

The New Patriotism

Our country! In her intercourse with foreign nations may she always be right, but our country, right or wrong. — Stephen Decatur, 1816

Anyone who says patriotism is 'my country right or wrong' ought to have his head examined. — Jane Fonda, 1970

Patriotism is in fashion again. Public expressions of national pride are more abundant, participation in patriotic rituals more common than a few years ago. There is renewed interest among educators, political leaders, and the public at large in the meaning of citizenship. There is more talk of "civic responsibility."

Likewise, political campaigns rely more heavily than in the recent past on patriotic themes and on direct appeals to patriotism itself. A leading motif of the Republican presidential campaign of 1984 was that Ronald Reagan had made us once more "feel good about being Americans"; and Senator Gary Hart, a leading Democratic aspirant for the presidency, has hinted at 1988's campaign rhetoric in his February 1985 Boston speech on "true patriotism."

Of course, talk about patriotism is not the same thing as patriotism itself, and we might more accurately say that the rhetoric of patriotism is back in fashion. It is doubtful that people are more or less patriotic from one decade to another, but it is evident that the popularity of public appeals to patriotism waxes and wanes over time. The cyclical nature of this popularity reflects in part an enduring ambivalence about the nature and meaning of patriotism. Some have been unreserved about their rejection or embrace of patriotism. Alexander Pope declared the patriot a fool in any age; Samuel Johnson derided patriotism as a refuge for scoundrels. On the other side, Rousseau recommended that the citizen's love for the fatherland "make up his entire existence." Most of us, however, feel uncomfortable endorsing either extreme. Patriotism seems to have a good face and a bad face; and we puzzle to understand what role, if any, it can play in a moral and valuable life.

Patriotism vs. Morality

Ralph Barton Perry gave this account of the double aspect of patriotism: "The evil of patriotism, as well as its good, is embodied in the utterance 'my country, right or wrong.' Here is devotion and fidelity, but also disregard of principle. . . ." Devotion and fidelity

are admirable, but if the object of the devotion is unworthy, then fidelity to its cause may require supporting wrong. If the patriot must stand with his country against the morally right, then we must wonder at the price patriotism exacts.

Many seek to avoid the moral tension here by denying that patriotism and morality conflict. One argument occasionally offered is that patriotism cannot conflict with morality because the standard of right is the state and its ends. This line of argument is not open to anyone who holds a cosmopolitan morality, that is, to anyone—Kantian, Platonist, utilitarian, intuitionist, libertarian, Christian, Muslim, Jew—who holds universal moral principles or appeals to a moral authority beyond the state.

A more common argument is that "blind" patriotism may be morally dangerous but "enlightened" patriotism is not; enlightened patriotism does not mean our country, right or wrong. However, if "enlightened" means always conforming to the requirements of a universal morality, then the problem about patriotism seems evaded rather than avoided. Patriotism means "love of country," and to love something means to be partial toward it. To be devoted and faithful to something means to cleave to it, to stick by it, to maintain support for it through good times and bad. Morality, on the other hand, requires us to take up an impartial standpoint of judgment, to judge our country with the detachment with which we would judge any other. How could patriotism and morality *not* potentially conflict?

There seems no escaping the problematic character of patriotism. Stephen Decatur seems right about patriotism, at least in so far as "my country, right or wrong" expresses the point that patriotism cannot be detached and impartial. Nevertheless, patriotism may also be much less morally dangerous than supposed. Standing by the country, even when it is wrong, seldom will require the patriot to act against principle. Jane Fonda may be right, too. To see how this is so, we need to explore more deeply the meaning of love of country.

Love of Country

To describe patriotism as "love of country" doesn't advance our understanding very far because love itself is not a single, simple thing. We don't esteem or encourage everything called love; some emotional dependencies we need to overcome or outgrow on our way to greater maturity. We value those loves that

make the lover a better person and the object of love better off.

Kant defined love as "good-will, affection, promoting the happiness of others and finding joy in their happiness." Following Kant's lead, we can define love of country as affection for and commitment to the good of the country. The patriot identifies his own fulfillment, to some extent, with the fate of his country. He is happy at its good fortune and its triumphs, disappointed at its failures. He is downcast when it is harmed and indignant when it is wronged. He is diminished when it is diminished.

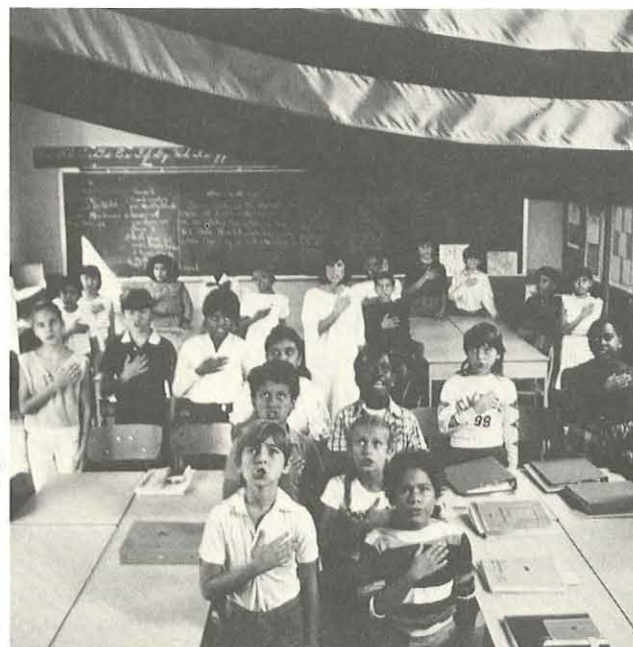
Love expresses a desire for and identification with the good of particular individuals or groups. Love, whether patriotic or any other kind, can thus prompt us to disregard universal moral principle. But this threat is genuine only when the welfare of the loved one is truly at odds with morality.

The patriot must "stand by" his country, right or wrong. But this cannot mean the patriot must always support, condone, participate in, or refuse to criticize the wrongful actions and policies of his country. Where such wrongful actions and policies harm the country, to support and participate in them would be to act against, not for, the good of the country.

This point is clear enough in the parallel case of parental love. Suppose a parent, upon discovering her child is involved in a theft, insists that the child confess to the authorities and return the stolen goods. We do not see this as the parent's failing to "stand by" her child. On the contrary, the parent is acting in what she sees as the child's best interest, since she has a conception of the child's good that gives central place to honesty and acceptance of responsibility.

The patriot, likewise, must act on his conception of the good of the country. This means that quite opposed views and behavior can be equally patriotic. Since citizens may reasonably and vigorously disagree over how particular actions and policies affect the nation's welfare, patriotism cannot be identified with some "correct" or majority position on specific, contestable policies of government. A patriot may espouse courses of action as painful to his nation as the parent's strict discipline was to her child, and like the parent be acting for the ultimate good of what he loves.

The indeterminacy that inheres in patriotism is compounded by a further fact. Citizens can not only disagree about how to advance the country's good; they can disagree about the nature of that good itself. The true patriot, according to Woodrow Wilson, has a "deep ardor for what his country stands for, what its existence means, what its purpose is declared to be in its history and its policy." But the country's ideals, the meaning of its history, and the nature of its purposes are matters of considerable disagreement. If commitment to the good of the country means commitment to the flourishing of certain ideals and purposes embodied in the nation's existence, then equally



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good patriots can part ways on even the deepest matters.

Patriotism in Action

How should patriotism translate into action? The good patriot will be careful not to injure his country. He will respect constituted authority and give weight to authoritative justifications of national policy. He will be informed of his country's history and attentive to its ideals.

But consider what these dispositions mean. Avoiding injuring the country does not mean avoiding causing it pain. Giving weight to authoritative justifications does not mean being credulous or uncritical. Being attentive to national ideals does not mean endorsing the status quo or supporting some narrow "American way of life."

The good patriot will want to avoid two corruptions of love. First, affection can blind us to the faults of what we love. Such blindness cannot be a merit in love since it can seldom be in the interest of what we love to indulge or encourage its worst behavior.

Intense identification with what we love can also corrupt the commitment to its good by inverting the direction of identification. "Living through another" can lead us not to identify our desires with his fortune but his fortune with our desires. Instead of shaping our desires to realize his good, we conceive of his good in a way that realizes our desires.

A good patriot will be wary of these corruptions of love and will want to avoid such lack of detachment as to be blinded to his country's faults or to be incapable of conceiving its good independently of his own.

A fault, but not a corruption, of love is that its partiality can exclude "outsiders" from our concern.

An intense commitment to the good of some can crowd out attention to the good of others. A love can become so dominant that all other considerations get swept aside, including consideration of right or wrong. This brings us back to our original worry about patriotism and raises a question about its appropriate place. Where should love of country enter into a good life?

Patriotism—as love of country—stands uneasily between cosmopolitanism and localism. Cosmopolitanism says there are associations and causes broader than the state that deserve our loyalty; localism says there are groups and causes smaller than the state in which we should invest our love.

We naturally begin life with local attachments—to other individuals, to family, neighborhood, and community. Patriotism says: we must transcend local points of view; we must submerge parochial commitments and take up a larger point of view, the point of view of the good of the nation as a whole. Patriotism wants to dominate our other loves, so that if we have to choose between love of a friend and love of country, we will choose the latter. But why should patriotism dominate? Why is love of country a more valuable love than love of friend or family or neighborhood? E.M. Forster once wrote: “If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying a friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.” This is resistance to the domination of patriotism on behalf of local attachments.

Patriotism is also pressed from the other side. Demanding as it does the enlargement of one’s point of view and commitments to encompass the state, it lies in turn exposed to similar demands of enlargement. Why stop with the nation-state? Why not adopt a point of view in which the nation is but one more locality submerged in a broader community of interest? George Santayana claimed that if a man “has

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There are many jealous gods who demand that we love them above all others. Do any secular gods merit such love? More important, can the nation be such a god? Rousseau wanted an identification with the fatherland so intense it excluded all other loyalties.

Others find such an identification repellent.

The good patriot cannot be oblivious to the tension between national patriotism, local attachments, and cosmopolitan commitments. Does he fail to be a good patriot if he fails to accord love of country domination over every other love and commitment? Do we fail to be good parents, good spouses, good neighbors if we

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do not subordinate all other considerations and concerns to the claims of child, spouse, neighborhood? The answer to this question is quite evidently no. By the same token, I suggest the answer to the first question is likewise no. Love of country must be able to coexist with other loves without dominating them.

Conclusion

How do we create good patriots? How do we inculcate patriotism without creating chauvinism, false pride, and blind obedience? How do we create citizens with the sensibility, traits of character, and habits of mind to feel love, honor its demands, avoid its corruptions, and understand its place?

Part of the new patriotism is just the return to fashion of the rhetoric of patriotism, a fashion likely to be as unedifying as past such fashions. Framing political issues as matters of patriotism is almost always a shabby affair since it converts honest disagreements about policies and ideals into defamation of character and imputation of disloyalty.

But part of the new patriotism represents a renewed interest in the questions just asked about instilling patriotism and understanding citizenship. Careful reflection on these hard questions is much needed and all to the good.

—Robert K. Fullinwider

The motto by Stephen Decatur is well known, that by Jane Fonda less so. Both are quoted at the front of John J. Pullen, *Patriotism in America: A Study of Changing Devotions* (New York: American Heritage Press, 1971). The Ralph Barton Perry quote is from *The Citizen Decides* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1951), p. 15; the Santayana quote is from *The Life of Reason*, rev. ed. (New York: Scribner, 1953), p. 162; the Rousseau quote is from *The Government of Poland*, trans. by Willmoore Kendall (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972), p. 19. An informative history of patriotism in America is *The Roots of American Loyalty* by Merle Curti (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946); the quote above from Woodrow Wilson comes from p. 231.
