

My Country, Right and Wrong

Good morning. Thank you for inviting me here today. Abraham Lincoln once noted: “few sinners are saved after the first 20 minutes of a sermon,” inferring the audience falls asleep if the message exceeds that suggested time frame. With the 4th of July right around the corner, this morning is an appropriate opportunity to discuss the theme of patriotism viewed through the lens of U.S. History, keeping Lincoln’s witty observation about sermons foremost in mind.

On July 3, 1776 Founding Father and later-in-life Unitarian John Adams wrote from Philadelphia to his beloved wife Abigail who was back at their homestead in Quincy, Massachusetts:

The Second Day of July 1776 will be the most memorable Epoch, in the History of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations, as the great Anniversary festival. It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shows, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this continent to the other from this Time forward forever more.

It was on that momentous, but mostly forgotten, date in history, July 2, 1776, when delegates at the Second Continental Congress meeting in Philadelphia officially separated the 13 American colonies from Britain by approving a motion for independence. 12 of the 13 colonies’ delegates approved the motion, the last colony, NY, joining the rest of the conspirators shortly thereafter. Two days later, on July 4, the actual Declaration of Independence was adopted by Congress leading to that date being designated our nation’s birthday. The principle author of the Declaration was, of course, Thomas Jefferson, assisted by John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman. To further confuse things, the actual signing of the Declaration by Congressional members happened a month later.

Historical facts tend to blur over time, evolving into distorted interpretation or fantastic manipulation by individuals with personal agendas or by those unrestrained by facts. This country's citizens should have a much greater awareness of our history, both good and bad. George Armstrong Custer, as many of us now know, is hardly the American hero history said he was for a century, following his demise at Little Big Horn, although the efforts of his surviving wife and most enduring fan, Libby Custer, maintained his reputation as a courageous martyr for a long time. Historian David McCullough, author of two prize-winning biographies, *John Adams* and *Harry Truman*, says unequivocally that most Americans today are historically illiterate. It is difficult to be an informed, reasonable U.S. patriot without knowledge of our nation's history, and how past events and long-departed pivotal personalities that shaped those events, impact our lives today.

A few years ago, I was the Commander of American Legion Fred Hancock Post 19 in Renton, Washington. I served in that role partially out of the conviction that progressivism needs a toehold in traditionally conservative settings like the Legion, to counter a commonly held cultural notion in this country that only those from the political right can rightfully lay claim to being "patriotic," that those with different political leanings, different viewpoints, different pursuits, separate and apart from conservative doctrine and conservative lifestyles, somehow love America less. I must emphasize the American Legion performs many praiseworthy civic functions, along with her sister organization Veterans of Foreign Wars, including visiting warehoused veterans in VA hospitals, honoring recently deceased veterans at graveside ceremonies, and assisting disabled veterans in navigating the bewildering bureaucracy of veterans affairs. But it was none other than 5-star General and later 34th President Dwight Eisenhower who said, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed." Love of country manifests itself in many ways. I want to share two stories about two everyday patriots that reflect the highest ideals of this country.

Not long ago I bid a final farewell to a good friend who was a conscientious objector during World War II. He no doubt endured endless accusations of cowardice or being called a traitor, perhaps even being labelled an “outside agitator,” even though he was born and raised on a southern Illinois farm in the 1920s and 1930s. The most hurtful accusations came from family members. He loved America very much, serving in hospitals treating wounded returning home from the conflict. He and his wife spent a good portion of their younger lives serving in South America as Christian missionaries, before returning to America to work as a school superintendent in the Pacific Northwest. In short, he was a man of conviction, faith, and, ultimately, he was a true patriot.

I have another unique story. True. A few years back I attended the memorial service of the mother of a family friend who had died in her mid-90s. Her surviving husband told me a remarkable story. He and his late wife met in Puyallup in the mid-1940s, where Japanese-Americans like them on the way to internment camps in Idaho and California, were being processed. They spent two years in confinement before returning home to Redmond, Washington fully expecting the truck farm he had painstakingly developed over the years to be in the possession of the government or perhaps held by an opportunistic landowner who took advantage of his plight, like so many instances in those days. On the day of his return to his farm—highway 405 now occupies much of the land where the farm once stood—the man’s next door neighbor knocked on his door and handed him the deed to his farm. The deed was paid in full by the neighbor while he and his wife were held behind barbed wire by their own government. The neighbor was, in short, a true American patriot, rendering justice during one of the worst episodes in this country’s history. The power of patriotism should never be under-estimated.

Over two hundred years ago, Samuel Johnson, a British essayist, moralist, and literary critic, wrote, “Patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels.” Some may consider this ultra-cynical. I think Johnson’s observation is more spot on today, than when it was first written following the American Revolution. Throughout this country’s history, up to the

present day, patriotism has been a convenient political tool for suppression or manipulation. In what might be viewed as a statement of heresy in some settings, like American Legion Halls, I would suggest, with genuine conviction, that the late academic Dr. Howard Zinn, author of an alternative American history text entitled A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES, and other notable works, was at least as much an American patriot, as was former FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover or famous red-baiter and confirmed demagogue Senator Joseph McCarthy. Truth is, quantifying one's love of and loyalty to country using patriotism as a measuring stick is an exercise in futility and even fraught with danger. Dissenters in American history, figures like Eugene Debs, Henry David Thoreau, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Frederick Douglas, Gloria Steinem, and James Baldwin have, to my satisfaction, demonstrated their love of country by exposing "conventional patriotism" flaws, holding themselves and the respective societal cultures of their day accountable to America's storied ideals we have been struggling to attain over four hundred years and counting, with only partial success. Norman Rockwell's paintings were not real portraits of American culture, only an artistic rendering of an ideal, a dream we aspire to attain.

Some may think those who serve in the military are the most patriotic among us. This is not necessarily the case. I remember a survey discussion in the NAVY TIMES magazine 35 years ago, not long before I left the navy. Active duty participants in the survey listed patriotism as the #6 highest reason for joining the military. Travel, pay, security, health insurance, regular advancement; all were greater enticements. Maybe times have changed in today's post 9/11 environment. My reasons for joining the navy were that after college I moved to Seattle and almost became homeless due to its wrecked economy. I needed a job, family tradition was also a factor (my mother's father served as a navy Captain during WWII and the Korean conflict). I also enlisted in the navy because I am a patriot. UUA principles are, as we know, rooted in peace, deploring the kind of violence the American government and organized religion has historically perpetrated against the indigenous peoples of North America and Central America, and in the name of American

patriotism/expansionism/civilization and Christianity. We still overlook or otherwise dismiss the horror of thousands of lynchings of African Americans in the post-Civil War South, or the institution of chattel slavery itself which helped make America the economic powerhouse it is today. Howard Zinn wrote about these shameful aspects of American history in an open, honest manner, incurring the wrath of conventional academics and those I would call “traditional defenders” of American patriotism.

Patriotism is sometimes celebrated in formal ceremonies commemorating individuals who gave their lives for their country. One of the more memorable moments in my military career was being assigned escort duty to a family who lost a twenty-year old sailor aboard USS STARK in May 1987. 37 American sailors were killed when an Iraqi aircraft fired two Exocet missiles at the STARK, one of them detonating causing widespread damage. At the time, Iraq was an ally of the United States. It was later confirmed beyond any doubt the attacking aircraft acted in error. Several weeks later President Ronald Reagan came to Mayport, Florida to deliver a memorial address, which I attended with the family. Putting aside my personal issues with President Reagan, his performance before the families of the victims of the STARK attack that day was impressive. Escorting one of those families was one of the most difficult, and yet at the same time, most meaningful experiences in my navy career. Patriotism—or at least rituals intended to represent patriotism—was very much on display at the memorial service. Flags and uniforms and men and women in military formation, and military bands playing martial music, and a Presidential tribute to the lost sailors of USS STARK made this an appropriate tribute to the dead. And yet one wonders, as I did onboard a navy destroyer operating off the shoreline of Beirut in October 1983 where 241 U.S. Marines were killed in a terrorist attack on their barracks at Beirut International Airport, whether this brand of patriotism—power projection in places where our presence is unwanted and unnecessary—was worth the enormous price of losing all these young men. Let me put this more succinctly.

In his brilliant book, *Lawrence in Arabia*, author Scott Anderson writes: “It is the question that has faced people and nations at war since the beginning of time, and usually produced a terrible answer: in contemplating all the lives lost, the treasure squandered, how to ever admit it was for nothing?” Current estimates are that this country’s expenditures on defense exceed the combined total of the next ten countries of the world ranked in total dollars spent on defense spending. Never mind the hundreds of other non-military priorities that only the federal government can address. Dwight Eisenhower’s counsel against excessive defense spending has been shoved aside today, supplanted by MAKING AMERICA GREAT AGAIN, the latest patriotic-tinged lie being peddled by a White House armed with an agenda I cannot begin to understand.

Finally, philosopher, historian, writer Bertrand Russell once wrote, “war does not determine who is right, only who is left.” We would do well to reflect on these words as we ponder the true meaning of patriotism today.

I bid you peace.