

Patriotic and Ethical: Can One Be Both

Our country! In her intercourse with foreign nations may she always be in the right; but our country right or wrong.

-*Stephen Decatur, 1816*

And say not thou "My country right or wrong," nor shed thy blood for an unhallowed cause.

John Quincy Adams, 1847

Webster's defines a patriot as "one who loves and zealously supports his country."

Patriotism can be a great asset for a society. Robert A. Heinlein considers patriotism a necessary part of man's evolutionary process. He says, "An animal so poor in spirit that he won't even fight on his own behalf is already an evolutionary dead end" ("The Pragmatics of Patriotism," *Human Events*, Jan. 26, 1974).

Yet, in the hands of unscrupulous, shortsighted, or authoritarian leaders, it can become a tool used to manipulate. It can become a smokescreen for highly immoral actions. It can lead people into a trap of caring solely for one's own countrymen and not a bit for inhabitants of the rest of the world. Thus as Matthew Rothschild points out, "the United States can kill two million Indochinese, but Americans concern themselves only with the less than 60,000 U.S. soldiers who fell in ... Vietnam" ("Put Out No Flags," *The Progressive*, July 1986).

Roscoe Drummond, in his article "Hurrah for Patriotism" (*The Christian Science Monitor*, Feb. 2, 1981), provides what he calls the ingredients of patriotism: acceptance of government by the people; total dedication to the freedoms of speech, peaceful assembly, and religion; and a person's complete devotion to assuring that others have the freedoms he or she wishes to retain.

Willingness to defend one's country in war is not, to Drummond, a key ingredient of patriotism. Military acts are not related to patriotism, and neither is there any mention of superiority or egotism in Drummond's "recipe."

Thus, Drummond is a throwback to those whose definition of patriotism includes a large measure of conformity, of what Henry Steele Commager calls "the uncritical and unquestioning acceptance of America as it is.... [The conformist] regards America as a finished product, perfect and complete."

Commager, Drummond, and many others define patriotism not by its unquestioning loyalty to anything bearing the "Made-in-the-USA" label but by its willingness not only to question and criticize but also to rebel. Indeed it becomes one's patriotic duty to rebel against behaviors which deter "liberty and justice for all." Indeed, it becomes unpatriotic to fail to rebel.

Is it not a person's patriotic duty to criticize such unethical behavior during World War II wherein a government relocated Japanese-Americans to camps in order to prevent sabotage and disloyalty—before any such acts had taken place? (Even if such acts had taken place, could one support the internment of an entire group of people solely because they happened to be of the same race or national origin as the person who committed the offense?)

Isn't it unpatriotic to fail to deplore the treatment of veterans, minority groups, the poor, the young, the old, and all the disadvantaged and helpless in this country?

Is it unpatriotic to prevent an organization from gathering, even though its philosophy of racial separation directly opposes the ideals of Americanism? Or, in order to preserve Americanism, is it patriotic to inhibit such a gathering?

Is it patriotic for a politician to use the filibuster in order to avoid a vote on an issue that he feels would be detrimental to the ideals of Americanism (desecration of the flag, for example)? Or, by attempting to inhibit or delay this vote would the politician not then himself be a detriment to American ideals? What is patriotic here? What is ethical?

The answer to the question posed in the title is, "it depends." If one defines patriotism as Stephen Decatur did, then one could be caught defending a country's actions the morality of which is questionable. If one believes true patriots do not tolerate injustice or tyranny, as John Quincy Adams believed; if one accepts Lincoln's words, "with malice toward none, charity for all"; then clearly the patriot can also be an ethical person.