

Regan Byers

Eastern Michigan University
AVVA Member, 926200 ASC

Patriotism: The First Refuge of an American

Patriotism in America is often treated like a holiday decoration, something only to be seen on special occasions in the appropriate context. When the towers fell on September 11th, everyone hung their flags, pinned ribbons to their jackets, and adorned their bumpers with “God Bless America” stickers. A few short years later, the country was in the midst of a nasty debate over war, and seeing a flag outside someone’s home became equivalent to leaving Christmas lights on in April.

Though written in 1981, John Schaar’s “The Case for Patriotism” still has timely and relevant points. Schaar says patriotism is “unwelcome in many quarters of the land today and unknown in many others”, and the word “patriotism” has “settled, in most people's minds, deep into a brackish pond of sentiment where thought cannot reach” (Schaar). It seems most people only reach into that “brackish pond” on Independence Day. Patriotism is not a mere trinket to be shined and polished on a seasonal basis. It is tool that can be used to sharpen minds, build courage and strengthen resolve.

Being a patriot requires a person to love their country and defend it from those who disparage it, including fellow citizens. It means having the courage to speak up when its leaders are wrong, the strength to do something about it, and the wisdom to know whom to reach and how to institute the right kind of change. However, it also means knowing how to properly choose those battles. Though I did not agree with the war in Iraq and was unhappy to send my husband overseas, I understood his decision to defend the country, and I must respect and support his choice. While I choose to disagree with those who run the government, I will not pour scorn on those who preserve it.

In fact, preservation is an integral part of patriotism, when one believes in and upholds the values and principles set forth in the Constitution: “in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity” (Barbour &Wright, 460). John Collins clarifies this point, saying that Americans should “leave behind the apathy that has plagued our nation in recent decades and get back to what our founding fathers died for, to allow all our

citizens to have representation in the laws that govern our country” (Collins).

Many of these laws are fundamental to the American way of life, such as the Bill of Rights. The essence of patriotism lies in these rights, but none more so than the First Amendment. Within the First amendment lies the right to “peaceably assemble” and “to petition the government for a redress of grievances” (Barbour & Wright, 468). Citizens have numerous ways in which to show their patriotic love, whether it’s protesting a war, asking for removal of government officials, or reform on health care.

With “freedom of the press” (Barbour & Wright, 468), the founders intended a society in which all perspectives could be heard. A patriot respects those different viewpoints, yet reads beyond the headlines; looking for contrasting data and opinions, leading to thorough and careful evaluation.

“Freedom of speech” (Barbour & Wright, 468) gives each citizen the ability to speak out in support of the government, and the ability to speak out against it, particularly when one feels the need to preserve or protect American ideals. Either of these acts shows great love for the country, an aspect that is vital to

patriotism. This can be the most challenging ideal to stick with, especially when there are disagreements. However, those disagreements produce the thoughtful and serious conversations that bring healthy compromise and positive change to this country.

Speaking on behalf of America shouldn't be difficult, because patriotism offers one a place from which to draw courage. Collins reminds that America is the "home of the brave: Do not be afraid! Do not let anybody make you feel afraid. Not even your own government. If you allow this to happen, you let them imprison you and take your freedom from you" (Collins). A patriot always remembers there is no need for fear, because "America was founded on democracy. What gives America the greatest strength is having all our citizens, from all walks of life and cultures, become informed on the issues that face our nation and then voting to make sure they are heard" (Collins).

Patriotism means finding a voice to express one's thoughts and concerns to others. There is opportunity for activism on a number of levels thanks to blogs, chat rooms, networking sites and even Youtube that can help one participate in an established group or form a new one altogether. The more traditional and perhaps most

precious alternative to these measures is exercising the right to vote. Patriotic Americans have been using their vote for years to speak volumes to those in power. The formula is simple: “If you don’t like the way our government is doing its job, it is your patriotic duty to tell them or vote them out of office” (Collins).

The treatment of patriotism as a passing fad is possible because of the willingness of many to confuse and interchange patriotism with nationalism. Both are “characterized by exaggerated love for one's own collectivity combined with more or less contempt and hostility toward outsiders” (Schaar). Patriotism is not an exaggerated love, but an honest love for the people and country one holds dear. Patriotism does not mean showing hostility to outsiders. It means showing compassion for those who wish to become part of this great nation or for those who wish to use America and its democracy as the template in which to model their own country.

“The Case for Patriotism” states that “we become devoted to the people, places and ways that nurture us and what is familiar and nurturing seems also natural and right. This is the root of patriotism” (Schaar). American’s strong sense of patriotism was borne out of everything that enables a society to sustain itself:

justice, kindness, tenacity. These values lead to America's fundamental qualities of democracy, equal opportunity and individualism.

There's a song by the group 3 Doors Down called "Love Me When I'm Gone". The video shows friends and family saying goodbye as their loved ones go off to war. Even though it brings tears to my eyes every time I hear it, it's still one of my favorites. I watch that video and marvel at the patriots I see, both in and out of uniform. Sometimes being a patriot means giving one's life for the country, sometimes it means giving your loved one's life.

Few people give much thought to patriotism while shopping a furniture sale on a holiday weekend. I give my father-in-law, the retired Sergeant, a kiss on the cheek and say thanks. Most people give no further thought to patriotism once the bottle rockets are used up. I look at my husband, listen to the dog tags clinking on his chest, and give him a warm, proud smile. I love a man who loves his country; there's no better way to show my patriotism.

Works Cited

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