

Patriotism

by Cal_Thomas

WASHINGTON, Indiana - It's a long way from Washington, D.C., to Washington, Ind., where my father was born a century ago next January and where I am attending a Thomas family reunion. On the drive from Indianapolis, one passes towns that could fill a Norman Rockwell album. My favorite is named Freedom because, though the town has only a single flashing caution light, it displays many flags. If I don't slow down, I will miss both. Driving past miles of cornfields, listening to local radio stations that still play music, not syndicated political talk, and carry commercials for farm equipment and feed, I ponder what it means to be patriotic and to love America. Last week, senator and Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama said that religion is not the exclusive property of conservative Christians. He is right. Neither is patriotism a trademark of the Republican Party. As with religion, some people on the right have used patriotism, which should be a unifying theme, to divide Americans. My liberal friends love America as much as I do. They might disagree on some, or all, of my political and religious beliefs, but that does not make them less in love with America, much less un-American. Many political and religious liberals have family members who have served or are serving their country in war and in peace. These have spilled their blood and given their lives to guarantee our freedom to disagree and to still live together. Here in this Washington, I am told stories of how our family stuck together, neighbor helping neighbor, during the Great Depression; of a grandfather who was out of work at the B and O Railroad for two years; of employees with more seniority than he who took a day off so he could work and earn some money; of one of his sons (my uncle) who had a paper route and would bring home eggs donated by subscribers. Few here judged their neighbor's worth based on his or her political or religious beliefs. They helped each other. This was the real America. When the "boys" went off to war, they had total support from family, friends, neighbors and all they left behind and for whose benefit they fought. When those who survived came home, some voted for Democrats and some for Republicans, but no one questioned their patriotism because of their electoral or religious choices. Last year, I visited Normandy, France for the first time. At the American cemetery, there is not an "R" (for Republican) or "D" (for Democrat) on the grave markers of those who died on D-Day. The 2008 presidential candidates and their supporters should be asked not to question the patriotism of their opponents. Surely most of us prefer debate and discussion of the issues that confront us to a litmus test about whose blood runs more red, white and blue. Leaders of many nations, including America, have used patriotism to persuade citizens of policies that are not always in their country's best interests. Hitler's deputy, Herman Goering, cynically observed: "Naturally the common people don't want war; neither in Russia, nor in England, nor in America, nor in Germany. That is understood. But after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine policy, and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is to tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country." And still we love America for opportunities that do not exist in such proportion in any other nation. A person who criticizes a particular policy does not necessarily love his country less than one who supports that policy. G.K. Chesterton said, "'My country, right or wrong' is a thing no patriot would ever think of saying except in a desperate case. It is like saying 'My mother, drunk or sober.'" After 231 years, we still try to make wrong into right and cheer the right and the nation that makes change possible when we succeed. That's patriotism. (c) 2007 Tribune Media Services, Inc.

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