to publicise the protests. It helps to shed doubt on what experts are saying to the point where Dr. Fauci, who is the lead scientist around infectious diseases, had to get extra security for, because he was threatened by right-wing, as a target of the right wing. So, so Fox News plays an important disinformation role in all of this and a motivating role.

**Adam Smith 25:25**

So the core question I'm trying to understand here is, is why the anti-lockdown protests take the form they do in the US, you know, why we see fat white guys with guns in legislatures, why we see this extreme anti-government rhetoric and the symbolism of rebellion. And part of the explanation is about the extraordinarily deep partisan divide in the US at the moment, the fact that the people who watch Fox News live in a different information universe from those who don't, which of course means that there's a massive problem of political legitimacy, isn't there? And a female Democratic governor like Governor Whitmer in Michigan is a target because on a, on a deep level, many Republicans in the state don't trust her. They don't respect her. They believe, they believe she's illegitimate simply because of who she is and everything they believe. She represents, just as Democrats don't trust a word, don't trust a word that comes out of the President's mouth.

And it really seems to me that the United States is suffering a crisis of political, a crisis of political legitimacy on all sorts of levels, which has been brutally exposed by the virus. But we also keep on coming back to this idea of America as a country defined by rebellion, albeit rebellion to maintain a very conservative social order. And looking from the outside in, it's the persistence of that don't-tread-on-me memory of the American Revolution, which seems to be what separates American political culture from everywhere else.

**Margaret Weir 27:13**

Well, I think every country has sets of cultural symbols that they refer to like, one of the mysteries to Americans, is how the French always end up in these massive street protests. And that they show all of this solidarity. So, you know, so I do think that every country has certain symbols that they can evoke, and it leads to kind of actions that are cult, that are distinctive to that nation. The thing that I would say about the U.S. is that there is the other side of symbols of equality and that, and that African Americans have often used those symbols in their centuries-long struggle for equality, that there is an aspirational side to take those symbols, and let's use them to make America be what it claims to be. So, so those symbols are there to be deployed and they are deployed on, on both this kind of conservative protest that we've seen but also throughout American history, for freedom and for equality.

**Adam Smith 28:36**

Margaret, that's brilliant. Thank you so much for joining me on the RAI podcast. Thank you.

**Margaret Weir 28:44**

Thank you. Oh, I'm very glad to do something as the Winant Professor other than sitting around in Maine watching the boats go by.

**Adam Smith 28:53**

Margaret Weir. To understand why the anti-lockdown protests have taken the form they have in America, we've been talking about the characteristics of a national political culture, the way in which politics is shaped by people's understanding of what their country is, where it has come from, and what it ought to be. In the United States, the formative period of the Revolution is the constant reference point. But revolution means different things to the opposing factions in this most factious of countries. For the most vociferous of the anti-lockdown protesters, and the right-wing groups financing them and giving them publicity, the Revolution is, above all, a story of rebellious men used to running their own affairs, taking up arms against a meddling, arrogant tyranny. This is a national myth that has no direct counterpart in other Western democracies. It's one story of the revolution and, as we can see every day, one that is politically potent. Other stories are of course, available. You've been listening to the Last Best Hope podcast from Oxford's Rothermere American Institute. I'm Adam Smith. Goodbye.