

WILL THE TRUE PATRIOT PLEASE STAND UP?

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Since 9-11 we have been living in a red, white and blue world. A land of Old Glory snapping in the breeze and bumper stickers that are meant to unite us and ignite us as patriotic Americans. Tomorrow is Memorial Day, a day I have always had trouble with. It will, like all others be filled with patriotic preaching about our brave men, our boys, and in a few places our women and girls who died in the defense of their beloved country. Seldom do we recall the agony of those who died opposed to us, or those who died simply because they were in the way. Yes, it is a time to remember the bravery of those who fought for the freedom of this country, or because they had no other choice but to go to war.

I will say right now, I know there were just wars fought in self defense, wars fought for justice even. My heart is pained for those who sacrificed their lives, their limbs or their sanity in any of those wars. I daresay, I don't think I would be very popular in some circles were I to suggest that I would also like tomorrow's holiday to be a time to also remember the incompetence of the elders who sent their youngsters into the wars that cost them their lives.

Memorial Day was accompanied by controversy about what was right, right from the start. It started with the Civil War. Commander-in-Chief John A. Logan of the Grand Army. Of the Republic issued a general order designating May 30, 1868 as a day “for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating, the graves of comrades.” Of course, the comrades he wanted to remember were the ones, as he said, who “died in defense of their country during the late rebellion.” He said he did so “with the hope that it will be kept up from year to year.”

The state of Virginia then declared May 30 to be Confederate Memorial Day, an act that could only be considered to be continued defiance. Memorial Day began to be celebrated in one state after another over the century until it was almost universally celebrated throughout our country. Almost I say, because by the 1950s it still was not recognized in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas, even though the Civil War had been over almost 100 years. Most of those states and a few others had a “Confederate Memorial Day” that they celebrated. Some still do.

Memorial Day is a time when patriotism rears its emotional and dubious head, and watch out, the Fourth of July is not far behind. Just open any catalogue or look at any newspaper or magazine ad and you will see a fine array of American flags on everything from tee shirts to bathing suits to luggage to lawn furniture. It is a grand old flag—I love it—I do not know of any design more beautiful or more evocative of the

land I love. But let's not confuse flying the flag with patriotism. It's good for the feelings it inspires in some people who see the flag flying. But patriotism is really a private as much as a public virtue. I wonder-- does flying the flag, or wearing the flag, or saluting the flag, make one a true patriot? I am given to puzzling about that, and I am sharing with you my puzzling on this Memorial Day weekend.

This proliferation of flags certainly is a sign that patriotism is riding high in America once more. Scholars define it variously as love of country, place, or people. But also as a fervor that can grow into nationalism, jingoism, ethnocentrism, and fear of foreigners. Some of us think that the new patriotism marks the end of more than a decade of national introversion that started when the United States began withdrawing from Vietnam and was of course, kick started once again with the attacks of 9-11.

So today I want to dive into this subject of patriots and patriotism. I am sure you each have your own definition and your own feelings about it. Patriotic fervor, historians tell us, ebbs and flows in cycles. Some experts think patriotism itself remains constant, that only its expression changes. But most agree that national fervor waxes and wanes, causing America to alternate between self-assertion in world affairs and withdrawal into itself. When patriotism grows stronger, it brings about a kind of tribal unity. It was this solidarity that made it possible to create America, the nation, this land of ours, to stretch from

sea to sea, to resist an attempt to tear it apart; and finally it was this solidarity that helped to defend it and much of the Western world against totalitarian control.

However, as we are seeing now, at the peak of each cycle, patriotic excess stifles dissent and causes repression. Such excess motivated Abraham Lincoln to suspend the law of habeas corpus, requiring sufficient evidence to bring the accused to trial. Sound familiar? Wars have always brought such excesses.

Jefferson's Declaration of Independence defines patriotism in an implicitly rebellious fashion. According to that precious document, we do not owe our allegiance to a government or its leader and certainly not to its military or its flag, but to each other and to our common right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The Declaration states "Whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends it is the Right of the People to abolish it." For Jefferson disagreement was not only a right but also a necessity.

We UU's know about that. In fact dissidence is sometimes regarded as one of our finest traditions and proudest exports to the world. The feminist movement began here and spread throughout the world. Our civil rights movement has inspired the oppressed in dozens of nations and I think one of the finest examples of true patriotism is the recent passage of the recent repeal of the "don't ask don't tell" ruling in the military.

History tells us that patriotic excesses cause regret, self-recrimination and guilt. When waves of patriotic fervor start to fall, sometimes those who have tried to ride the waves to success are brought down, too. Often the excesses of patriotism come back to haunt the nation. And the cycle begins again. It will be interesting to see whether that will happen this time. This isn't the time to go into the details of the current Patriot Act, also called by some as the "Unpatriot Act" which was one result of the current administration's response to 9-11.

Many loyal Americans are dissenting in a positive way to this kind of suspension of the liberties our forefathers secured for us in the Constitution as individuals and even in cities and town across the country. Still that attack on this country is also seen by some as an attack on our identity as Americans, and on our sense of national pride. It brings up an adrenaline surge that makes us want to retaliate, to protect ourselves from more punches. For some of us at least. It is an assault on our personal status, what can we do but take refuge in our flag? And silently condoning an erosion of civil liberties as necessary to the security of our Homeland.

As we all know, we didn't find any weapons of mass destruction or biochemical labs, last I heard, but that's a dead issue now. Al Martinez of the *LA Times* tells us it's now time to re-consider it all. He writes, "The easy part of the war was blowing things up and penetrating

human flesh with steel. The hard part is looking deep into our souls through the holes in our conscience and wondering how, as a free nation, we comported ourselves. We were patriotic all right with our flags everywhere. We had our felt tears at the sound of the National Anthem, we looked on with admiration of our troops, watching our soldiers, and their jaws set, ready to do their duty as their commander in chief determined that duty to be. “

“Our ability to disagree and our inherent right to question our leaders and criticize their actions define who we are. Not only in war, but in the chilled climate of a nation hunkering down in the face of domestic terrorism. Freedom should never be fear’s victim. “ (Martinez)

Just as the political right does not deserve an exclusive claim to the word *patriotism*, we liberals need not have contempt for the word either. We may be carrying on a quarrel, maybe a lovers’ quarrel with many of our nation’s policies and politics over the years in regard to security and anti-terrorism actions. However, we can still respect its mix of opinions, its outspoken voices, left and right, and its by-God attitude. The Constitution is one of the great documents of history, written by those I consider our truest patriots who made the American Revolution happen and the new Republic come to fruition—those men and women are our spiritual ancestors. The first Amendment is freedom’s torch. There must be brave ones who stand to say “nay” while the masses thunder “aye!”

There must be those of us liberal Christians, UUs and others who say “nay” to the buildup of the invasions of the Mideast wars starting with Iraq. An example I would like to give is those of us who back in 2002 who stood on the corner of Arrow Street and Indian Hill Boulevard in Claremont quietly protesting the Iraq wars while taking verbal abuse from those supporters of the invasion. Those militant folks took over a corner and wrapped themselves in the American flag, along with the huge flags of the Army, Navy and Marines. Even as they were yelling harsh expletives at us, we had to remind ourselves of our first UU principle in our response to them. Yes, they too are persons of inherent dignity and worth. They too are worthy of our understanding and, yes, our understanding, if not our approval: as we had to remind ourselves not worth arguing with.

Those of us who marched in the street, stood in defiance of the over-simplified and false accusations from them—we did not want to send our troops over to that land and therefore were not patriotic. We did not stop the wars, of course. Our eyes were wide open on that one. But I think we lifted up the basic idea of what is a free society by simply standing there as silent witnesses, or marching with our peaceful signs and banners. I think those of us who were bold enough to do that deserve our honor too, and that is something to remember on this weekend of memory. And we didn't know at the time just how right we were!

We know that Jefferson's Declaration of Independence defines patriotism in a totally rebellious fashion. According to that precious document, we do not owe our allegiance to a government or its leaders, nor to its army or its flag. We owe it to each other and to our common right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness. "Whenever any form of Government becomes destructive of these ends," the Declaration states, "it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it." Jefferson went on record that it was not only a right but a necessity. He said, "I hold a little rebellion now and then is a good thing. "

Let's hope this is only the beginning. Our civil rights movement has inspired the downtrodden in dozens of nations, and gay rights were practically discovered here. I do believe Jefferson would be proud of us for that. If those early rebels had buckled under to the reigning government the flag in our lapel would be the Union Jack and we would be singing "God Save the Queen" today. Royal weddings can be lovely.

I know that patriotism has been defined as "the last refuge of the scoundrel." But I do not want to stop with that definition, true as it often is. I am more likely to go along with that great rebel of colonial times, Tom Paine. He said: "My country is the world. My countrymen are mankind." It is difficult for many of us to revel in American military power and insist that the American empire will be the benefactor in the end. That the USA will always win, always be the exceptional country of the world.

Speaking as one citizen, I do not welcome the expansion of the nation's power, with the anger it has generated among so many people in the world, especially at the personal and collective price we are all having to pay—the huge growth of our military budget at the expense of health, education, the needs of children, one fifth of whom grow up in poverty right here in this land.

I suggest, with Howard Zinn, that those of us patriotic Americans, who worry and care for this country act on behalf of a different vision. Instead of being feared for our military prowess, we should want to be respected for our dedication to human rights. Does this require a re-defining of the word *patriotism*? You decide. I think you will agree that we need to expand it beyond that narrow nationalism which has caused so much death and suffering. Professor Zinn says, “If national boundaries should not be obstacles to trade—we call it globalization—should they also not be obstacles to compassion and generosity?”

I have five grandchildren who are very dear to me, but I want to consider all children everywhere as mine, as our own, not just them. In that case, war in our time is always an assault on children, and is not acceptable as a solution to the problems of the world. We humans are smarter than that, I think. We can search for other ways to solve the problems of war as we remember that war is always too great a sacrifice. It is not heroic or glamorous. It is ugly and wasteful. But how many people will remember that fact in their speeches tomorrow?

The novelist Ishmael Reed said quite boldly “The duty of the true patriot, a citizen of the world is to expose nationalism as the village idiot of the global Village.” Nationalism is inherently selfish. There is nothing different or unique about American nationalism or militarism. It is based on the first law of our animal nature, self, protection. Yet on our shrinking earth where walls and borders can no longer benefit anyone, the American ideal of *E pluribus Unum* should become our national and international watchword.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt applied his four freedoms—freedom from want and freedom from fear, freedom of faith and freedom of speech to “everywhere in the world.” Eleanor Roosevelt when she was chair of the Human Right Commission of a new UN co-authored the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This was a global statement of America’s principles of liberty and just for all. A century before that, Abraham Lincoln had recognized that the Declaration of Independence “gave liberty not alone to the people of this country but hope to the entire world for all the future.”

I agree with Dr. Forrest Church, writing on this subject of “We Need More Patriots”: by affirming and expanding the founders’ vision of “out of many, one” the UN is itself the greatest monument to American patriotism. Tom Paine used the word “patriot” to describe those Revolutionary war rebels who resisted the rule of the British monarch.

He also enlarged the idea of patriotism to include us here when he said, “My country is the world. My countrymen are mankind.”

We are not alone my friends— we know that even though at times we may feel that way. I believe we are part of a vast majority of true patriots who agree with Paine: an unprecedented, astounding, global movement for justice and wisdom. When I stop for a moment, I can feel the connections, imagine them lifting us up, when I sit still and let those connections sustain me. We need more true patriots and there are possibilities on the immediate horizon for those of us who are willing to be spiritual warriors for the earth, to be like the Dalai Lama, young and old Buddhists, people of all faiths, peace-loving people in all lands that have a special role to play for peace and human rights. With that kind of global movement we may see the end of the military-industrial-petroleum age or at least help to hasten its demise. We must keep open our minds to the larger contexts, to the wonderful resources for understanding and joining in with this possible Great Turning of human history.

Memorial Day invites us to remember and affirm that even in the face of all the folly, jingoism and loss of lives and limbs that confront us, life can still be good. If we are wise and hopeful, we would re-imagine our flag a multi-textured, many-hued banner of hope and memory that flies its colors all over the world. We would learn from the pain and welcome the challenge these days present to us. I love our

American flag—when I am in a foreign country and catch sight of those stars and stripes my heart beats truly a little faster and I breathe a sigh of gratitude to be an American. Yet I also yearn to salute a flag that brings the whole earth, beyond borders, into our into worldwide family. I salute each of you as true patriots who love this whole earth as your country. Our country. Our land. May we always stand up, stand up for the possibilities of a globe where all our celebrated for their differences and all become one in the spirit.

SILENCE

SPIRIT OF LIFE,

On this Memorial Sunday, May we remember

Bravery in its many faces,

Of those who chose to fight for justice and democracy,

Bravery of those living or now dead who are or were willing to be a majority of one in the search for truth

Bravery of those who look to their own consciences first and refuse to surrender their integrity

Bravery of those who mourn, who pick up the pieces, dress the wounds, renew their resolve

To make things better,

Bravery of those who are warriors for this earth, for all things living in it, on it, above it.

Blessed be. Shalom, Salaam