

What is a Patriot?

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The first mention of love of country occurred in Rome, under the Republic. The slogan was: Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori (It is sweet and proper to die for one's country. The better translation is to give one's life for one's country.

During our own country's birth, during the Revolutionary War, Nathan Hale, an American spy captured by the British, said before his execution: " I regret having but but one life to give for my country."

The definition of "patriot" is undergoing an ugly transformation today when Donald Trump attributes "love of country" to a man who sucker punches a demonstrator being escorted from the rally. Does love of country mean hatred of every other country? Does love of country mean hatred for different political views? Does love of country become love of party and hatred of the other party? Does love of country become hatred of its elected government? Didn't any of these people go to Civics class in high school?

The answer to this last question is, alas, no. When I was in high school (obviously a long time ago), in Rochester, New York, we were required to take Civics, where we learned about how our government is structured. We learned about balance of powers among the three branches of government, elections, and the duty of voters to be informed. Our school went even further than this.

We had school-wide programs in which we staged our own mock presidential nominating conventions (in our case, a Republican convention), learning about how such conventions are organized and executed. A few years later, we (and many schools cross the country) held mock United Nations conferences also, to learn about the various delegations from around the world and the likelihood of their positions in world politics.

One should not love one's country blindly. The Germans did that when Hitler came to power. The public voted, and the Nazis won in a plurality (not a majority in their multi-party system), and there was never another election. One man, one vote, one time? Could we, in the longest-standing democratic republic come to that?

Many young people today have voluntarily become "low information" (ignorant), never reading newspapers, not watching television news, and only getting their national and world news through sound bites, late night satire, or word of mouth. Many express disinterest in voting at all. Other young people with a little information (university students) become one-sided activists convinced that their country and their society is evil and that only a revolution can fix it.

At the other end of the spectrum are those, like the sucker-puncher, whose response to a too-rapidly changing society has been fueled by a poisoned diet of government-hatred and simplistic promises of bringing back an imagined past. Both groups share disdain for "government."

In Civics, we learn what government does. Without government, who would have made the national parks, social security, VA hospitals, military service academies, Manhattan Project, TVA, interstate highways, transportation safety administration (FAA), dams and power systems, national defense institutions, trade negotiators, Research & Development grants (essential especially today), NASA for space travel and research, Medicare, Food and Drug inspectors (including water watchdogs), and courts adjudicating conflicts and establishing important principles?

Government haters have cut so many funds from these institutions that they struggle to function. EPA inspectors were too underfunded to protect Flint's water from the State's criminal negligence. These government institutions have given our citizens the best standard of living that the world has ever seen. Institutions are not perfect because human beings are not perfect. But they are a work in progress that is the envy of much of the world. People vote with their feet! Why else do political and economic refugees come here?

We need to revisit the concept of patriot. Patriots are those who love their country enough to participate in an informed, civil fashion. Choosing a party requires regarding both parties as partners, not enemies. And being "low information," a category of supporter "loved" by Mr. Trump, have no business voting or pretending to be patriots.

677 words

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