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## **How Can You Love a Country?**

**by Sheldon Richman**

Why do people get upset when Barack Obama refuses to wear an American-flag lapel pin or Michelle Obama suggests that she hadn't been proud of her country until recently?

The Right, led by its talk-radio spokesmen, makes the biggest fuss about these things, but other people appeared bothered as well, and it may account for Obama's poor showing among working-class white voters in border and southern states. While race may have been the underlying reason for that showing, many voters told exit pollsters that Obama was culturally unlike them. Taking off the lapel pin he once wore might have been taken as a sign of that cultural difference.

Uneasiness with the Obamas' apparent attitude about "their country" would most likely be chalked up to Americans' sense of patriotism. They love their country, and they are uncomfortable about people who don't seem to love it. But as an explanation this is little help. "Patriotism" is too vague a word to shed light on this matter. It's taken to mean "love of one's country." But what does *that* mean? The idea is rarely analyzed.

A country is an abstraction that covers many things. What it stands for goes far beyond one's home or birthplace, which understandably invokes affection under normal circumstances. Also inextricably bound up with the concept of country is a history, and central to the history of any country is its political history, that is, the record of its government's conduct. For better or worse, a country is in large part its government. Thus for most people, loving one's country means, among other things, feeling a sense of loyalty to and even reverence for its government. That doesn't mean that people never criticize "their" government. But for the person who thinks of himself as patriotic, the criticism never reaches down to the core; it's usually directed at specific politicians.

That is particularly true in a democratic society: because people may vote for political officeholders, they believe the government is of, by, and for the people. Criticism will tend to be tempered if it is regarded as criticism of oneself. In the United States, the idea of self-government

is reinforced by state schooling and the news media, which plant the message that if one doesn't like the government, one has only oneself to blame.

That is why radical criticism of the government from an American citizen — particularly when made on foreign soil — is so offensive to most people, as is a *foreigner's* criticism of the U.S. government. When Venezuelan dictator Hugo Chavez called President Bush a “devil” in an address to the United Nations, the editorial writers and commentators didn't laugh dismissively. They fumed at the insult! (“Hey, that's our president he's talking about!”)

Thus, by his not wearing a flag pin and by her indicating a previous lack of pride in her country, Barack and Michelle Obama seemed unpatriotic. Yet the word “patriotism” doesn't really get at what underlies the suspicion we've seen expressed. “Nationalism” better captures the phenomenon, because it connotes something like a religious attitude toward the nation, as though it were a transcendent mystical entity, an object of worship, with the government its material representative. That explains why the flag is treated as something sacred. Why else would people force their kids to pledge allegiance to it (with a Nazi-style salute in the early 20th century), fear its touching the ground, or want a constitutional amendment forbidding the burning of it? (If I buy an American flag at Wal-Mart, isn't it my property? So why can't I burn it if that's what I want to do?)

### **Nationalism and the state**

One need only listen to right-wing media personalities to hear this attitude clearly expressed. Television and radio talkers such as Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity go on endlessly about how great “the United States” is, how it has been a force for good in the world, and how un-American anyone is who thinks otherwise. For them, no compliment is greater than “you're a great American” because it means you love this nation and its political system without reservation. Dissent that reaches a fundamental level is barely to be tolerated.

But, again, the terms used are hopelessly vague. What is America? Obviously, it's many things, but one can't help but think that for the Limbaughs and Hannitys, it is essentially the government. (Would America exist without its government?) They might deny this — claiming that the people, not the government, are what make America great — yet when they rhapsodize about America, it is nearly always the U.S. government's record in foreign affairs that they talk about. This highlights one of the contradictions in conservatism. Most conservatives pay lip service to free people, free markets, and small government while simultaneously singing the praises of government activism in foreign policy. They justify activism in security terms, but what they favor does serve not the security of the American people. On the contrary, it endangers them by drawing them into foreign quarrels and creating enemies.

The state comes into its own in war, the anti-war dissident Randolph Bourne pointed out as the U.S. government prepared to enter World War I. That is true of foreign policy generally,

which is why today's conservatives are so drawn to it. (An earlier generation of conservatives, who really were skeptical of state power, opposed foreign intervention.) For the current crop of conservatives, nothing provides the opportunity for "America" to show its greatness and leadership as do foreign policy and, most especially, war. In reality, what they actually provide is an opportunity for self-serving, ambitious presidents to create legacies and funnel citizens' wealth to government contractors — Eisenhower's military-industrial complex.

Worship of the nation and its government is in fact inconsistent with America's founding ideals. Thomas Jefferson said the appropriate attitude of a free people toward the government is "jealousy" not "confidence," much less adoration. He spoke of the need to keep it caged. He was right, but if he were around today, conservatives might accuse him of not loving his country. Stripped of its incidental characteristics, government is nothing but physical force. So government, even under the best of circumstances, must always be eyed with suspicion. No Jeffersonian can be comfortable with government activism in foreign affairs. Appeals to security are to be met with high skepticism, for it's too easy a cover for political intrigue.

That conservatives relish almost any foreign activism shows how un-Jeffersonian they are. They are nationalists and state-worshippers. For them, to love America *is* to love the government (at least if it is run by one of their own) because it is the government that embodies the nation and the nation is great and deserving of reverence.

No wonder Barack Obama bothers them so deeply, though he is far from the radical they think he is.

There certainly are things about America to love. The philosophy expressed in the Declaration of Independence tops the list. The abolitionist movement is another example. Any dedication to liberty and resistance to tyranny are worthy of admiration.

But for that very reason, so much about "America" deserves not love or pride but contempt. From the start, people in power have sought to nullify the ideals that distinguished America from other countries. The record of U.S. interventionist foreign policy, which has required coercion of the American people and others, is a record of shame. American presidents have supported and even installed dictators to advance the U.S. government's imperial agenda. Their military policy has regarded civilian lives as expendable in the pursuit of an international regime amenable to the American ruling elite's mercantile interests. Of course, that was justified as spreading freedom and democracy, a charade that fooled far more Americans than foreigners.

Domestically, freedom and free enterprise have taken back seats to other objectives, such as economic stability or national security. Capitalism *in practice* has meant a system of mercantilist privilege for wealthy interests, with harmful consequences at home and abroad. That is not something to be proud of. It is something to be condemned.

To neutralize dissent, the government and its "private sector" clients have inculcated an ethic extolling "service to our country," especially military "service." We are asked to believe that

every American soldier sent to intervene in a foreign land was “defending our freedom.” A largely uncritical populace accepts this view, and even when people grow tired of a military operation, they rarely entertain the thought that the politicians and military personnel responsible for it are guilty of crimes. (“Mistakes were made.”) Even harsh war critics in the media can’t mention “our troops” in Iraq without calling them heroes who are serving their country. Only a mystical nationalism can conflate following a political hack’s orders with serving his fellow citizens.

Insisting on the alleged virtue of loving one’s country mainly serves to give those in power a blank check. The alternative, though, is not to hate one’s country, for that would merely be the other side of the same fallacy. A country per se should be an object neither of love nor of hatred.

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