

## Soul of Democracy

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I remember my first flag-waving experience. When I was a kid, I saw in a comic book and sent away for a mail-order set of tiny little flags of the nations of the world. When I got them, I pasted popsicle stick flag poles onto the miniature colored flags, and immediately started waving around the ones I like the best. Those I selected for flag-waving had little to do with any particular political affiliation, and much to do with color and interesting design. But eventually too, these little flags became for me object lessons in international geography – a subject not at all being stressed at school. In fact, at school, I learned that I wasn't supposed to wave flags unless they had stars and stripes attached to them. I was especially discouraged from waving around the ones that had hammers and cycles attached.

I also took a lively early interest in international sports, especially those of the Olympic Games. But I soon found myself getting frustrated with network coverage, because at times, I was not even being told what nation actually won a particular race or event. The American team or individual participant, regardless of their place in the lineup, got all the attention. Even then, it struck me as chauvinistic and lacking in good sportsmanship. Now when I try to catch up on the World Cup and such, I find I am happier if I can tune into a Canadian channel. Does all this mean that, right from the get-go, I've been insufficiently patriotic?

This week we citizens of the United States traditionally celebrate what is good about our nation – its most cherished ideals, its love of liberty, its unifying of races and cultures, its bountiful backyard barbecues. Our nation needs, probably now more than ever, to rediscover its best virtues. Genuinely participatory democracy cannot be "...just a noble ideal. It is an historical necessity". (Michael Peranti) And: given that we here today are also citizens of another country, one traditionally referred to as the kingdom of God coming on earth, a realm that transcends national boundaries, that is global in scope and sacred in nature, we must take our citizenship seriously in both these realms. So this morning, let us consider the following, in the light of our global citizenship in the Kingdom of God: What is the nature of true and of false patriotism, what is the soul of democracy, and, we briefly attempt to respond to the question "Which America will we choose to be from here on OUT?"

Let me say I believe that true patriots in any would-be democracy love their country enough to participate in it, and regardless of the cost, insist their leaders live up to the best of democratic principles. True patriots believe they still CAN participate, that a functioning democracy of, by, and for the people is not a pipe dream but a constant real possibility. They also know that to take participatory democracy for granted is an oxymoron. One has to use it or one loses it, and already we've lost so very much. Our own right to participate in ways that effect genuine social change, even to have something as basic as our vote fairly tabulated in America – these are liberties still being fought for, not already established for all time. True patriots are unafraid to express their opinions, however critical, out in the open, and to resist the endless classifying of so-called 'state-secrets'. True patriots maintain an appropriate degree of national humility that does not gloat or brag or assume we are a 'more perfect union' than we really are. True patriots are internationalists as well because they know no nation state is an island unto itself, and that which one does or leaves undone effects all. True patriots put grassroots democracy into practice

in their own local communities, schools, and churches, and are conscious of a peoples' history, of those great movements for social change: for the 8-hour workday, for peace, for the right of women and minorities to vote, to get a decent education, and so on. True patriots are far more interested in these than in the vainglorious escapades of empires and of kings at war.

Clearly, a false and a dangerous kind of patriotism also exists. Samuel Johnson once said that patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels. Scoundrels in positions of power certainly do take abusive advantage of a trusting people's instinctive desire to love their native land. There are those who have made it their business to manipulate uncritical masses, to stir discontent and disunity in otherwise progressive circles of the citizenry – one example of this that I mentioned last Sunday: the John Birch Society-funded Center for Religion and Democracy, which has already so-effectively sowed seeds of disunity within the structures of several mainline Protestant denominations. As a nation we are still largely uninformed or in denial as to the extent powerful scoundrel elites have already stolen democracy from us. It would not be an exaggeration to say that democracy is in grave danger. Historian Michael Perman calls the powerful scoundrels' misuse of a people's instinct to love their country 'SUPERpatriotism'. Superpatriots encourage uncritical acceptance of any and all things American, or Israeli, or Roman, or British, or Saudi, my country, its leaders, right OR wrong or however they bought their way to seats of power. It's that old football 'we're #1' mentality that never bothers to define what we're #1 AT. Hapless Archie Bunkers of the world are not the executors of superpatriotism, but rather, its victims.

Meanwhile, I would contend that our nation, at its best, stands for freedom of speech, the press and religion, and none of these freedoms can survive without the other. Perhaps what is contained within the Bill of Rights, as practiced in real life, as defended under great duress by civil liberties groups, is the very heart and soul of democracy. Or maybe it's our nation's governing system, so carefully designed to put checks and balances on the abuses of power, and one person, one vote, and the wealth of possibilities for progressive social change that arise in the fresh air of a functioning democracy. It should almost be in our American DNA to resist all attempts at unfettered executive privilege, at any and all suspensions of basic civil rights, even during those times we have considered ourselves to be at war or endangered by terrorism. Writer Salman Rushdie, who had to go into hiding for years because of the fatmah issued against him, puts it succinctly: "The answer to terrorism is to not be terrorized." But of course, this has NOT been the attitude and approach those in power have encouraged of late.

The soul OF democracy, I would argue, is government of, by and for the people – the ordinary commoners, if you will, you and me – we are the government remember? That's why I submitted my application yesterday to be elected Precinct Community Representative for my preferred political party. The American prophet Bill Moyers said, "The soul of democracy (in America) has been dying, drowning in a rising tide of big money contributed by a narrow, unrepresentative elite that has betrayed the faith of citizens in self-government. Yet despite squalor for the poor and gated communities for the rich, the great mass of Americans have not yet given up on the idea of 'We, the People.' We have refused to accept the notion (that the Heritage Foundation promotes so diligently), that government should be shrunk to a size where (as Grover Norquist has put it) they can drown it in a bathtub." So of course it's up to ALL of us to determine which

America we will be...from now on. Let us not be duped by those who only stir up fears that lead to raw aggression and greed or to silent cowardly capitulation.

I believe that Jesus and the Biblical prophets loved their homelands too, but never in a blind nor in an uncritical manner. They loved enough to critique their own time and place and leaders, to hold them accountable to the highest of standards.

I would call the Apostle Paul and the early Christians true patriots. Some but not all of them were citizens of the Roman Empire, legally granted certain rights not offered to foreigners, women or slaves. Yet because of their global citizenship in the kingdom of God trumped their citizenship in the Empire, they were often thrown into prison, persecuted, even tortured. They, like Jesus himself, were labeled Jewish agitators disturbing the peace and subverting Roman law and order. Why? Because they pledged their allegiance to something even more important than Rome. Which is not to say that the Apostles Paul and Silas, when imprisoned, were not also bold to defend their rights as Roman citizens in good standing. Whenever they could, they utilized their own best patriot standards in the interest of all. In effect, they took advantage of their rights as citizens - privileges Rome only offered to a male elite - and made them human rights - rights equally due to be human rights, rights equally due to slaves and women and foreigners. And when Paul and Silas refused to leave that Roman prison quietly, they, like Martin Luther King and so many other prophets throughout history, brought the violence of class inequality out into the open. There it began to be confronted with the appropriate degree of shame.

Our Biblical heritage also exposes to us the role of the OT prophets being that of true patriots. They loved their people and native lands passionately, and yet railed out at how rulers fail to uphold God's own and even THEIR own best ethical standards. The Prophet Micah, for example, cries out to the leaders of his own beloved nation Israel for failing to uphold even minimal standards of fairness for the poor. "Justice is in your very job description! But instead, you skin my people alive...in a pot of cannibal stew." Micah was decrying torture! He did so with the kind of clear moral outrage that ought to always be a foregone conclusion whenever anything as barbaric as torture is permitted. How can any person with even a shred of decency respond otherwise?

I do thank God that we have, at least on paper through Congress, legally banned the use of torture. I thank God that a majority of Supreme Court judges finally this week insisted that EACH branch of government OBEY its own and international laws concerning torture and torturous detainment without trial! Even so: our system of checks and balances has gone far, far awry with the preponderance of so-called 'executive signing statements' - statements that sidestep laws passed by Congress and upset the balance of power between the three branches of government. Our President issued one such signing statement quite recently, indicating that he would ignore said congressional law banning torture when he thought it encroached on his power to "defend America from future terrorist attacks." And yet I thank God that in spite of how awry it sometimes does go, this country's best patriot dream of a system of true checks and balances still does sometimes work! I thank God too that we have at least a remnant of a free, unbought press and nowadays - a lively free internet - which has at least had enough journalistic gumption and savvy to expose warrantless eavesdropping, home searches, extraordinary renditions, secret detention centers. Now if we will only pay sufficient attention to get sufficiently outraged!

When we DO resist false patriotism at us not be intimidated or discouraged by the reaction! Remember that when the Prophet Micah stood up to the rulers of his day, they told him at first, that he was soft on terrorism. Eventually, in their desperation, they branded him a traitor and put him in isolation. OT prophets paid dearly for critiquing the cruelties and injustice of their day. Prophets pay dearly today as well. They old hymn tells it accurately, “Truth IS forever on the scaffold, wrong forever in the throne.” Yet we can never surrender, and thank God that good people never do, to the wrong in the throne and the truth on the scaffold, as if that arrangement is something inevitable. We have to realize its nothing new, nothing we can change overnight, and yet, something that remains inherently outrageous from a moral standpoint. Wrong on the throne must stay an outrage always, never to be caved into, always tenaciously opposed and adamantly resisted until the day either it or we are no more! This is to do what is both our patriotic and our prophetic duty: expose the cruelties of our own time and place; and hold onto the holy hope of something different and better for all. Let us do just that. Happy July 4<sup>th</sup>, and Amen.