How to Think about Patriotism

Wilfred M. McClay

Recent developments in our politics have inspired a re-evaluation of patriotism and a fresh consideration of its worth. Even advocates for the cosmopolitan ideal have come to understand that the sentiment of patriotism is indispensable to the development of the kind of social bonds that foster solidarity and mutuality in a society. There is a naturalness to patriotism, reflecting a healthy love for what is one’s own, gratitude for what one has been given, and reverence for the sources of one’s being. Such dispositions are more visceral than intellectual, being grounded in our natures and the basic facts of our natality. Yet their power is no less for that, and they are denied only at great cost. A disposition toward gratitude nourishes the roots of our most important moral sentiments.

There are many meanings to be found in Aristotle’s famous declaration that man is by nature a “political animal,” but one of them is that we are in some sense made to live in community with one another. We are by nature belonging creatures, and one of the deepest needs of the human soul is a sense of membership, of joy in what we have and hold in common with others.

Much of the thrust of modern political and social thought, however, has compelled us to look in the opposite direction. This trend is especially vivid in a work like Sigmund Freud’s Civilization and Its Discontents, in which civilization is understood to rest upon a brutal suppression, even a kind of mutilation, of our instinctual natures, for the sake of the uneasy equilibrium that makes human society possible. We endure life in society as the pacing tiger endures the cage, but it is not what we were made for.

Wilfred M. McClay is the G.T. and Libby Blankenship Chair in the History of Liberty at the University of Oklahoma. This essay arose out of his work with the American Project at Pepperdine University’s School of Public Policy.
That is perhaps a rather extreme version of this view, reminiscent of Thomas Hobbes’s brutal understanding of the social contract, instituted to subdue the even-more-brutal state of nature. But some of the same ideas, albeit in milder form, underlie the libertarian strain of conservatism and indeed liberalism itself, both of which often seem to posit the individual as something ontologically prior to all social relations, capable of standing free and alone, able to choose the terms on which it makes common cause with others. It is thanks to such an understanding that we have an endless fascination with romantic cultural heroes, from Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman to the current crop of movie stars and pop musicians—a transgenerational herd of independent minds that can be counted on to sing the praises of nonconformity and the song of the open road, again and again, in strikingly similar ways.

This autonomous individualism is also visible in modern conceptions of politics and economics that emphasize the organization of society into a system of countervailing forces, which together produce an order that no force standing alone, no matter how virtuous, would be capable of producing. Individuals are thought to come into the world fully formed and armed with a quiver of imprescriptible rights and the freedom to exercise them; yet it is not out of their exercise of this freedom, but instead through the interactions and collisions of individuals and groups, competing and accommodating, that an enduring social order or a productive economy are produced.

That same vision of order achieved through dynamic equilibrium is visible in our own battered but still-magnificent Constitution, with its systemic distrust of all concentration of power and authority, and its low but solid assumptions about the self-interestedness that pervades our human nature. And to be sure, as that last example implies, this view of things—that we are fundamentally self-interested creatures, and there will always be an inherent uneasiness about our lives together—captures some essential part of the truth about the human condition.

But it captures only a part. For among our deepest longings is the desire to belong, and it is an illusion to believe that we can sustain a stable identity in isolation, living apart from the eyes and ears and words of others. Only beasts and gods dwell outside the city, Aristotle warned us, and no city or nation can long survive in the absence of civic virtues and the loyalties that flow from them. “Virtue” for Aristotle was a kind of natural excellence that nevertheless required much striving.
to be achieved. Its task was prescriptive and aspirational, and it aspired to a kind of transcendence. Consider these luminous words from the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

[W]e must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more in power and in worth does it surpass everything. This would seem, too, to be each man himself, since it is the authoritative and better part of him. It would be strange, then, if he were to choose not the life of his self but that of something else.

So patriotism, rightly understood, is also aspirational in character, with a strong admixture of self-overcoming contained in its mandate. Yes, it is an utterly natural sentiment, whose primal claims upon our souls we deny at our peril. But we cannot be content with it in the initial form in which it is given. We must work upon it, refine it and elevate it, if it is to be made into a means by which we can strive to “live in accordance with the best thing in us.”

This is not a simple thing, particularly given the difficulty of isolating and expressing the things that comprise the core of American civilization. By this, I mean not just that we have lost the ability to think about these matters, which is certainly true, but that the matters themselves are inherently complex.

Patriotism, in the American context, is an intricate latticework of ideals, sentiments, and overlapping loyalties. Since its founding, America has often been understood as the incarnation of an idea, an abstract and aspirational claim about self-evident truths that apply to all of humanity. There is certainly some truth to this view, but to focus on it exclusively ignores the very natural and concrete aspects of American patriotism: our shared memories of our nation’s singular triumphs, sacrifices, and sufferings, as well as our unique traditions, culture, and land. These two types of American patriotism are undeniably in tension, but the tension has been a healthy one throughout our history; our nation’s universal ideals have meshed with, and derived strength from, Americans’ local and particular sentiments.
Among elite opinion-makers today, the universal variety is viewed as the only legitimate form of American patriotism, while its more particular loyalties are dismissed as a divisive blood-and-soil nationalism. But there is much more to American patriotism than this, and we are in real danger of losing the shared sense of spirit and sacrifice that comes from remembering our past together.

The Two Strains of American Patriotism

The tension between the different versions of patriotism is well illustrated by a minor controversy from recent history: the debate over the naming of the U.S. government’s new Department of Homeland Security. The use of the term “homeland” generated complaints almost from the start from commentators, activist groups, and critics in academia, and the reasons had to do with a clash in fundamental perceptions about American national identity.

“Homeland” seemed insular and provincial, and some heard in it an echo of the German Heimat, a fatherland of blood and soil. Americans’ attachment, critics of the term argued, is not to something geographical or ethnic, but to a community built around widespread assent to a universal civic idea of “freedom.” In other words, they asserted, America is best understood not as a country in the usual sense, but rather as the embodiment of a set of ideas—a nation dedicated to, and held together by its dedication to, a set of propositions. It is a creed rather than a culture.

Furthermore, they continued, those ideas are deemed to have a universal and all-encompassing quality; therefore, the defense of the United States is not merely the protection of a particular society with a particular regime and a particular culture and history, inhabiting a particular piece of real estate, whose chief virtue is the fact that it is “ours.” Indeed, the fluid, voluntaristic, present-minded, and contractarian nature of American culture makes it a society built, in Werner Sollors’s formulation, upon the value not of descent but of consent, meaning that every individual is created equal and is equally provided with the opportunity to give his assent to the values for which the nation stands.

Small wonder, then, that the United States has, for so much of its history, been so welcoming to immigrants. For one is, in this creedal view, made an American not so much by birth as by a process of agreeing to and consciously appropriating the ideas that make America what it is. Converts are always welcome. In fact, in this view of America, we are a
nation of converts. The use of the term “homeland” seemed to the critics to be a betrayal of precisely this core meaning: the openness at the heart of the American experiment.

One finds evidence for this view from the very beginning of the history of the United States. For example, in Federalist No. 1, Alexander Hamilton contended that the American nation was marked by historical destiny to be a test case for all humankind, deciding whether it is possible for good governments to be constituted by “reflection and choice,” rather than relying on “accident and force.” Such a mission, he added, being universalistic in character, should conjoin “the inducements of philanthropy to those of patriotism” in the hearts of those hoping for the success of the American experiment. The particular mission of America is part and parcel of a universal quest of humanity.

There can be no doubt that, on some level, this view is right in stressing that this strong sense of American universalism is a key element in the makeup of American national self-consciousness. But it is far from being the only element. There is in the United States, and in all reasonably cohesive nations, an entirely different and completely indispensable set of considerations also in play. These are not best understood as matters of blood and soil. Instead, as the French historian Ernest Renan insisted in his 1882 lecture “What is a Nation?”, a nation should be understood as “a soul, a spiritual principle,” constituted not only by present-day consent but also by the dynamic residuum of the past, “the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories” that form in the citizen “the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.” These shared memories, and their transmission to the next generation, are what form the core of a national consciousness. As Renan explained,

The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion…. To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more—these are the essential conditions for being a people…. A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future.
Renan strongly opposed the idea that nations should be understood as entities united by racial, linguistic, geographical, religious, or material factors. None of those factors were sufficient to account for the emergence of this “spiritual principle.” But neither was the principle of active consent sufficient without the added substance of the past in which that consent was embedded and through which it found meaning.

The ballast of the past is similarly indispensable to the sense of American national identity, and it is something quite distinct from the dualism of descent and consent. It forms a strain in our patriotism that is in some respects far less articulate than the universalistic strain, precisely because it conflicts with American assertions of universalism; its intellectual basis is less well-defined. But it is every bit as powerful, if not more so. And it is a very particular force. Our nation’s particular triumphs, sacrifices, and sufferings—and our memories of those things—draw and hold us together, precisely because they are the sacrifices and sufferings, not of all humanity, but of us alone. Yet, paradoxically, the experience of this particularistic strain is something that we share with the peoples of nearly all other nations. It is universal precisely because it is not universalistic, just as the love of one’s own parents or one’s family or one’s spouse is universal precisely in its particularity.

As mentioned above, this aspect of American patriotism is not always well-articulated, particularly in academic settings, where it faces incomprehension and a deeply rooted disdain. One will have better luck searching in popular culture, in songs and fictions where one can find the more primal aspects of American patriotism expressed with great directness and vividness. Consider the words of the patriotic songs that have become part of the American canon, songs in which the sense of “home” and particularity are ever-present. “The Star-Spangled Banner” speaks not of the universal rights of man, but of the Flag, and it recounts a very particular story, recalling a moment of national perseverance in a time of war and hardship. “America the Beautiful” mingles wondrous invocations of the American land with reverent memories of military and religious heroes of the past and calls to virtue and brotherhood. And there is little else but images of land and echoes of Heimat in Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America”—“Land that I love!” and “My home sweet home!”—which has enjoyed a surge of popularity in the years since 9/11.

That the composer of this song, one of the formative geniuses of American popular music, was born in tsarist Russia with the name
Israel Baline is, of course, both utterly amazing and entirely appropriate. Even immigrants lacking a shared descent, language, culture, or religion could find a way to participate in the sense of America as a home, as a place where they could be “born again.” And they were not only participants in it, but were among the most articulate exponents of it. This astonishing feature of American life illustrates a quality about the United States that sets it apart from every other nation in the world. It also serves to illustrate the immense distance between the actual form taken by American particularism and the blood-and-soil nationalisms to which it is so often inaccurately and ungenerously compared.

There is a vital and living tension in the makeup of American patriotism, a tension between its universalizing ideals, with their rationalist and contractual tendencies, and its particularizing sentiments, with their emphasis upon memory, history, tradition, culture, and the land. This tension may be especially pronounced in America — it was on particular display in the 2016 presidential election — but it is not unique to it.

Our Mixed Patriotism

One can find an early version of the same tension emerging in the debates of Richard Price and Edmund Burke, which, despite their late-18th-century British provenance, prove highly relevant to the American situation then and now. Price, a liberal clergyman and Enlightenment philosopher who greatly admired the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham, offered “A Discourse on the Love of Our Country” as a sermon delivered in London in 1789. It put forward a strikingly rational and proto-cosmopolitan view of patriotism: Conventional patriotism was a form of blindness, Price contended, and “a narrower interest ought always to give way to a more extensive interest.” Good citizens should consider themselves “more as citizens of the world than as members of any particular community”; the king was “no more than the first servant of the public, created by it, maintained by it, and responsible to it.” His majesty was not his own, but that of “the people,” and his power was “a trust derived from the people.” Hence the British people, like the French, whose nascent revolution Price regarded with wide-eyed admiration, had the right to overthrow their monarch and reorder their regime anytime they saw fit to do so.

Burke found Price’s sermon repugnant and published his Reflections on the Revolution in France the following year to refute such arguments.
Instead of Price’s irreverent Benthamite rationalism, Burke stressed the importance of respecting the wisdom of traditional and time-honored things. In place of universalism and cosmopolitanism, Burke grounded politics and social life in the “little platoons” of the local community, in all their particularity and idiosyncrasy. In place of a society built upon the individualistic myth of the social contract, Burke invoked the givenness of authority and the “contract” of eternal society, a pact joining the living in organic and reverent unity with the dead and those yet to be born. Tradition, precedent, and precept were for him nearly always better guides to action than abstract reason, as he had summarized in a never-delivered speech years earlier, because “[t]he individual is foolish”—even the most rational individual—but “the species is wise.”

Clearly the subsequent history of the United States follows neither Price nor Burke exactly. Instead, the genius of American patriotism has consisted in the country having found a way of permitting both sets of precepts to coexist, and even to be harmonized to a considerable extent. Both are available to be drawn upon in comprising the rich, but mixed, phenomenon of American patriotism. The Pricean elements in American patriotism are certainly evident, but so too are the Burkean ones. They need to be in conversation with one another—and never more so than today.

America has been fortunate to escape the continental European pattern of patriotic sentiment, in which local and particular loyalties are viewed as an impediment to devotion to the nation and must therefore be subdued at nearly any cost. Our Civil War—in which a figure like Robert E. Lee felt compelled to choose between his particular identity as a Virginian and his national identity as a citizen of the United States—is the exception that proves the rule. We often fail to appreciate the extent to which the characteristic American pattern of patriotic sentiment has been a broadly Burkean one, in which larger loyalties have built upon more primary ones and have drawn strength from those primary ties, to such an extent that it is never easy to disentangle them.

Abraham Lincoln showed an instinctive understanding of this complexity in American patriotic sentiment, emphasizing first one then the other in his oratory, as circumstances dictated. In his first inaugural address, in which he pleaded against the rising tide of secession, he expressed his hope that “[t]he mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone
all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

These are familiar words, so familiar that we may not notice in them the careful and dignified blending of the local with the national, and the public with the private. Those “mystic chords of memory” are understood to emanate not only from the earth’s fallen heroes, but also from the hearts of living individuals and the hearthstones of living families. The choice of the word “hearthstone” was especially inspired, invoking in a single word the whole universe of local and particular loyalties and intimacies that are the stuff of ordinary human life—the Lebenswelt of a warm and beloved family home. Lincoln hoped that by sounding the notes of the local and particular, he could also reinvigorate the chorus of the national.

At other times, Lincoln’s oratory took on a different and more expansive tone, attributing a larger, universal meaning to the survival of the American experiment. In his second annual message to Congress in 1862, he envisioned the United States as “the last best hope of earth.” A year later, in the Gettysburg Address, he speculated that the war’s outcome would test for the world whether a stable and enduring nation built upon twin commitments to freedom and equality was even possible.

Yet this dual focus on the national and the universal was not as inconsistent as it might seem. It was at the very heart of the matter. The meanings Lincoln was tapping into were part of the complex web of sentiments and ideals making up American national identity; all were valid, all were resonant. It would be a grave mistake to discount the ways that American identity has been exceptional, and the extent to which the success of the American experiment has been seen, by Lincoln and other Americans, and non-Americans too, as a cause with universal implications. But it also would be a mistake to think of American patriotism as something entirely exceptional, taking a form wholly distinct from the forms of patriotism found in other societies and polities. Such a view is a recipe for excess, whether born of hubris or of self-denial, an outlook that would blind us to the debilities and needs to which our common humanity binds us and by which it restrains and limits us. Everyone belongs to someplace, and Lincoln’s mystic tones, while transposable into different keys, cannot resonate if the better angels of our nature try to play them all at once. The result is not music, but cacophony, or white noise.
Of course, one should note that Lincoln’s splendid words failed to avert a horrific conflict with a faction within his country, a faction that violently disagreed with his understanding of the relation between the particular and the national. But that only goes to demonstrate that the nation’s mixed patriotism has not been easy or uncomplicated. It is in need of constant adjustment, and may not, therefore, be a universally applicable pattern. Exceptions are just that, and they are not self-sustaining.

**The Ballast of the Past**

Some of the best European writers on patriotism often miss its essentially mixed character in America. George Orwell’s celebrated essay “Notes on Nationalism” made a memorable distinction between the local affections of patriotism, which he applauded, and the more generalized and ideological affections of nationalism, which he disparaged. There is much to be said for Orwell’s priorities, and I think that Burke would have thoroughly approved of them. But his understanding does not quite fit the American instance, where a kind of rough federative principle evolved—one that has encouraged smaller loyalties to feed into and support larger ones—in place of a zero-sum struggle between the nation and the groups that constitute it.

In America, patriotism and nationalism are not locked in mortal conflict, though they are often in tension. It is a creative and beneficial tension, however. One of the greatest American achievements, both politically and socially, has been creating a political and cultural setting that can comprehend and support, to the greatest degree possible, the multiple natural loyalties of the human person without requiring its inhabitants to choose between and among them. Broadly speaking, an American is not forced to yield his loyalty to his locality, family, state, religion, ethnic group, or race to be an American—and he is no less an American for declining to do so. And he can be dedicated to the principle of America while at the same time loving the nation itself, with its culture and history and love of the land.

As to how to solve the undeniable problem of the general erosion of patriotic sentiment in this country, how to inculcate patriotism in rising generations of Americans, how to reconcile a vigorous conception of assimilation with the pluralism to which we are so deeply committed—those are other matters, and very grave concerns indeed.
In addressing these concerns, two things must be kept in mind. First, it must be acknowledged that these tasks are well worth pursuing. In fact, they are essential. The kind of patriotism that the United States has brought into being is one of the bright lights of human history, and we should not allow it be extinguished by mere inattention or a perverse self-hatred, born of our colossal ignorance of history. Second, we must remember that the answers to these problems will involve culture as much as, if not more than, they will involve creed.

We are not lacking in an awareness that all men are created equal. Where we are lacking is in remembering, and teaching others to remember, the meaning of Lexington and Concord, Promontory Summit and Menlo Park, Independence Hall and the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Iwo Jima and Pointe du Hoc, and countless other places that represent moments of spirit and sacrifice in the American past. It is these moments with which the American future, if there is to be one, will need to be conversant, and will need to keep faith. It is only in tending both facets of patriotism—love of America and love of her ideals—that we can nurture our civic virtue, and elevate our sense of belonging, to live in accordance with the best thing in us.