

What Defines Patriotism in Contemporary America?

Contest Essay
September 11, 2009

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It seems that in contemporary American society, many citizens have come to take for granted the privileges and freedoms that they are fortunate enough to experience. Too many individuals have neglected to fulfill the expectations that accompany American citizenship, including members of the city, state, and national governments. This lack of responsibility has not only resulted in the perpetuation of such polarizing issues such as racial equality, economic disparity, and disaster relief, but also introduced new areas of tension such as health care, immigration, and large scale corporate thievery. While scrutiny of Congress and the Executive Branch of government is vital to ensure the welfare of the people is maintained, apathy and resentment seem to have not only caused Americans to hold politicians in low esteem, but caused a schism between many of its citizens as well. These issues seem to have resulted in an overall lack of national pride. While such terrible events such as 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina bring our people together in front of their televisions and computers, the methods with which these disasters were dealt with quickly divided our people once again.

Regardless of whether one is in agreement with the military response of the Bush administration to 9/11, it cannot be denied that some action was necessary. And while scrutinizing Katrina's relief efforts, how many individuals actually contributed to the effort themselves? When such disasters occur, it is not only the responsibility of the government to act, but the responsibility of the American people as well. While citizens today are not expected to bear arms against British soldiers to establish their

independence, there are other ways for Americans to display patriotism today, some of which are consistent with early ideals and others that seem to be new in today's America. By examining the current responsibilities of a good American citizen, displaying a level of tolerance and respect towards other Americans and other cultures as well, and possessing an informed, realistic opinion of the United States military and its soldiers, one can obtain a fairly accurate and complete definition of what it means to be patriotic in our society today.

Along with the freedom and luxury that accompany American citizenship comes responsibility. Americans are expected to adhere to certain behavioral standards to maintain their freedoms. There is also an expectation that these standards include providing for one's self and family. Hard working Americans and even those that don't work too hard are held responsible for much of the cost of maintaining a civilization through taxation, an often unpleasant but essential reality. Unfortunately, there are those that exploit the system and misuse or abuse these tax dollars for selfish reasons. This is quite opposite of patriotic behavior. Jason Deparle in the New York Times notes that despite rising unemployment, 18 states have cut their welfare rolls (Deparle 1). This means less assistance for those that truly need it. It is not patriotic to buy fireworks on the Fourth of July with money from your welfare check if you could go to work instead. Nor is it patriotic to throw a parade in your hometown with money embezzled in a real estate scam that may soon leave many of your neighbors homeless. Aside from providing for one's family, Americans are expected to teach their families to uphold proper societal values, which provide for plenty of moral and personal variations so as not to be stifling or dictatorial. One can still strive for individualism while choosing a

profession that serves to benefit society, not just one that promises great financial reward. Instilling such values in one's children is crucial in both displaying and maintaining patriotism. Failure to do so only perpetuates the conflicts that burden our society.

A second element of patriotism that is closely related to personal responsibility is that of tolerance and respect not only towards other Americans, but other cultures as well. This is a broad concept that is essential for any American to develop a proper perspective of their role in our society. The American population is quite ethnically diverse, a tradition consistent throughout the development of our society and construction of our infrastructure. And the large degree of personal freedoms granted to our citizens has resulted in a great moral, political, and religious diversity as well, leading to many conflicts. Certain moral tendencies have been identified and manipulated by certain political entities which further the division between many groups and subcultures in our society. One side condemns the other for acting immorally while the other claims their intolerance is in fact immoral. Ironically, patriotism is evident on both sides of such conflicts. As long as those that are pro life respect the rights of those that are pro choice (not necessarily pro abortion), and they are acting towards what they consider to be the ultimate benefit for society, they are displaying patriotism. Regardless of whether or not someone agrees with current military operations, their willingness to respectfully voice their opinion is evidence of patriotism. Individuals are not required to purchase American automobiles to be patriotic, but they must understand the integral role the automotive industry holds in American culture. When, for example, an anti-abortion fanatic bombs an abortion clinic and murders innocent employees, the disrespect and hypocrisy intensify the tension already existing near such moral divisions. Quite simply,

it is difficult to tolerate such irresponsibility. No less tolerable is the hypocrisy displayed by some members of the U. S. Senate that deemed the American automobile industry not worthy of saving while plans for foreign auto plants are in place in the states which they represent.

Tolerating diverse ethnicity has become a topic surrounded by much controversy. Events such as 9/11 and the growing concern of illegal immigration have caused many Americans to shun the cultural groups associated with each of the aforementioned issues. But this nation was established in large part due to ethnic diversity, and it is hypocritical to dismiss this reality now. It cannot be ignored that there is a significant presence of hostile Arabic and Muslim organizations within our borders, but not every woman that wears a hijab is hiding a bomb, nor is every middle- eastern gas station owner financing Al Qaeda operations. A gradual change is evident in the public opinion towards Arab Americans, 45% of citizens believed that they encouraged violence in 2007 while only 38% feel this way in 2009 (Lindsay 1). Not all Hispanics are illegal immigrants, and not all illegal immigrants are useless parasites ready to burden our society. Ironically, this is an issue that both Democrats and Republicans agree on. According to Mark Dolliver, 41% of Democrats and 61% of Republicans want less (Dolliver 1). The railroads that enabled the rapid growth of industry in the nineteenth century were built largely by immigrant labor, and our highways and bridges certainly need some attention now. According to D. Wayne Klotz, president of the American Society of Civil Engineers, “Crumbling infrastructure has a direct impact on our personal and economic health, and the nations’s infrastructure crisis is endangering our future prosperity” (Cooper 1). Not only could immigrant labor be utilized in such a manner, but patriotism could develop

among these individuals who may then serve to portray a more favorable image of the United States throughout the world.

A final element, one that is often overlooked, needs to be considered while identifying patriotic individuals and accomplishments. This is a proper attitude towards the U. S. Military and its soldiers. By no means is any citizen expected to agree with every military action carried out by the bureaucracy, nor should they be obligated to agree with violent actions of any kind. But any American citizen that considers them self a patriot must appreciate the freedom and relative safety they enjoy while living here in the United States as well as respect the soldiers that have fought and sacrificed to protect this freedom and safety, both in our nation and throughout the globe. Military protection is a necessary evil in modern society, and to condemn those that participate for good reason is hypocritical for anyone living comfortably within America's borders. And as for the soldiers themselves that fought overseas, they can provide a valuable perspective on the consequences of war for anyone that cares to take the time to listen. And only with great exception will one find any of these soldiers that enjoyed their time in battle, most despise war despite fulfilling their responsibility to serve their country and the rest of the world. These individuals have fulfilled one thousand times over the criteria for patriotism, and any American that strives to be patriotic must properly acknowledge the sacrifice of these soldiers, many of which have returned to the countries that fought in to participate in their reconstruction, others look after their fellow veterans that need support, only increasing the degree of their patriotism. One such example is that of John Craven, a Veteran of the Vietnam War, who is still deeply troubled by the loss of members of his squad, and in 2006 returned to Vietnam and placed a plaque

commemorating these fallen soldiers on the site of their old camp, after obtaining permission from the government and farmer that now owns the land (Craven 53, 54).

While it may seem difficult to display unconditional pride and adoration for our nation today, Americans must continue to be appreciative of their opportunity to live in such relative comfort and safety. Patriotism can be displayed by being a responsible, tolerant, respectful citizen who appreciates those that sacrifice for their freedom. With the current economic and political unrest that threatens our privileged existence as Americans, there exists ample opportunity for citizens to display patriotism and truly reveal the degree to which they value their country.

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