

**PATRIOTISM AND CIVIC LITERACY**  
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Since September 11, 2002 we have seen an extraordinary outward display of patriotism in the United States. Flags fluttering from doorways and the antennae of automobiles are commonplace. Bumper stickers proclaiming, “I’m Proud to be an American” appear on vehicles ranging from second-hand pickup trucks to sleek and smart sport and town cars. Those visible signs of patriotism are at once an expression of pride and a palliative for our grief and sorrow—an understandable response to a national tragedy. But more important, not only for our healing and the long-term health and vitality of our constitutional democracy, is a patriotism less visible, better understood, and more enduring. It is the kind of patriotism which calls for fidelity to the values and principles for which our country stands—and it is that kind of patriotic fidelity that I would like to discuss with you this morning. Let us consider together two major questions:

1. What should patriotism mean in a constitutional democracy?
2. What responsibilities do schools—and we as educators—have for helping students develop a “large and wholesome meaning” of patriotism?

Patriotism appropriate for our constitutional democracy is not narrow, self-serving, chauvinistic nationalism of the kind sometimes described as “the last refuge of scoundrels.” Neither is it a club which one group of citizens uses for impugning the motives of their fellow citizens or denigrating their worth. It is, on the contrary, a patriotism which has a “large and wholesome meaning.” Adlai Stevenson described that

meaning in an address to the American Legion convention in 1952, when he was a candidate for the presidency of the United States. Stevenson said: “I venture to suggest that what we mean [by patriotism] is a sense of national responsibility which will enable America to remain master of her power—to walk with it in serenity and wisdom, with self-respect and the respect of all mankind; a patriotism that puts country ahead of self; a patriotism which is not short, frenzied outbursts of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime....”<sup>1</sup>

When Stevenson spoke some 50 years ago, there was no way he could have foreseen the threat that terrorism poses for us today. Even so, his words had a prophetic ring. Stevenson concluded:

“It was always accounted a virtue in a man to love his country. With us it is now something more than a virtue. It is a necessity, a condition of survival. When a man says he loves his country, he means not only that he loves the New England hills, the prairies glistening in the sun, the wide and rising plains, the great mountains and the sea. He means that he loves an inner air, an inner light in which freedom lives and in which a man can draw a breath of self-respect.

Men who have offered their lives for their country know that patriotism is not *fear* of something; it is the *love* of something. Patriotism with us is not hatred.... it is the love of this Republic and of the ideal of liberty of man and mind in which it was born and to which this republic is dedicated.”<sup>2</sup>

To love this Republic and the “ideal of liberty of man and mind” for which it stands means more than that one is consumed with sentiment or filled with passive admiration. The verb to love is an active verb. It means to cherish, to care for, to nourish, to preserve,

to safeguard, and to defend. Thus, the citizen who truly loves this country must first understand and be freely committed to its ideals—the values and principles to which it is committed. The citizen who truly loves this Republic must also be willing to take part in safeguarding those values and principles and in helping to effect the more complete realization of this nation’s ideals. In short, the citizen must be both “enlightened and engaged,” to use adjectives currently in vogue with political scientists. While calls for an “active or engaged” citizenry are many, definitions of what those terms mean are few. For that reason it is helpful to consider the distinction that some scholars have drawn. Patricia Avery of the University of Minnesota, for one, explains it this way:

“The engaged but unenlightened citizen participates in politics but without an ‘understanding of the game.’ He knows how to achieve results, but the results serve his narrow, self-interest.

The enlightened but unengaged citizen appreciates the norms of democracy and understands the nature of the public good but essentially operates as a bystander in the political sphere. She ‘watches’ but does not contribute....

The enlightened citizen understands core democratic principles such as popular sovereignty and constitutional government and is attentive to actions and events that potentially undermine these principles....

In sum, the engaged citizen is attentive to politics because he is watching out for his own self-interest; the enlightened citizen is attentive because she is concerned about threats to the political system.”<sup>3</sup>

Although that dichotomy may be overdrawn, it tends to confirm the observations Thucydides made long ago, as well as research as recent as this year. In his *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Book I, Sec. 1), Thucydides lamented:

“The great wish of some is to avenge themselves on some particular enemy, the great wish of others to save their own pocket. Slow in assembling, they devote a very small fraction of the time to the consideration of any public object, most of it to the prosecution of their own objects. Meanwhile each fancies that no harm will come of his neglect, that it is the business of somebody else to look after this or that for him; and so, by the same notion being entertained by all separately, the common cause imperceptibly decays.”<sup>4</sup>

More recently (March 2002), a poll conducted by the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation asked more than a thousand randomly selected adults if they believed that involvement in civic life is necessary for one to be truly patriotic. A majority of the respondents (59%) said no, involvement in civic life is not essential to patriotism. The pollsters then followed up with respondents who are active in civic life. Again, a majority of the activists (53%) said that involvement in the civic and political life of the community was not necessary for true patriotism. Paradoxically, in the same poll an overwhelming majority (88%) agreed with the statement that if “politics in America is going to improve, people like me need to get involved.”<sup>5</sup>

One would expect more encouraging responses from students at the nation’s colleges and universities, but again the results of the most recent *American Freshman: National Norms Study* are sobering. In what perhaps was an attempt to put the best face possible on its findings, the study announced “a renewed interest in politics” among freshmen. But that announcement was quickly qualified by the statement that the number of

students reporting that they frequently discussed politics in the preceding year “rose sharply” from a record low of 16% to almost 21%. That’s barely one-fifth of the college freshmen. Similarly, the percentage of students who feel it is “very important” or “essential” for them to keep up-to-date with political affairs rose from the previous year’s record low 28% to 31%, marking the largest one year increase since the 1972 presidential election. One additional disturbing finding of the study is that a scant one-fourth of the freshmen reported voting in student elections.<sup>6</sup>

The *American Freshman Study*, now in its 37<sup>th</sup> year, is a barometer of significance. It not only is the oldest and most comprehensive assessment of students at 464 institutions of higher learning, it is a measure of how engaged and enlightened those who constitute the potential leadership pool in our nation are.

In response to findings from studies such as those just mentioned, state lawmakers around the country have been crafting legislation that would have schools begin the day with the Pledge of Allegiance, post the national motto “In God We Trust” in classrooms, or require students to take classes that “teach patriotism.”<sup>7</sup> Responses such as those are open to question. The celebrated Peruvian novelist, Mario Vargas Llosa, in an address to the Democracy Commission put it this way:

“...While patriotism, as Dr. Johnson observed, may sometimes serve as the last refuge of scoundrels, it is more often a generous, unselfish sentiment of love for the land where one was born and one’s ancestors died. It represents a moral and emotional commitment to the web of historical, geographical, and cultural references that frame the destiny of every individual. But even patriotism, with all its beautiful and noble qualities,

cannot be made obligatory without degrading it any more than would be the case for such private experiences as friendship, faith, and love.”<sup>8</sup>

The Supreme Court of the United States took a similar and memorable stand against coerced professions of patriotism. In 1942, West Virginia’s State Board of Education required all teachers and students to “participate in the salute honoring the Nation represented by the Flag.” Refusal to salute the flag was deemed to be “insubordination” which led in the expulsion of students and subjected their parents to up to \$50 in fines and up to 30 days in jail.

Children in the Barnette family, who were Jehovah’s Witnesses, objected that saluting the flag was “forbidden by command of scripture,” a verse in *Exodus 20: 4-5*. To salute the flag was to violate their religious beliefs; saluting a flag, they believed, was tantamount to worshipping a “craven image.”

In deciding *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943), the Court chose to rule on free speech rather than freedom of religion grounds. Justice Robert Jackson wrote for the majority in its six to three decision. The Court’s opinion is the more remarkable because it was rendered in 1943 in the midst of World War II when the tide of battle was not running in favor of the Allies. In what has been acclaimed “one of the great statements in American constitutional law and history,” the Court noted that:

“The case is made difficult not because the principles of its decision are obscure but because the flag involved is our own. Nevertheless, we apply the limitations of the Constitution with no fear that freedom to be intellectually and spiritually diverse or even contrary will disintegrate the social organization. To believe that patriotism will not flourish if patriotic ceremonies are voluntary and spontaneous instead of compulsory

routine is to make an unflattering estimate of the appeal of our institutions to free minds. We can have intellectual individualism and the rich cultural diversities that we owe to exceptional minds only at the price of occasional eccentricity and abnormal attitudes. When they are so harmless to others or to the State as those we deal with here, the price is not too great. But freedom to differ is not limited to things that do not matter much. That would be a mere shadow of freedom. The test of its substance is the right to differ as to things that touch the heart of the existing order.

If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein. If there are any circumstances which permit an exception, they do not now occur to us.

We think the action of the local authorities in compelling the flag salute and pledge transcends constitutional limitations on their power and invades the sphere of intellect and spirit which it is the purpose of the First Amendment to our Constitution to reserve from all official control.”<sup>9</sup>

The passage of time, as well as recent research regarding the dispositions of young Americans, testify to the Court’s sound reasoning in the *Barnette* case. There is neither need nor justification for coercing displays of patriotism or for attempting to prescribe orthodoxy in politics, religion, or other matters of opinion. To do so would, as the Court opined, “make an unflattering estimate of the appeal of our institutions to free minds.” As evidence, consider the results of the recently completed International IEA Civic Education Study of ninth grade Americans students. Three questions which dealt with

their basic orientation towards country were asked of these fourteen to fifteen year-olds.

In response:

- 91% of the students agreed with the statement that “the United States should be proud of its accomplishments.”
- 85% of the students also concurred with statements: “I have a great love for the United States” and “The flag of the United States is important to me.”

It is also worth noting that this study showed no significant differences in the responses of the students by race, sex, or socioeconomic level.<sup>10</sup>

While those positive and uncoerced affirmations of patriotism are heartening, one of the patterns that is emerging from most other research on young people’s knowledge and understanding of the constitutional democracy in which they live is not as comforting. Studies show that students know “the slogans of democracy,” such as “freedom of speech and press,” “majority rule,” and “civil rights,” but they have a very “thin” understanding of those concepts. They often are unable to explain how and why those concepts are related to the maintenance and improvement of constitutional democracy.<sup>11</sup>

If we are to foster the kind of intelligent and enduring patriotism which results in “the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime,” then we must make certain that every child receives the kind of education that enables him to become civically literate. Every child needs to learn what the values and principles on which this country is based are. That entails familiarity with and understanding of the nation’s founding documents, most particularly with the United States Constitution and with what many consider to be its “true preamble,” the Declaration of Independence. Every child also needs to understand



why fidelity to those values and principles is essential to achieving the twin goals we as a people have set for ourselves—liberty and justice for all.

Writing about patriotism in *Civitas*, R. Freeman Butts said, “Any defensible conception of citizenship and the civic virtue upon which the life of citizenship depends must take account of the extraordinary dynamic force that patriotic sentiments play in American life. At its best, patriotism binds the diverse elements of American society into an integrated whole, fostering mutual acceptance of citizens as a common political order. At its worst, patriotism can degenerate into a nationalistic chauvinism. But in its best sense, patriotism is a positive force for national well-being.”<sup>12</sup> I believe we witnessed an example of that extraordinary dynamic force at work earlier this week when the Ninth Circuit Court touched off a firestorm with its decision about the use of the words “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Patriotism is more than just a concept, an abstraction. It is abnegated or brought to life and vitality by people—by patriots. A responsibility of overriding importance for schools is to enable every child to become the kind of constitutional patriot so eloquently described by the African novelist Chinua Achebe. “Who is a patriot? He is a person who loves his country. He is not a person who *says* he loves his country. He is not even a person who shouts or swears or recites or sings his love of his country. He is one who cares deeply about the happiness and well-being of his country and all its people. Patriotism is an emotion of love directed by a critical intelligence. A true patriot will always demand the highest standards of his country and accept nothing but the best for and from his people. He will be outspoken in condemnation of their short-comings without giving way to superiority, despair or cynicism. That is my idea of a patriot.”<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

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5. Morin, Richard. "Nothing Lasts Forever" People Say the Recent Surge of Patriotism Hasn't Much Changed Politicians and the Media." *The Washington Post Weekly*. February 25 – March 3, 2002, p. 34.
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11. Avery. *op.cit.*
12. Center for Civic Education. *Civitas: A Framework for Civic Education*. Calabasas, CA: Center for Civic Education. 1991, p. 31.
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