

The Anatomy of Patriotism

John L. Loeb, Jr.

United States Ambassador to Denmark, 1981-1983

The Sons of the Revolution means a lot to me. Through descent from an English-Jewish family by the name of Phillips of London and Charleston, South Carolina, I am a member of the Sons of the Revolution. My four times great-grandfather, Jacob Phillips, was a member of the South Carolina Militia during the War of Independence.

I should add that a number of the Phillips family were Tories and returned from Charleston to England before the American Revolution.

From 1776 until modern times, a member of my family has served in the United States armed forces in every war.

They held public office, they pioneered in business, nurtured talent in many fields, and they demonstrated and transmitted from generation to generation a spirit which I consider part of my heritage.

In their love of this land, my family shared an emotion which has been widely felt with particular intensity in this country since the time of the Founding Fathers—patriotism.

American patriotism must be an almost instinctive response to a land so blessed.

Who could not be attached to and awed by a country so vast in its continental sweep, so endowed with natural wondrous beauty?

Who could not be devoted to and protective of a nation whose government was entrusted to its citizens? And where life, liberty and even the pursuit of happiness was their birthright?

Patriotism does not require daring physical deeds and sacrifice in the defense of the nation for services performed in the glare of public attention. You don't have to be another Nathan Hale or Daniel Webster to be a patriot.

In the truest sense, patriotism, to me, is expressed in the daily lives of ordinary men and women whose conduct as citizens is governed by their belief in and practice of the ideals and traditions that are the glory of American democracy: Men and women who believe in freedom not only for themselves but for their neighbors, who seek opportunity without denying it to others, who understand that democracy requires tolerance.

Unhappily, patriotism has sometimes been invoked to camouflage bigotry—by the Know-Nothings of the 1840s, by the Ku Klux Klan, by the apostles of McCarthyism after

World War II and by the extreme Religious Right today. Almost every minority in America has, at some period, been subjected to intolerance.

Yet, when compared to the rest of the world, when we look at the racial, religious and ethnic conflicts tearing apart the Middle East, Yugoslavia, the former Soviet Union, Africa, Northern Ireland—there are too many examples to list—America’s experiment in diversity and tolerance has succeeded beyond anybody’s wildest dreams.

The anatomy of patriotism is complex.

Patriotism might be difficult to sustain in a people as diverse as we are. We are, after all, a nation of immigrants—and we have all been immigrants. Each of us has pride in our special heritage as well as great love of America.

Even in the 18th century, the Founding Fathers knew that a spirit of tolerance and freedom was crucial—*indispensable*, to preserve the unity and purpose of the new nation.

That is why, for example, they took the revolutionary and historic step of separating the church from the state.

President George Washington often gave voice to these same sentiments of tolerance and liberty.

I would like to read to you part of a letter* that he wrote to the Jewish congregation of Newport, Rhode Island (now the Touro Synagogue), on August 17, 1790** :

“The citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy, a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship...Happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens.”

* *Editor’s Note:* The complete text of George Washington’s letter is reprinted in the annex to this piece.

** *Editor’s Note:* This text is based on remarks presented by Ambassador Loeb at the re-opening of the Adeline Moses Loeb Gallery, Sons of the Revolution in the State of New York, Inc., Fraunces Tavern Museum.