

United States

On Patriotism

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"Patriotism", Samuel Johnson is famously reported to have said, "the last refuge of scoundrels!"

If so, this country has truly become a rogue nation. Everywhere the term is bandied about by politicians desperate both to attach it to his or her cloak and to dispatch it from the credentials of opponents. But what is 'patriotism', really?

A shameless, slavish concordance with, and conformity to, the policies of a current regime? How tawdry! Or perhaps something more?

Love of one's country, devotion to the welfare of one's country? Is that 'country' the physical land, the people who occupy it, the principles upon which the nation was founded, the principles currently espoused by the present leadership or those future principles yet unknown and unnamed? "All of the above", simply will not do. And whose welfare? Those richest, those poorest, those currently in power, those who aspire to be, or those powerless and destitute? What is the "patriotic" response to a government whose policies are seemingly, hopelessly, perhaps criminally wrong? Silent submission or overt opposition?

America's working principles have clearly changed since its founding. Our constitution has been amended numerous times, the bill of rights being only the first many such. And it is evolving; its principles are neither permanently fixed nor immutable. Are the currently ensconced principles then those that love of, and devotion to, which constitute patriotism? What of those to come, which we can now only potentially envision? And what of all the amendments proposed but not adopted or adopted but now repealed? Was it patriotic or not to urge their repudiation or revoking? These principles were shifty sands indeed.

Even now, what is or is not constitutional is clearly unclear. Our Supreme Court adjudicates what constitutes current constitutionality. But since that changes with time, today's conformity, ebbing and flowing, may well be tomorrow's violation. Does what constitutes patriotism change with the vagaries of the judicial process? with the amendment process? Is patriotism jumping to whatever tune the current court or regime requires, or may it be refusing to?

Perhaps patriotism differs for each citizen, what he or she regards as the quintessential aspects of the country: one man's hero may be another woman's traitor. Or is patriotism the mean of the country's sensibility, our societal norms? Bumper stickers across the land proclaim pride in America, presumably a response to the behavior of our current leadership. Others reveal little to be proud and much to be ashamed of, both in the behavior of our leadership and in the lemming-like acceptance of that behavior by so many of our compatriots.

Who is unpatriotic? Those who despise and are ashamed of what's become of this country, or those who fail to see and appreciate its divergence from

what it once was and what it might have been or become? Those who struggle to maintain the status quo with all its warts and flaws, or those who strive to change, to improve it? One slogan proclaims pride in power, the power of pride; another that dissent is patriotic. The knife cuts both ways.

This country is unusual. Others are so ancient, with so contorted a history, it is difficult, perhaps irrelevant, to explore the connection between their founding and the present state. Still others are so young they have little history other than the trauma of their birthing. Ours was founded consciously, deliberately, righteously on righting of wrongs for some - but by no means for all - of its then inhabitants. Thereafter one thin and faltering thread in its history has been the painstakingly slow extension of those reforms to other sectors of our society. Is reform then a guiding principle of this country? The fundamental principle of reform is that, no matter how trivial or egregious, unless and until problems are identified and acknowledged, they will not, they cannot be effectively addressed or remediated. Reform requires critical objection to present behavior and policy.

Like a rose bush, America is beautiful from a distance but consists up close of both fragrant blossoms and thorny thickets. Is a critical observer any less 'patriotic' for perceiving both, for wishing to enhance the positive national attributes while reducing or blunting the negative ones? I have a vision of and for this country that clearly differs from what it is now. So did Martin Luther King, Jr. So, I presume, do a range of our various leaders, actual and want-to-be, and much of our citizenry. Is any unpatriotic for being unpopular, or more patriotic for being popular? Majority rule is no guarantee of right or justice; it is merely a convenient, operational political expedient.

Patriotism seems to me akin to allegiance: one can plausibly profess allegiance to vague or specific principles; but why on earth would one pledge allegiance to a piece of colored cloth? On a battlefield, a flag is akin to a beast's marking some specific bit of contested turf. Defending it may make some kind of primitive, animalistic sense in the context of territoriality disputes; but given what our, or any, nation has done, committed and been through in the course of its building, how can any conscientiously merit unconditional acceptance and approval? Surely any country that's been around long enough to field a flag or have a history has committed unnumberable atrocities on its own or other peoples, however studiously its historians may struggle to suppress recollection or acknowledgement of them. Let that which is without sin claim otherwise.

In the end, the word "patriotism" differentiates one people from another, selects one group as being more deserving of special treatment at the expense of others, and encourages indifference to the plight of others' condition for the benefit of our own. It is yet one more obstacle to our species' learning to include all its kind under the umbrella of human need, right and frailty, a term full of "sound and fury, signifying nothing".

