

The
TRUE MEANING
OF PATRIOTISM

by
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Patriotism these days is like Christmas — lots of people caught up in a festive atmosphere replete with lights and spectacles. We hear reminders about “the true meaning” of the occasion — and we may even mutter a few guilt-ridden words to that effect ourselves — but like most people, each of us spends more time and thought in parties, gift-giving, and the other paraphernalia of a secularized holiday than we do deepening our devotion to the “true meaning.” The attention some pay the fictional Santa Claus rivals that which they pay the One whose name the holiday is meant to hallow.

So it is with patriotism, especially on Memorial Day in May, Flag Day in June, and Independence Day in July. Walk down Main Street America and ask one citizen after another what it means and with few exceptions, you’ll get a passel of the most self-righteous but superficial and often dead-wrong answers. America’s Founders, the men and women who gave us reason to be patriotic in the first place, would think we’ve lost our way if they could see us now.

Since the infamous attacks of September 11, 2001, Americans in near unanimity have been “feeling” patriotic. For most, that sadly suffices to make one a solid patriot. But if I’m right, and the Grinch has stolen patriotism, it’s time for Americans to take a refresher course to get it back.

Patriotism is *not* love of country, if by “country” you mean scenery — amber waves of grain, purple mountains’ majesty and the like. Almost every country has pretty collections of rocks, water, and stuff that people grow and eat. If that’s what patriotism is all about, then Americans have precious little for which

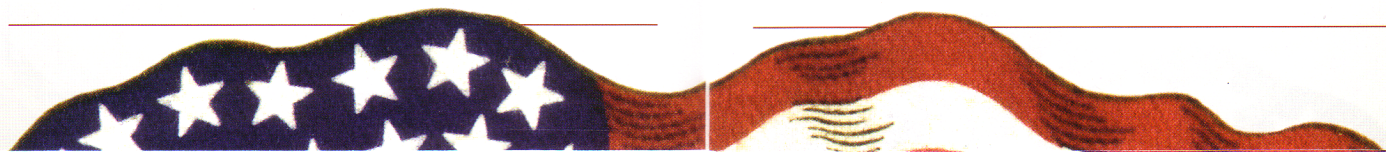
we can claim any special or unique love. And surely, patriotism cannot mean giving one’s life for a river or a mountain range.

Emma Goldman, in a 1911 essay, rightly disparaged this parochial, location-based concept. That kind of patriotism, she said, “assumes that our globe is divided into little spots, each one surrounded by an iron gate. Those who have had the fortune of being born on some particular spot, consider themselves better, nobler, grander, more intelligent than the living beings inhabiting any other spot. It is, therefore, the duty of everyone living on that chosen spot to fight, kill, and die in the attempt to impose his superiority upon all the others.” I’d like to think there’s something about being a patriotic American that’s far removed from the young Nazi soldier who marched into battle for “the Fatherland.” After all, he thought he was patriotic too.

Patriotism is not blind trust in anything our leaders tell us or do. That’s just stupidity, and it replaces some very lofty concepts about the true meaning of the word with the mindless goose-stepping of cowardly sycophants.

Patriotism is not simply showing up to vote. You need to know a lot more about what motivates a voter before you judge his patriotism. He might be casting a ballot because he just wants something at someone else’s expense. Maybe he doesn’t much care where the politician he’s hiring gets it. Remember Dr. Johnson’s wisdom: “Patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels.”

Waving the flag can be an outward sign of patriotism, but let’s not cheapen the term by ever suggesting that



it's anything more than a sign. And while it's always fitting to mourn those who lost their lives simply because they resided on American soil, that too does not define patriotism.

People in every country and in all times have expressed feelings of something we flippantly call "patriotism" but that just begs the question. What is this thing, anyway? Can it be so cheap and meaningless that a few gestures make you patriotic?

Not in my book.

I subscribe to a patriotism rooted in ideas that in turn gave birth to a country, but it's the *ideas* that I think of when I'm feeling patriotic. I'm a patriotic American because I revere the ideas that motivated the Founders and compelled them, in many instances, to put their lives, fortunes and sacred honor on the line.

What ideas? Read the Declaration of Independence again. Or, if you're like most Americans these days, read it for the very first time. It's all there. All men are created equal. They are endowed not by government but by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. Premier among those rights are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Government must be limited to protecting the peace and preserving our liberties, and doing so through the consent of the governed. It's the right of a free people to rid themselves of a government that becomes destructive of those ends, as our Founders did in a supreme act of courage and defiance more than two hundred years ago.

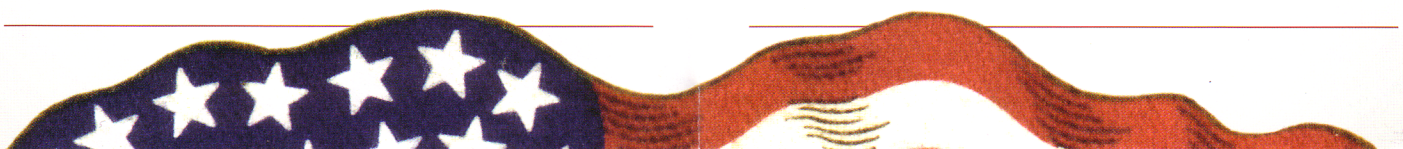
Call it freedom. Call it liberty. Call it whatever you want, but it's the bedrock on which this nation was

founded and from which we stray at our peril. It's what has defined us as Americans. It's what almost everyone who has ever lived on this planet has yearned for, though only a few have ever risen above selfishness, ignorance, or barbarism to attain it. It makes life worth living, which means it's worth fighting and dying for.

I know that this concept of patriotism puts an "American" spin on the term. But I don't know how to be patriotic for Uganda or Paraguay. I hope the Ugandans and Paraguayans have lofty ideals they celebrate when they feel patriotic, but whether or not they do is a question you'll have to ask them. I can only tell you what patriotism means to me as an American.

I understand that America has often fallen short of the superlative ideas expressed in the Declaration and in the Constitution as well. That hasn't diminished my reverence for them, nor has it dimmed my hope that future generations of Americans will be re-inspired by them.

This brand of patriotism, in fact, gets me through the roughest and most cynical of times. My patriotism did not flag when Bill Clinton debased the Oval Office with a young intern. My patriotism is never affected by any politician's failures, or any shortcoming of some government policy, or any slump in the economy or stock market. I've never felt my patriotism to be for sale or up for a vote. I never cease to get that "rush" that comes from watching Old Glory flapping in the breeze, no matter how far today's generations have departed from the original meaning of those stars and stripes. No outcome of any election, no matter how adverse, makes me feel any less devoted to the



ideals our Founders put to pen in 1776. Indeed, as life's experiences mount, the wisdom of what giants like Jefferson and Madison bestowed upon us becomes ever more apparent to me. I get more fired up than ever to help others come to appreciate the same things.

During a recent visit to the land of my ancestors, Scotland, I came across a few very old words that gave me pause. Though they preceded our Declaration of Independence by 456 years, and come from three thousand miles away, I can hardly think of anything ever written here that more powerfully stirs in me the patriotism I've defined above. In 1320, in an effort to explain why they had spent the previous thirty years in bloody battle to expel the invading English, Scottish leaders ended their Declaration of Arbroath with this line: *"It is not for honor or glory or wealth that we fight, but for freedom alone, which no good man gives up except with his life."*

Freedom — understanding it, living it, teaching it, and supporting those who are educating others about it. That, my fellow Americans, is what patriotism should mean to each of us today.



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Lawrence W. Reed is president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Michigan. The Center's mission is to equip citizens and other decision-makers to better evaluate public policy options. Under his leadership, the Center has emerged as one of the most effective and prolific of over 40 free-market institutes outside of Washington, D.C. It has actively trained and assisted hundreds of similar groups from nearly all 50 states and some 30 foreign countries. The Center maintains two award-winning Web sites: www.mackinac.org and www.MichiganVotes.org. This essay was originally published for the June 2003 issue of the Foundation for Economic Education's journal, *Ideas on Liberty*, for which Mr. Reed writes a monthly column.



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