Introduction

_Dissent and America_

If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.

—Henry David Thoreau, Walden Pond, 1854

All we say to America is to be true to what you said on paper. . . . Somewhere I read [pause] of the freedom of speech. Somewhere I read [pause] of the freedom of press. Somewhere I read [pause] that the greatness of America is the right to protest for right.

—Martin Luther King, Jr., Memphis, April 3, 1968

There are many ways to tell the story of the United States, many possible perspectives. This is the story of the U.S. told through a somewhat unlikely assortment of voices. It is the story of religious dissenters seeking refuge in a New World; Native Americans defying the onslaught of European settlement; political revolutionaries launching a government “of the people, by the people, for the people”; enslaved Africans resisting their oppressors while creating a new culture; immigrants fighting to assimilate into American society; women persevering to gain equality; and minorities demanding their share of the American Dream. It is also the story of a countless number of Americans who prodded, provoked, and pushed the United States to actually be the nation it imagined itself to be. Throughout these stories runs the thread of dissent, protest, conflict, and change.

_Dissent: The History of an American Idea_ is the personal reflection of a historian on the centrality of dissent in American history. Of course dissent in not sui generis an American idea, but Americans have instinctively understood, even if mostly unconsciously, the interrelatedness
of dissent and what it means to be an American. Dissent created this nation, and it played, indeed still plays, a fundamental role in fomenting change and pushing the nation in sometimes-unexpected directions. My goal has been to write a narrative history of the United States from the standpoint of those who did not see eye to eye with the powers that be, from the standpoint of those who marched to the beat of a different drummer constantly challenging the government to fulfill the promise laid down in the nation’s founding documents. There has not been a time in American history when dissenters have not spoken out against the powerful and entrenched interests. At the same time, there were many occasions when dissenters against the dissenters fought ever harder to maintain, or restore, a social order that they feared would vanish if dissenters had their way. And so dissent did not propel the United States on a steady path toward the progress that dissenters sought. It was a rocky road.

Naturally it is impossible to include all those who dissented during the four-hundred-year history of the United States in a single volume. Although I have included a large number of dissenters in these pages, the reader should keep in mind that those discussed here are only a fraction of those who had an impact on the development of the United States. There are literally hundreds of others I would have liked to include, from the Merrymount Settlement to the Catholic Worker Movement, from Aaron Burr to Angela Davis, from Henry Demarest Lloyd to Paul Krassner, but that would have resulted in an impossibly unwieldy book. My goal has been to cover a representative selection of the most important dissenters and dissent movements that have influenced the course of American history, while at the same time touching on some of the less significant, less successful dissenters. Even those who did not achieve their goals had an impact because they created an atmosphere of debate. Impassioned debates over conflicting issues compelled Americans to look more deeply not only into the issues but also into their own attitudes and behavior, and as a result they either reaffirmed or revised their beliefs. This has been the case in the past. It will continue to be the case in the future.

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Dissent is one of this nation’s defining characteristics. Every decade since the earliest days of colonization Americans have protested for just
about every cause imaginable, and every time they did, defenders of the status quo denounced the protestors as unpatriotic and in more recent times as un-American. But protest is one of the consummate expressions of “Americanness.” It is patriotic in the deepest sense.

Even before the United States was conceived, there was dissent. During the seventeenth century religious dissent played a significant role in the planting and development of the English colonies. In the eighteenth century political dissent led to the open rebellion that resulted in the birth of the United States. In the nineteenth century dissenters demanded the abolition of slavery, suffrage for women, fair treatment of Native Americans, and the banning of immigrants. And they protested against the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Civil War (on both sides), and the Spanish-American War. In the twentieth century dissenters organized to prohibit alcohol but also demanded workers’ rights, women’s rights, African American rights, Chicano rights, reproductive rights, and gay rights. They also protested against every war (declared and undeclared) fought by the United States. In the twenty-first century dissenters protest against abortion, NAFTA, globalization, the Iraq War, the PATRIOT Act, the National Security Agency, bank bailouts, and out-of-control deficits. On the right the Tea Party movement has arisen, perceiving itself as the true heirs of the patriots of the American Revolution standing firm opposing despotic government; and on the left the Occupy Wall Street movement denounces the control of government by corporate interests and the finance industry. Clearly, dissent has many faces.

On the broadest level, dissent is going against the grain. It is speaking out and protesting against what is (whatever that is), most often by a minority group unhappy with majority opinion and rule. However, history has shown that dissent is far more complex, that it comes from all political perspectives and in a variety of categories: mostly religious, political, economic, and cultural/social. Religious dissent is the insistence that everyone be allowed to worship according to the dictates of conscience and not according to the rules of an established religion. Although most religious dissent occurred during the colonial period, when individuals insisted on religious liberty, and during the early national period, when the new nation endorsed the principle of separation of church and state, the demand for religious autonomy persists to this day. Religious dissent was expressed when new sects such as the
Shakers, the Mormons, or the Branch Davidians were formed, and it is still being expressed on a different level in the debates over school prayer, intelligent design versus evolution, abortion rights, capital punishment, and the right to die.

Political dissent is a critique of governance. As the United States grew from a fledgling nation into a world power, political dissenters expressed dissatisfaction about the way those who were in charge governed, and usually (but not always) they provided a plan or recipe for redressing what they perceived as wrong. Most often they used the nation’s founding documents as the authority to legitimize their protest. Antebellum abolitionists demanded the end of slavery, declaring that holding persons in bondage was contrary to the principle that “all men are created equal.” In recent years hundreds of thousands of Americans protested the decision to launch a preemptive invasion of Iraq, proclaiming that doing so transforms the United States into an aggressive imperial power and that by embracing imperialism the United States is renouncing its democratic birthright.

When the economy crashes, economic dissent comes to the fore. People take to the streets protesting economic injustice and inequality. And as distress and suffering expands from the lower classes to the middle class, so too does protest. One thinks of the Richmond bread riots and the food riots in Georgia and North Carolina during the Civil War, the violent labor disputes of the nineteenth century, Coxeys Army marching on Washington in 1894, the Bonus Army’s encampment at the Capitol in 1932, the militant labor activism during Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s liberal presidency, the tax revolts of the 1970s, the occupation of Zuccotti Park in 2011.

Cultural and social dissent is a rejection of the predominant attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of mainstream society. Utopian groups in the nineteenth century, such as the Oneida Community, defied the conventional values of their time and established a community where all men and women would be treated equally. “Beatniks” and “hippies” in the mid-twentieth century rejected the conventional middle-class morality of their time, urged their fellow Americans to “do their own thing,” and influenced millions to reevaluate their views of race, gender, and sexuality.

But this is only part of the story. There is significant and frequent overlapping of religious, political, and cultural/social dissent. For exam-
ple, many dissenters, such as temperance activists in the early twentieth century and the Christian right today, can be labeled as political, religious, and social dissenters. The 1960s counterculture’s challenge to American values was also intricately tied up in the political protests against the Vietnam War and the struggle for racial equality. Furthermore, there are economic and psychological factors that often play a role in all dissent movements.

There are some decades that are relatively quiet dissentwise and others when significant problems intensify so rapidly that tens of millions of people get involved in the discussion to find solutions. During these periods we see a sharp rise in dissent, and that dissent can take many forms as different groups propose different solutions. Some dissenters are reformers who wish to fix the problems through a process of reform. Some are reactionaries who seek to address the problems by returning to the policies that existed before the problems arose. Some are radicals or even revolutionaries who propose to solve the problems by smashing the system and starting over. The debate over slavery and the events leading to the Civil War, the Progressive era, and the 1960s were periods when dissent, in all its diverse forms, exploded.

There are several levels or stages of dissent. At the beginning individuals might simply disagree with a policy or a law or an issue. Perhaps they are willing to tolerate a wrong or an injustice for a while, but when it becomes less tolerable, the next step is to become active. Individuals might write a letter or an article, give a speech, lead a protest march, or conduct a demonstration. Dissent and protest carried to a higher level entails resistance, civil disobedience, breaking laws, or even participating in a riot or insurrection. At the last extreme, as in the American Revolution or in John Brown’s raid, outright conflict breaks out. At this point dissent has metamorphosed into something much larger and is either crushed or brings about a radical transformation.

The methods and forms of dissent are wide-ranging. Many protesters express dissent through petitions and protest marches. Some use music or art or theater or comedy to articulate their message. Some engage in acts of civil disobedience, willfully breaking laws to put pressure on the system to force those who have political and economic power to acknowledge and address the issues. They are often marginalized individuals and groups that lack power but have a legitimate grievance against the way things are. Most times these types of dissenters
have criticized the United States from the left. They have sought more equality, more moral rectitude, more freedom. They have demanded that America live up to what it had committed itself to on paper at the Constitutional Convention. Many of these dissenters have viewed the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence as binding contracts between the people and the government and protested when they believed the government was not fulfilling its part of the contract.

Dissenters often have a keen sense of history and build on the experiences and methods of earlier dissenters. It is not unusual to see dissenters quote those who have gone before as well as draw on the successful tactics and strategies of earlier dissent movements. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s employed many of the tactics of the labor movement of the 1930s, while antiwar activists adopted the tactics of the civil rights movement in their protests against the war in Vietnam and later the Iraq War. Dissenters with a vision for the future look to the past for inspiration.

Individuals and groups that protest against the protestors are also expressing dissent. Reactionaries have frequently resisted change and fought to maintain the special privileges and supremacy of their class or race or gender. Some have wanted to maintain the status quo and prevent change, while others have sought to turn back the clock to a simpler, more “trouble-free” time. When abolitionists denounced slavery, antiabolitionists argued just as passionately to preserve the institution. When women demanded equality, millions of Americans reacted with hostility and formed antisuffrage associations.

Although most dissent springs from those who lack political power, there are instances when a dissent movement is part of the power structure—the temperance movement and the Know-Nothings of the nineteenth century; the antitax ideologues of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. There are also notable individuals who fought entrenched interests from a position of political power—Representative Clement L. Vallandigham and Senators Theodore Frelinghuysen, Robert M. La Follette, and Margaret Chase Smith, for example, all spoke out against what they believed was a usurpation or misuse of power on the part of the federal government. Founding fathers Thomas Jefferson and James Madison dissented forcefully against the Alien and Sedition Acts.

Over the years dissenters achieved varying levels of success. Some got in trouble. Some were arrested. Many were beaten. Some were
killed. But they kept hammering away at the powers that be until those powers began to listen. As a result, public opinion was swayed, laws were enacted or repealed; slavery was abolished, unions were organized, women got the right to vote, the Jim Crow laws were invalidated. In fact many dissenters who were maligned, vilified, and even demonized as unpatriotic and anti-American by their contemporaries are now considered heroes. Some dissenters never achieved the change they were seeking, but though their goals were dismissed, they raised new questions and had an influence on the political discussion.

For the most part dissenters have embraced lofty ideals and have a moral purpose. And most of them believe they are acting to ensure that the United States lives up to its promise to secure Americans’ natural rights. But there are dissenters whose goals are not well intended or virtuous and who use questionable means to attain their goals—they are not in it to grant equal rights to a downtrodden minority but to restrict rights or to promote their own narrow interests at the expense of others.

During times of heightened passions—the 1850s, the Progressive period, the Great Depression, the Vietnam War—dissenters have protested from liberal, conservative, and radical standpoints. In the debates about the war in Vietnam, for example, there were those who believed that America was acting as an imperial power and that the capitalist system should be toppled. There were those who opposed the war primarily on ethical grounds because the United States was acting immorally. And there were those who opposed the war simply because the United States was losing it and thus argued that if the government was not going to go all out in its effort to destroy communism in Vietnam, then there was no point in being there. For completely different reasons radicals, doves, and hawks, in the end, all came to protest the war in Vietnam.

Obviously not all dissenters are created equal. Nor are the consequences of their efforts necessarily positive or socially useful. There is a difference between dissenters whose goal is to create a more just society by expanding the rights of the disempowered, and those who are self-aggrandizing troublemakers interested only in disrupting society or denying rights to others. Historian Eric Foner, in The Story of American Freedom, points out that “freedom” is a “contested concept.” So too is “dissent.”
Seventeenth-Century Dissent

Early seventeenth-century religious dissenters, refusing to conform to the practices of the Church of England, crossed the Atlantic and founded the colonies of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay. Most of these early settlers were committed to setting up churches according to the only polity sanctioned, in their view, by scripture. In 1620 Puritan Separatists settled in Plymouth, so they could worship according to the principle that each church was wholly separate from the Church of England. A decade later Puritan Congregationalists, seeking to reform the church from within, founded Massachusetts Bay Colony, where they organized churches in which ministers were chosen by the members, not appointed by the bishop of London; and membership was restricted to those who could provide evidence of “saving faith” to the congregation.

The Puritans, however, were not promoting the principle of religious freedom. They were only seeking to practice religion the way they saw fit. Those who did not see eye to eye with them were not to be tolerated. It was Roger Williams who pushed for religious freedom. Williams, one of the first dissenters in the English colonies, took exception to several tenets of the Puritan oligarchy. He called for the complete separation of church and state and for a broader religious toleration. Williams argued that to compel people to conform to a specific, authorized religious belief was counterproductive because it simply convinced people that the imposed beliefs are false. In the end, Williams’s dissension eventually led to banishment. He established a new colony that became a haven for those who held unpopular views. Over the next century and a half, as the colonial settlements grew increasingly diverse and multicultural, Williams’s advocacy of toleration and the separation of church and state became a fundamental part of eighteenth-century political discourse. Shortly after the ratification of the Constitution these principles, regarded by then as natural rights, were enshrined in the First Amendment.

Incidents of political dissent also cropped up in the early years of colonial America. By the 1670s fertile land in Virginia was becoming increasingly scarce. Indentured servants were forced to work as tenant farmers for wealthy landlords or move to less desirable acreage on the frontier. But much of this land was off-limits because it was reserved for Indians. Seething with disdain for the wealthy landholders and
filled with racial hatred of the Indians, a band of indentured servants and some slaves, led by Nathaniel Bacon, marched on Jamestown in the summer of 1676, torched the town, and plundered the landed gentry’s estates. In the aftermath of the rebellion the Virginia governing authorities, in a decision that had profound historical consequences, decided no longer to rely on unruly, disgruntled indentured servants to fill the colony’s labor needs but on African slaves whose lifelong subjugation would prevent them from becoming a potential threat to the colony’s stability. From this point on slavery became entrenched in colonial America.

Not only does Bacon’s Rebellion show how dissent shaped the Chesapeake colonies, but to a large extent the rebellion also reveals the ambiguities in dissent. On one hand it appears as a straightforward class struggle—an uprising by the lower classes against the Virginia aristocracy—but on the other hand it was a venting of deep-seated racism against the Indians that demonstrates how racism can conceal deeper economic issues. The rebels were attempting to expand their rights, while simultaneously diminishing the rights of the Indians. Further obfuscating the issue is the fact that it was also a power struggle because not all of the rebels, indeed not Bacon himself, were truly lower class, but they wanted to wrest political and economic power from Governor Berkeley.

Eighteenth-Century Dissent

In the eighteenth century Indians clashed with whites invading their territory, slaves rebelled in South Carolina and New York City, Quaker abolitionists condemned the institution of slavery, women spoke out against male authority. In the 1730s John Peter Zenger fought for freedom of the press, and thirty years later dissenters fought for the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Of course, the most momentous dissent movement of the eighteenth century was the protest against British taxation policies that led to the American Revolution. When Parliament passed the Stamp Act, colonists took to the streets in protest: effigies of tax collectors were burned, royal officials were tarred and feathered, and in Boston mobs destroyed government offices and even demolished and plundered the lieutenant governor’s residence. Parliament, stunned at the severity of
the protests, repealed the act in 1766, but each subsequent attempt to raise revenue only provoked more protest, until shots were eventually exchanged at Lexington and Concord. This time political and economic dissent led to revolution.

Despite the enthusiasm for independence a large percentage of the population remained loyal to England and protested against the war and against the rebels. Loyalists, such as the royal governor of Massachusetts Thomas Hutchinson, clashed uncompromisingly with those who advocated rebellion against Britain. In 1776 he found himself in the unusual position of defending the status quo against a rising new status quo. When the Second Continental Congress issued the Declaration of Independence and in the face of a tide of proindependence thinking, arch-loyalist Hutchinson dissented against the dissenters. He published a pamphlet vehemently criticizing every one of the points Jefferson made in the Declaration. Hutchinson argued that because some of the signers demanded freedom for themselves while denying it to others, the Declaration of Independence was a hypocritical document, a piece of propaganda that confirmed his belief that the rebellion was dishonest and criminal and the idealistic principles it espoused based on false logic. Although Hutchinson’s protestations went against the increasingly popular view that independence from Great Britain was a noble cause, his example anticipates those who in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries protested against the unwanted political and social change that was taking place around them, such as the Ku Klux Klan’s efforts to subjugate newly freed slaves and antiabortion activists who fought to overturn the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion.

Dissent was so important to the revolutionary generation that they enshrined the right to dissent in the First Amendment of the Constitution. And Americans, ever since, have taken that right seriously.

Nineteenth-Century Dissent

Once the United States was established dissent intensified rather than diminished. In the nineteenth century hundreds of thousands of Americans, troubled by the discrepancy between the nation’s democratic/republican principles and reality, spoke out against the injustices that still persisted. Social reformers urged radical changes in education,
rehabilitation of criminals and the mentally ill, and the elimination of alcohol. After 1831 abolitionism grew so widespread that it inflamed passions to such an extreme that the issue was only resolved through civil war. During the Civil War thousands of Americans on both sides protested against the war, against conscription, and against violations of the Bill of Rights. When the war ended, many southerners formed terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and the Knights of the White Camellia to protest the new social order, while in the North and West farmers, Indians, Chinese immigrants, laborers, and women organized alliances, protest groups, and unions to demand the rights that were denied them. After America's victory in the Spanish-American War in 1898 many citizens condemned the United States as an imperialist power and warned that democracy at home was in danger if the nation abandoned its ideals.

Arguably the most significant example of political dissent in all of American history was the antebellum abolitionist movement. Abolitionists were dissenters who opposed, mostly peacefully, sometimes violently, the institution of slavery. However, federal and state law protected slaveholders, while slavery itself had the sanction of the highest law of the land—the Constitution. To oppose a practice that was embedded in the economic, political, and social structure was a formidable task, but hundreds of thousands of Americans joined the abolitionist crusade. In 1831, William Lloyd Garrison began publication of a weekly antislavery newspaper, the Liberator, in which he unconditionally condemned slavery and demanded immediate emancipation and the granting of full citizenship and voting rights to all slaves. Garrison eventually went so far as to propose that the United States abrogate the Constitution because of its complicity with slavery and expel the southern states from the Union. Like flag burners in the twentieth century, Garrison incurred the wrath of his fellow citizens after he publicly burned a copy of the Constitution in Boston Common, thus alienating many of those who might have been sympathetic to his cause.

Some abolitionists expressed their dissent more moderately than Garrison. The former slave Frederick Douglass, after he escaped from bondage, traveled from town to town speaking out against slavery. Listeners were so amazed by his intelligence and eloquence that it caused them to rethink all the racial stereotypes they had been brought up to believe. The arguments of abolitionists like Garrison and Douglass, as
well as those of hundreds of others, educated Americans about the horrors of slavery and compelled them to examine their conscience and decide on which side of the issue they stood. This process has occurred over and over again in all dissent movements. Protestors go on marches, write books, deliver speeches, and hold demonstrations to inform the public, raise consciousness, and win converts to their cause.

The issue of slavery brought about still another type of dissent once the Civil War ended and slavery was abolished. The Ku Klux Klan was founded in 1865 for the explicit purpose of preventing former slaves from gaining political and economic power. In a campaign of terror and violence Klansmen rode through the South intimidating and murdering freedmen and creating a climate of subjugation and suppression that lasted for more than a century. The Klan was not interested in extending constitutionally guaranteed rights. Rather its goal was to make sure that African Americans were denied those rights. The KKK illustrates one of the paradoxes of dissent. If dissent is defined merely as opposing the status quo, challenging the way things are without regard to moral considerations, then the Klan is a dissent organization. Certainly the Klan is an example of reactionary dissent. The post–Civil War status quo was that former slaves were legally free and equal. The Klan opposed African Americans’ new status and sought to restore white supremacy. But since white supremacy was always at the heart of social relations in the South, the Klan, despite the fact that it was opposing the (new) status quo, was not expressing what I would view as a legitimate form of dissent. The Klan’s dissent was simply a continuation of the effort to maintain the old status quo.

Twentieth-Century Dissent

In the twentieth century dissent proliferated at an exponential pace. Political dissent was expressed in both world wars and dozens of undeclared military conflicts. Writer Randolph Bourne, Senator Robert M. La Follette, and Socialist Party leader Eugene V. Debs were among the hundreds of thousands who opposed U.S. entry into the Great War. The Second World War also had its share of protestors, despite the fact that a vast majority of Americans believed it was necessary and honorable to fight against fascism. Isolationists such as Charles Lindbergh,
conscientious objectors such as David Dellinger, and writers such as Henry Miller all condemned American involvement in the war.

The most divisive war in our nation’s history was the Vietnam War. The antiwar protests of the 1960s and 1970s were distinctive in that they were part of a wider protest movement that began with the African American struggle for civil rights. By the 1960s activists were taking to the streets for a host of reasons—African American rights, women’s rights, gay rights, Chicano rights, and opposition to the war in Vietnam. The dissent of the 1960s was unique in that it brought political, cultural, and social dissent together. Everything, from politics to militarism to racism to sexism to “American values,” was questioned.

Many of the protests followed the nonviolent civil disobedience format that Martin Luther King, Jr., espoused. Echoing Henry David Thoreau and Mahatma Gandhi, King argued that if an individual believes in justice, then he or she must oppose injustice: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” If a law is unjust, King wrote in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” that is, if it does not universally apply to all people and if it is not in harmony with moral law, then it is the duty of anyone who believes in justice to break that law. King never advocated breaking a just law, but he did advocate breaking unjust laws, such as those that sanctioned segregation. But when one breaks an unjust law, one must be willing to pay the penalty. King also argued that protest marches intended to call attention to injustice must be peaceful. If demonstrators destroyed property or responded violently to attacks they would be breaking just laws that were meant to protect people.

Some demonstrations, however, did get violent when protestors got impatient with delay and inaction. The government, it seemed to many frustrated activists, was moving too slowly to eradicate racial discrimination and to end the Vietnam War. Protests at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago became violent when police and demonstrators clashed in full view of television cameras. Millions of Americans watched in dismay as they viewed images of bloodied demonstrators being arrested and carted away by the police. In May 1970 a demonstration at Kent State University took the lives of four students when the Ohio National Guard opened fire on the crowd. The scope and intensity of antiwar dissent wound up having a fundamental impact on
shaping American policy for the remainder of the century. For more than twenty-five years after the end of the war in Vietnam, American foreign policy focused on avoiding, as far as possible, any commitment of U.S. forces in other conflicts around the globe.

Simultaneous with this retrenchment and rethinking of America’s role in the world, a conservative backlash also set in during the last quarter of the century, when millions of Americans sought to return to the conformity, complacency, and “family values” of an earlier time. Still, dissent was alive and well, as a multitude of dissenting groups, with a wide variety of agendas, proliferated.

The power of dissent in shaping history became further apparent over the issue of abortion when, after decades of women pushing for reproductive rights, the Supreme Court legalized abortion in the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision. Dissent had changed the law. However, after the decision, a new dissent movement came into being: the prolife movement. Thousands of Americans protested at abortion clinics and on university campuses around the country in an all-out effort to make abortion illegal once again. By the 1980s antiabortion dissent turned violent when some protestors bombed Planned Parenthood clinics and murdered clinic employees and abortion-providing physicians. The perpetrators argued that doctors performing abortions were committing acts of murder and therefore that killing them was a moral duty. As in previous occasions when dissenters brought about change, those who had previously dissented against the restrictions on abortion found themselves defending the new reality, and those who had once favored the status quo found themselves as the dissenters. What is particularly complicated about the abortion issue is that it is not as simple as one group wanting a right and the opposition wanting to deny that right, because antiabortion protestors argue that they are not trying to restrict rights but rather are seeking to expand them to unborn children.

In the 1980s and 1990s Theodore Kaczynski, convinced that technology was leading to the inevitable destruction of civilization, conducted an eighteen-year campaign of mailing letter bombs to scientists, researchers, and industrialists. The Unabomber’s method of protest resulted in the deaths of three researchers and the maiming of twenty-three. In 1995 Gulf War veteran Timothy McVeigh, believing that the federal government had become a malevolent force that endangered
the U.S. Constitution, set off a bomb at a federal office building in Oklahoma City that killed 168 people. Such methods of dissent went far beyond the philosophy of civil disobedience and even the boundaries of dissent. In these dissenters’ fight for what they perceived as a threat to their rights, they broke the most fundamental just law—the law prohibiting murder.

A New Century

September 11, 2001, opened a new chapter of dissent. In the first weeks after the terrorist attacks most Americans united behind the president, the War on Terror, and the PATRIOT Act (designed to root out would-be terrorists). But as time went by, many Americans began criticizing the policies that they believed provoked Al-Qaeda terrorists to attack the United States. By 2002 thousands of Americans, from both ends of the political spectrum, fearing the erosion of civil liberties, signed petitions and protested against the PATRIOT Act. And in February 2003, a month before the American invasion of Iraq, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators took to the streets protesting a war that had not yet begun, believing that it was a terrible decision that would only strengthen terrorism, not defeat it. Among the most resolute protestors were veterans of previous wars, such as West Point graduate David Wiggins, who published an open letter to the troops embarking for Iraq, telling them that invading Iraq will lead to “a more dangerous world.”

A multitude of political groups, grassroots peace organizations, soldiers returning from Iraq, and Gold Star Mothers like Cindy Sheehan spoke out by holding vigils and marching in demonstrations, hoping to convince the administration to end the war in Iraq.

In addition to the political protests focusing on American foreign policy, the first years of the twenty-first century also saw an escalation of social and cultural dissent in the ongoing protests for and against same-sex marriage, health care reform, immigration reform, abortion, and the government’s violation of privacy rights. In a century that is only in its second decade, we cannot foresee the scope and extent of future protest movements, but if the history of the past four hundred years has taught us anything, it has taught us that dissent and protest in all its numerous manifestations is not going away and will continue to shape the United States.