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MAKING PATRIOTS

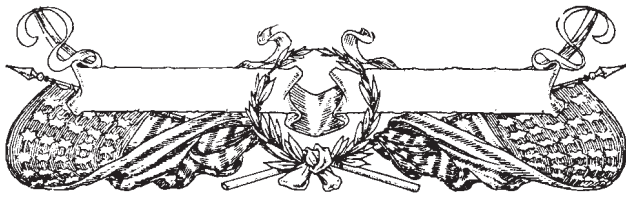


Walter Berns

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Walter Berns

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WALTER BERNS is the John M. Olin University Professor Emeritus at Georgetown University and resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. His books include *The First Amendment and the Future of American Democracy* (1976) and *Taking the Constitution Seriously* (1987).

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*To my
grandparents and great-grandparents
who immigrated to America*

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P R E F A C E



I belong to the generation of patriots that fought World War II. On the occasion of Winston Churchill's death in 1965, I wrote (in Cornell's student newspaper) that those who came after us could not fully understand why we, who remember the great and terrible events of 1940–41, should be so moved by his death; that they could not appreciate him as we did; that to them he was merely a name or, at most, a legendary figure, whereas to us he was, among other things, the embodiment of the greatest cause in our lives: the preservation of government of, by, and for the people at a time when it was most imperiled. We thought it altogether fitting and proper that (on April 9, 1963) he was made an honorary citizen of the United States.

Britain had, of course, been fighting for more than two years by the time we went to war, and it is not to belittle her contribution to final victory to say that the war could not have been won without us; Churchill knew this and acknowledged it. We were “the arsenal of democracy”; more than that, we were, as Abraham Lincoln said—not boastfully but as a fact—“the last, best hope of earth.”

This was true in 1862 when Lincoln said it, as well as in 1941, and it is more obviously true today. Like it or not—and it *is* something of a burden, certainly a responsibility—America is to modern history as Rome was to ancient, and not only because we are the one remaining superpower. Modern politics began three hundred-plus years ago with the discovery or pronouncement of new principles, universal and revolutionary principles, respecting the rights of man. In 1776 we declared our right to form a new nation by appealing to these principles. Because we were the first to do so, it fell to us to be their champions, first by setting an example—this was Lincoln’s point—and subsequently by defending them against their latter-day enemies, the Nazis and fascists in World War II and the communists in the cold war. Our lot is to be the one essential country, “the last, best hope of earth,” and this ought to be acknowledged, beginning in our schools and universities, for it is only then that we can come to accept the responsibilities attending it.

Our unique place in the world is recognized elsewhere, sometimes grudgingly or inadvertently. In 1987, the bicentenary of our Constitution, I was in Brazil, where the people had recently overthrown a military dictatorship and had begun the process of writing a democratic constitution. I had been invited to lecture on constitutionalism. At one place, a university in Recife, after I had finished my prepared remarks, someone got up and denounced, not me, but the local official who had sponsored my appearance. “Why,” he shouted, “did you invite an American? What can they tell us about constitutions? They’ve had only one. Why didn’t you invite a Bolivian? They’ve had a hundred!”

I have enjoyed telling this story to students here, expecting them to appreciate it and hoping that they might even learn something from it. My hope is that they and their el-

ders might learn something from this book, specifically, why this country deserves citizens who love and honor it, and are prepared to defend it.

Political scientist Sheldon Wolin had this in mind when he pointed out that we are citizens not only in the formal or legal sense, but because we share a birthright “inherited from our fathers,” a birthright to be cared for, improved, and passed on to future generations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In 1997 Irving Kristol asked me to write an essay on patriotism for his journal, *The Public Interest*; this book is an outgrowth of that essay. In writing it, I have enjoyed the counsel of various friends and colleagues: Robert Bork, Werner J. Dannhauser, Hillel Fradkin, and Richard Stevens. My wife, reading it chapter by chapter, had to constantly remind me that I was not writing for an academic audience; I am grateful for this advice and have done my best to follow it. I am also grateful for the suggestions made by the two anonymous readers engaged by the University of Chicago Press. My greater debts, however, are to Kristol and to Robert Goldwin, both of whom read the entire manuscript and suggested how it might be improved, and to the American Enterprise Institute and its president, Christopher DeMuth. A “think tank,” in Washington parlance, AEI provides a collegiate setting where scholars and others (including this retired professor) are able to study and write free of the constraints now imposed on universities by zealous public officials, and without having to worry about enrollments or,

better yet, appointments, endowments, and budgets. DeMuth and his administrative colleagues take care of such matters. Finally, I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge the assistance of various graduate students (chiefly Jeffrey Morrison) who scoured the libraries for the books and other sources I needed.

INTRODUCTION

For what we can only presume to be good reasons, God willed that there be many nations, each with its own language (see Genesis 11:5–9) and, inevitably, its own interests. These interests not only differ but are also likely to come into conflict, which suggests that a patriot has to be more than a citizen or mere inhabitant of a nation; he has to be devoted to his nation and be prepared to defend it.

This was well understood in the nations (or cities) of classical antiquity, especially in Sparta, where the words “citizen” and “patriot” were essentially synonymous. Why this was so, or how this came to be so, is the subject of the first chapter of this book; here it is sufficient to point out that a Spartan had no interests other than the city’s interests.

It is otherwise with Americans, a fact made evident in the case of Nathan Hale, arguably this country’s most famous patriot. Hale said, as he was about to be executed by the British in 1776, “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country,” and his alma mater, Yale, erected a statue of him on its Old Campus. “For God, for country, and for

Yale,” as they say there, and, by saying it, they recognize that a patriot may have at least three interests and imply that he can be for all three, simultaneously and without reservation or equivocation.

This may be true at Yale (or may once have been true), but for most peoples, or, at least, for most Western peoples, patriotism has been something of a problem—not, of course, for the Spartans; their loyalties were not divided. A Spartan could be for Sparta without reservation or equivocation because there was nothing else in Sparta to be for: no gods, other than the city’s gods, and no Yales, so to speak. This was not the case in that most famous of classical cities, Athens; like Sparta, Athens had its own gods, but, unlike Sparta, it had a sort of Yale, a community of academics with philosophic interests, one of whom (Socrates) it executed for his impiety and his allegedly corrupting effect on the youth of the city.

Patriotism became more of a problem with the advent of Christianity, which, by effecting a separation of the things that are Caesar’s and the things that are God’s, made it more likely that a person’s loyalties would be divided. It became a still greater problem after Martin Luther. Where, before him, there had been one church in western Europe, there were soon to be many, as many churches as there were kingdoms; and in some of those kingdoms, there were many varieties of Christians. This was especially the case in the kingdom best known to Americans, the British. Could a Roman Catholic (Thomas More) obey his sovereign after his sovereign (Henry VIII) broke with Rome? Could the Scottish Presbyterians obey their king (Charles I), who ordered them to recognize the authority of Anglican bishops and to worship according to the Anglican Book of Common Prayer? Not likely, and, in the event, impossible: the pious More preferred the scaffold and the pious Scots, a civil war.

As I point out in the second chapter, our Founders were determined to avoid these old problems, and they succeeded, but only at the price of introducing a new one. Americans would not owe fealty to a monarch or a family, or be required to subscribe to an article of faith. They would pledge their allegiance to “the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands.” The Republic, in turn, stands for a principle or idea, the idea first expressed by “the patriots of seventy-six” (as Lincoln called them), that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain “unalienable Rights,” and that government is instituted “to secure these rights.” This was new and was understood by the Founders to be new.

The late Martin Diamond had this in mind when, in an American government textbook, he points out that the terms “Americanism,” “Americanization,” and “un-American” have no counterparts in any other country or language. This is not by chance, or a matter of phonetics—Swissism? Englishization?—or mere habit. (What would a Frenchman have to do or believe in order to justify being labeled un-French?) The fact is, and it was first noted by the Englishman, G. K. Chesterton, the term “Americanism” reflects a unique phenomenon; as Diamond puts it, “It expresses the conviction that American life is uniquely founded on a set of political principles.”*

The problem (the new one) arises from the fact that the Republic also stands for our country—our birthplace and

*Chesterton reports that when applying for a tourist visa, he was asked by an official in the American consulate whether he was an anarchist, and whether he was in favor of “subverting the government of the United States.” He found this “funny” and “peculiar,” but, on reflection, quite relevant and sensible. Americans can speak of “Americanism” and “Americanization” because, he says, America is founded on a creed and “is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed” (G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* [New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1922], pp. 4, 7, 14).

the mansion of our fathers, as Alexis de Tocqueville put it—and country and idea (or principle) are not necessarily congruent; in fact, as we know very well, they can come into conflict. Who was the patriot in the 1860s, Ulysses S. Grant or Robert E. Lee? Opposed to slavery, Lee was tormented by the necessity of having to choose between principle (the natural equality of all men) and country, which for him meant Virginia. In the end, he declined the offer of command of the Union army and went with Virginia, saying that he could not raise his hand against his birthplace, his home, and his children. Are we expected to think less of him for this? Perhaps, but Grant did not; as I shall have occasion to point out in chapter 5, he came to Lee's defense at a critical juncture after the war. (On the other hand, a number of prominent southerners—e.g., Admiral David Farragut and General George Thomas—stayed with and fought for the Union, thereby testifying to the power of the Founders' design.)

The twofold nature of American patriotism was well expressed by Lincoln in his eulogy on Henry Clay. Clay, he said, was a patriot who “loved his country partly because it was his own country, but mostly because it was a free country; and he burned with a zeal for its advancement, prosperity and glory, because he saw in such, the advancement, prosperity and glory, of human liberty, human right and human nature.” As they were for Clay, country and principle were one and the same for Lincoln, and his determination to keep them the same, while preserving the integrity of the principle, led him to fight the Civil War.

It proved to be the deadliest of our wars, but it was also the most necessary: at stake was the meaning of the Declaration of Independence. Like Lincoln, the Confederates appealed to it, but they insisted that its principle respecting the

natural equality of all men did not apply to Negroes; worse, given their reading of the Declaration, the Confederates had no alternative but to say Negroes were not human beings. I shall have more to say about the Civil War and the race issue in chapters 5 and 6; here, I only want to emphasize that to allow the South to secede from the Union, and to recognize its *right* to secede, would render the principle meaningless. And other peoples, beginning with their rulers, would draw this conclusion. Lincoln had this in mind when he said America was “the last, best hope of earth.”

There is nothing peculiarly American about the Declaration’s principles. On the contrary, they are abstract and universal principles of political right, a product of political philosophy; any people might subscribe to them, and Thomas Jefferson expected that, in the course of time, every other people would do so.* Were that to happen, and if the character of a country were determined solely, or even mainly, by the philosophical principles on which it is founded, every country would be a liberal democracy and America would lose its distinctiveness and, along with it, any greater claim on the affections and loyalties of its people. Why (except for reasons having to do with the climate) should they prefer America to liberally democratic Canada? And if the rest of the world consists of nothing but allegedly peaceful liberal democracies (see chapter 3), why, except to lend some pomp to state funerals and other official ceremonial occasions, should there be soldiers and sailors—or, for that matter,

*Speaking of the Declaration of Independence on the eve of its fiftieth anniversary, Jefferson said, “May it be to the world, what I hope it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all,) the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government. . . . All eyes are open, or opening, to the rights of man” (Letter to Roger C. Weightman, June 24, 1826).

public-spirited citizens? Indeed, if they are all fundamentally alike, or, as Jefferson puts it, if “all eyes are [really] opened, or opening, to the rights of man,” why should the world be divided into countries or, as God said when He scattered them, nations?

As it happened, this question had been asked and answered in Europe even before 1826, when Jefferson had implicitly posed it in America. In Paris in 1789, he had witnessed the beginning of the French Revolution and approved of it; in fact, he had helped his old friend the Marquis de Lafayette draft the early versions of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. And why not? By appealing to natural right, were the French not doing what we Americans had done in 1776? Were their principles not America’s principles? In one respect, they surely were, but in the French version they were understood to justify actions that caused Jefferson eventually—his critics said belatedly—to change his mind about the Revolution. To say nothing more (but see chapter 2), the French revolutionaries chopped off the head of *their* king.

Edmund Burke, that great Anglo-Irish statesman and political theorist and a friend of the American Revolution, was quick to see the significance of what was going on in France. He referred to it as an “extraordinary convulsion, the effect of which on France, and even on all Europe . . . is difficult to conjecture.” He understood that the French Revolution, a “revolution in sentiments, manners and moral opinions,” was something new, and something alarming, especially because its principles appeared to be readily exportable; and those abstract, scientific, and universal principles, if exported—and unleavened by the unique experience or traditions of a country—would reduce not only the French but the peoples of all Europe to “one homogeneous mass.”

Something like the homogenization of Europe did in fact begin to happen, but the Revolution, and what a Frenchman of our own time (Pierre Manent) has called the enormous Napoleonic enterprise, “unleashed a contrary movement of particularization and national separation.” In a word, the attempt to export those universal principles gave rise to the glorification of the nation, which is to say, to nationalism and a politics of ethnicity where what matters is blood, not political principle.

Clearly, and made clearer still by the disorder and wars that followed, revolutionary France could not be what Jefferson expected America to be, “a light unto the nations.” Rather than proclaim the rights of man, the nations went their own way, with their particular memories, manners, morals, and culture. “I speak *for* Germans simply, *of* Germans simply,” said the philosopher Johann Fichte in 1807, a sentiment repeated by many another European. Out of this, in time, came the Nazi and other forms of fascist tyranny. But the idea of worldwide revolution did not die; within a few years it was given new life, but in a new form, by Karl Marx and the communists. A new form but with similar results: like Napoleon’s efforts to spread French universalism, the Marxist revolution led to tyranny.

Marx claimed to have discovered the laws by which human history is governed, which enabled him (he claimed) not only to understand the past but also to predict the future. According to Marx, nothing happens by chance. Thus, the communist revolution was predictable because it was historically inevitable. Just as feudalism was superseded by capitalism (or liberal democracy), so capitalism would be superseded—and, according to Marxists, in Russia *was* superseded—by socialism, and in due course the socialist state would wither away, and, in the words of Marx’s collaborator,

Friedrich Engels, the realm of necessity would be replaced by the realm of freedom. Born in Europe in the nineteenth century, this idea, and the promise it conveyed, captured the imagination of millions of people around the world.

But the Soviet Union, the socialist state par excellence, did not wither away, and never showed any signs of withering away; it collapsed of its own contradictions. Moreover, and in flat contradiction of Marx's theory of history, socialism has now been superseded by capitalism, not only in Eastern Europe but (perhaps) in Russia and the other parts of what was the Soviet Union. Marxism, which depended on history, has been discredited by history, and so has the idea of a worldwide Marxist revolution. The only ideal remaining (except in the Muslim world) is liberal democracy on the American model, and this (as the Marxists were wont to say) is not by chance.

It was American patriotism that had much to do with defeat of the twentieth-century tyrannies, the Nazi in World War II and the communist in the cold war. And for this, we Americans can be proud, or, at a minimum, take some satisfaction. Ours is not a parochial patriotism; precisely because it comprises an attachment to principles that are universal, we cannot be indifferent to the welfare of others. To be indifferent, especially to the rights of others, would be un-American.

Thus, we had no trouble whatsoever thinking of the Chinese students of Tiananmen Square as our fellows, and not merely because they erected a Statue of Liberty fashioned after ours. We could see immediately that they shared our "aims, aspirations, and values," as someone put it, and just as immediately, that the Chinese government did not. We were able to see these things because we continue to believe—and because our government continues to make it easy to

believe—that all men are endowed by nature’s God with certain unalienable rights. Believing this is part of what it means to be an American, and it is the job of the public schools to teach this to the younger generation of citizens.

This was well understood by our earliest educators, among them Thomas Jefferson (see chapter 4). The making of patriots could not be left to chance.

The Englishman Samuel Johnson said back in the eighteenth century that “patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels.” We have our share of them; they bomb federal office buildings and claim patriotic motives for doing so. But we have also had our share of heroes, patriots whom we admire because they fought for this country—with its universal principles and its particular sentiments, manners, and memories—and, despite all the current talk about globalization, there is no reason to believe we will not need their likes in the future.

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