

Land That I Love: Feelings Toward Country at Century's End

By Scott McLean

Patriotism—pride in one's country and devotion to the maintenance of one's political institutions—has traditionally been understood as the foundation of civic activity. "It seems to me," Alexis de Tocqueville said in *Democracy in America*, "that civic spirit is inseparable from the exercise of political rights." He held little confidence that civic attachments in America could be maintained from calculation of self-interest alone. They required passionate feelings of attachment to community, too. But he believed the price of this proud attachment was an "irritable and annoying" national pride and xenophobia which "has recourse to every artifice and descends to every childishness of personal vanity."

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This dual aspect of patriotism as supporting both civic engagement and international chauvinism is apparent in the post-Cold War era. In recent years there has been a great deal of anxiety over whether the amount of civic involvement in the United States is on the decline. At the same time, the collapse of Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War and the resurgence of violent ethnic nationalism around the world have led scholars to wonder whether Americanism will take the forms of isolationism or anti-immigrant attitudes in the new international environment. In short, citizens and leaders are worried that American patriotism will take on the worst qualities of mindless nationalism. Yet there has been virtually no effort since 1986 to explore the vast repository of survey data on American pride and national identity.¹ What, then, is the state of American patriotism in the Clinton era? To what extent can President Clinton and his successors depend on the same patriotic support for international military interventions as Presidents Reagan and Bush did? Domestically, to what extent can leaders use patriotism to fuel a revival of civic engagement? Will the next president face the prospect of a renewed "culture war" over what it means to be an American in an increasingly multicultural society?

Patriotism in Decline?

Despite prevailing worries about the decline of American patriotism and civic values, surveys tell a different story, as Table 1 indicates. Except for some decline in the late 1980s, and a sudden jump during the Gulf War, patriotic sentiments have been holding steady. Americans' trust in their government to "do the right thing" has rebounded from 19% in 1992, according to a National Election Study, to 33 percent of respondents in a 1998 Gallup/CNN/USA Today poll.

So why the impression that patriotism is on the decline? The one thing that never seems to change is a worry that we are not as patriotic as we were twenty-five years ago. Americans consistently say that the younger generation is not as patriotic as previous generations. In a June 1998 Opinion Dynamics/Fox News poll, for example, 68% of respondents thought Americans were more patriotic in 1973, precisely the time

when, the evidence suggests, Americans were actually less patriotic. A June 1989 Gallup survey found that people believed teenagers in 1969 were more patriotic than contemporary teens—forgetting, at least for the moment, about the anti-war protests and burning of flags and draft cards that marked the earlier era. The same sorts of worries can be found in a recent series of *Washington Post* articles based on a survey about how Americans view the moral state of the nation. While Americans are proud and satisfied with the economic and technological advances of America, they believe that moral values are on the decline.²

From Reagan to Clinton

The 1980s were both praised and condemned as a period of the flowering of American patriotism. Before the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam conflict, the National Election Study found that over half of all Americans could trust the national government to do what was right most of the time. By 1974, high trust had declined to 36%, and it has stayed below 50% for most of the time ever since. During the early Reagan years trust in government increased from 25% in 1980 to 51% in 1983. President Ronald Reagan's "America is back" and "standing tall" rhetoric was a tonic for patriotism after the national traumas of Vietnam, Watergate and the Iranian hostage crisis.

Yet the resurgence of American patriotism was short-lived under Reagan's leadership. Ironically, it was Iran-Contra—a scandal that seemed to remind people of Vietnam, Watergate, and the Iranian hostage crisis simultaneously—that undercut trust in government and patriotic sentiment. By 1986, trust in government was down to 35% and continued to decline well into the 1990s. Early in Reagan's presi-

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dency, the percentage of people who had stated they were "very proud to be an American" reached nearly 90%, but it dropped to 67% in 1987. Americans who said they were "very patriotic" plummeted from 64% in 1986 to 43% in 1987.

Many observers predicted that George Bush's rhetoric against Saddam Hussein in the Persian Gulf War would be the last gasp of the Cold War version of American patriotism. In applying the image of Hitler revisited to the Iraqi leader over an extended period of months, Bush managed a breathtaking reversal in public opinion from opposition to wholehearted patriotic support for the war. However, by 1992, American pride about the victory in the Gulf did little to help Bush's overall performance ratings. He was defeated by Bill Clinton, a known "draft dodger" who had led protests against the Vietnam conflict as a student at Oxford University.

In 1996, Clinton faced Senator Bob Dole, a genuine war hero who appealed to an older generation against a younger one that "never sacrificed." Voters polled by the Media Studies Center in January to February of that year considered Dole more patriotic than Clinton, but only 39% thought that patriotism is an essential quality for a president. Since then, the Monica Lewinsky scandal has troubled Americans, but it has also shown that presidential job performance in domestic and foreign policy can help redeem some of a president's moral failings. Clinton's job approval ratings on foreign policy have been on the rise since 1995, when troops were committed to enforce the Dayton Peace Accords in Bosnia. A Chicago Council on Foreign Relations study found in 1998 that Clinton gets almost as high foreign policy approval as President Bush did. The military conflict over the Yugoslav region of Kosovo began with very little public attention and weak public support, but by the

Table 1
Patterns of American Patriotism, 1987-1997
(in percentages)

Questions: "Do you completely agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree, or completely disagree with the following statement: I am very patriotic?" *Column contains responses of those who said they completely agree.* "How proud are you to be an American? Extremely proud, very proud, somewhat proud, or not very proud?" *Column contains responses of those who said they are extremely proud.* "'Please tell me if you completely agree with..., mostly agree with..., mostly disagree with..., or completely disagree with... [the following statement].... We should be willing to fight for our country whether it is right or wrong." *Column contains responses of those who completely agree.*

Year	Very Patriotic	Proud to Be American	Fight for US, Right or Wrong
1997	48	*	21
1994	*	86	*
1993	*	*	30
1992	52	*	24
1991	65	87	*
1990	48	78	22
1989	51	*	22
1988	51	67	23
1987	43	*	17

* = data unavailable for year

Source: "Very patriotic" question—surveys by Princeton Survey Research Associates For the Pew Research Survey Center, 1997, and for Times Mirror, 1990, 1992; Gordon S. Black for *USA Today*, 1991; and the Gallup Organization for Times Mirror, 1987, 1988, 1989. "Proud to be American" question—surveys by National Opinion Research Center, 1994; ICR for the Associated Press, 1991; the Gallup Organization for the World Values Study Group, 1990; and Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, 1988. "Fight for US" question—surveys by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Pew Research Center, 1997, and for Times Mirror 1990, 1992, 1994; the Gallup Organization, 1988, and the Gallup Organization for Times Mirror, 1987, 1989.

end of the first week of attacks, support for the action had reached 50%.

Even so, this level of support is much lower than the 80% support Bush received in a 1991 Gallup poll at the beginning of the Persian Gulf war, or the support given Clinton's subsequent strikes against Iraq. The low support might be explained partly by the public's preoccupation with Clinton's scandal and subsequent impeachment trial, and partly by the lack of any extensive public rallying campaign against Yugoslavia from the White House such as Bush employed against Iraq in the months preceding the Gulf War. Clinton has never appeared comfortable using the sort of patriotic rhetoric that characterized the Reagan and Bush presidencies. He has been more comfortable appealing for active support of democratization and human rights, federal support for community service projects, for aid to poor immigrants, and for more discussion about race issues.

Changes in National Pride

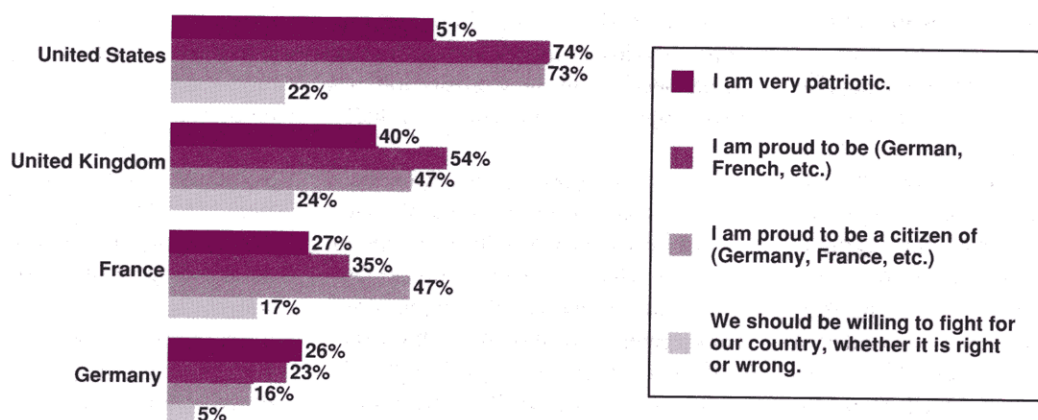
One dimension of patriotism is national pride. While the rest of the post-Cold War world struggles with the violent fragmentation of multi-ethnic states and as industrial nation-states try to inspire more unity, Americans show tre-

in a September 1997 survey on Constitutional knowledge conducted by Shepardson, Stern and Kaminisky that they are proud of the US Constitution. In other countries, citizens do not associate pride in nation with pride in governmental system quite as readily as Americans do. Americans also rate their

individual freedoms, today they are far more proud of American history and American technological advances. In 1960, only 3% of survey respondents told the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) that contributions in science, medicine and technology made them most proud. By the time NORC

Figure 1
Cross-National Comparisons of National Pride

Questions: ...For each statement, please tell me whether you completely agree with it, mostly agree with it, mostly disagree with it, or completely disagree with it... "I am very patriotic."... "We should be willing to fight for our country, whether it is right or wrong."; How proud are you to be[respondent's nationality]... very proud, quite proud, not very proud, or not at all proud?; In general, how proud are you to be a [respondent's country]... citizen? Are you very proud, quite proud, or not proud?



Source: "I am patriotic" question—survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for Times Mirror, 1991; "Proud to be [national identity] question—the Gallup Organization for the World Values Study Group, 1992; "Proud to be citizen" question—the Gallup Organization for *Yomiuri Shimbun*, April 1995; "Willing to fight" question—Princeton Survey Research Associates for Times Mirror, 1991.

mendous levels of patriotic sentiment toward their country. In the 1996 General Social Survey (GSS), 89% of Americans said they would rather be citizens of the US than of any other country. By most means of measurement, Americans are one of the most patriotic peoples in the world. (See Figure 1.)

Polling data show a fundamental continuity in national pride over the past four decades. Surveys from the 1960s to the 1990s reveal that Americans consistently point with pride to the US Constitution's protection for individual liberties and the democratic system of government. Seventy-one percent said

history more positively than people of other countries do. For the past forty years they have remained proud of America's economy, religious morals, standard of living, sports, and technological achievements. Americans have been less proud of their country's social welfare system, its global influence, and its treatment of minorities.

Yet American national pride has undergone some transformation since the heyday of the Cold War. Surveys have shown relative changes since the 1960s in what makes Americans proud of the country. While Americans remain very proud of the level of their

conducted its 1996 GSS, 47% were saying that American achievements in science and technology made them very proud—the highest-ranking aspect, tying American history. And while Americans are still proud of their freedoms, data since the 1960s indicate they are becoming less proud of the way democracy works in America.

History and collective memory surround these points of American pride. Dramatic symbols of America's historical mythology, such as the founding of the nation's political institutions, its wars, and its technological achievements, stand out in the American imagination. A

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1991 survey asked people which events in their lifetime made them most proud to be Americans. The events that made Americans most proud were victory in the Persian Gulf War, victory in World War II, Martin Luther King Jr.'s leadership on civil rights, the moon landing, and President Kennedy's leadership. The survey asked the same question a year later and found that pride over the victory over Iraq had significantly faded, while victory in World War II had dramatically risen. Surprisingly, Americans' memories of President Ronald Reagan were not associated with national pride. Barely 4% considered Reagan's leadership something to be proud of.

Do We Know What We're Proud Of?

It is also important to point out that while Americans are extremely proud of their history and their constitutional system of government, they show very little knowledge of either. According to the 1998 Maritz AmeriPoll, for example, 40% of Americans do not know that the flag has thirteen stripes or that the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776.³ Although Thomas Jefferson believed that the text of the US Constitution was clear enough to serve as a "text of civil instruction," Tocqueville was apprehensive about how much knowledge and discernment the Constitution assumes of citizens. "The Union," he said, "is an ideal nation which exists, so to say, only in men's minds and whose extent and limits can only be discerned by the understanding." Indeed, as Michael Kammen observes in *A Machine That Would Go of Itself*, in times of great Constitutional veneration, specific knowledge of the Constitution declines.⁴ The sacredness of the Constitution seems to be enhanced by its inaccessibility to most Americans.

There is evidence, too, that today, Americans venerate the Constitution but know few of its particulars, inserting into it other phrases and ideas they take to be part the rules of the game. A 1987 Hearst Corporation survey found that 64% of Americans believe the Constitu-

tion requires that English be the national language in schools and government. In a June 1986 ABC News/*Washington Post* poll, 29% of the public mistakenly believed that the phrase "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" is part of the Constitution, and only a third knew that it comes from the Declaration of Independence. Twenty-five percent had no idea where the phrase comes from. Another Hearst survey from the following year showed that over 80% of Americans attributed "constitutional" status to both the Gettysburg Address ("of the people, by the people, for the people") and the Declaration of Independence ("pursuit of happiness" and "all men are created equal"). Forty-five percent even believed that Marx's line "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need" is in the Constitution! (Is there hope for communism after all?)

It is not surprising that Americans often confuse the words of the Declaration of Independence or those of Lincoln or even Marx with the Constitution. When Americans attempt to express their commitments "as a people," the words "all men are created equal" and "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" come to mind more readily than the more straightforward provisions of the Preamble or the Bill of Rights. This blurring between the Constitution and the "American creed" in many people's minds points not so much to the ignorance of the American public but to a deeper moral ambiguity in every expression of attachment, pride or fidelity to "the Constitution" or "the principles of the Constitution." How much is being American about believing in the American ideals, and how much is it about having a particular cultural identity?

The Importance of Being American

But how do patriotic feelings prompt or encourage civic actions and sacrifices? Although it is difficult to be certain, it is clear that for Americans this national identity is something to be put on display. The mixture of civic action

and inner feelings in Americans' conception of their patriotism creates contradictory attitudes, made most evident in the numerous studies which show that Americans can often defend the liberal-capitalist system to the point of intolerance. Those with the highest pride in American civil liberties and democracy have less tolerance for immigrants, vocal communists, atheists or racists than most Americans.⁵

The paradox of a people proud of a history and constitution they do not know well stems from the tension in Americans' minds between two ideas. The first is the idea of America as a nation formed by common allegiance to, and consensus about, liberal Enlightenment ideals. The second is the idea that America is a distinct cultural community. Patriotism involves simply "being American" more than it involves making active sacrifices for the public good. Sixty-one percent of Americans in a June 1983 *New York Times* survey said that someone does not actually have to do anything in order to be patriotic—simply "loving your country" is all that is required. A nationwide 1994 *New York Times* poll asked Americans to describe themselves in a single word. People resisted labeling themselves as members of any interest group or ethnic category; none of the African-Americans in the survey defined themselves as "black" and no whites said that being white was the defining fact of their lives. Instead, the one adjective given most often in the survey was "American."⁶ When the GSS asked in 1996 how important it was to people to be American, 83% said it was important, and an astounding 45% said being an American was "the most important thing in life!"

Although in the same GSS, 74% of Americans said that having American citizenship was "very important" for being truly American, 60% also said that "to feel American" was very important. Moreover, two thirds believed that being born in America was either very important or fairly important for being truly American, while less than one third believed it was not.

Patriotism and the Melting Pot

The conflict between ideals and cultural politics stands out in Americans' attitudes about immigration. How a community brings in outsiders says a lot about its own self-understanding. In March 1999 Gallup reported that for the first time since 1977, a plurality supports increased immigration. However, much of this shift is explained by the booming economy. What will happen when the economy takes a downturn?

Americans believe that the country effectively "Americanized" the wave of immigrants in the early 1900s. While there is still a broad consensus today about the attractiveness of the liberal creed and the melting pot as ideals, Americans are losing faith that it works in practice. In a Gallup/CNN/USA Today poll conducted in May-June 1995, 71% of adults said they believed that the US is a melting pot in which people of different countries combine into a unified American culture, and 59% of the public believed it is better for the US to "encourage immigrants to blend into American culture by giving up some important aspects of their own culture." But Americans are divided about whether the melting pot works as effectively today as they believe it did in the early 1900s. In July 1993, 55% of Americans

in a Gallup/CNN/USA Today poll agreed that the increasing diversity brought by immigration "mostly threatens" American culture.

There is little certainty in the American mind about whether the today's immigrants, coming from Africa, Asia and Latin America, are as adaptable as the European immigrants of the nineteenth century. According to an April 1997 Pew Research Center survey, 69% of the public believed that in practice immigrants either had a lot (40%) or some (29%) influence on changing America's national character. Although 31% believed that immigrants today are less able to adapt to "the American way of life" than immigrants of the early 1900s, 34% believed they were more adaptable. Similar patterns can be seen in the way over a third of respondents to a 1992 Martilla and Kiley poll thought whites are more patriotic than other Americans, and a quarter thought that Asians and Hispanics are less patriotic.²⁸

We stand at a turning point in American patriotism. The end of the Cold War has lifted the burden of defining patriotism as anti-communism but has presented the new challenge of how to promote democracy and human rights in the former Soviet bloc. We also have new opportunities for focusing Ameri-

can national pride toward a project of civic renewal. But the end of the Cold War has also confronted Americans with the question of who may belong to the American community. How these issues are decided will significantly depend upon which symbols of American identity and national memory will prevail in the next presidential campaign, and the moral and political purposes to which they are put. It will also depend upon how effectively the next president will use the elements of national pride—and perhaps also the elements of national shame—to lead the country toward new goals in the next millenium.

Endnotes

¹Frederick Turner and Everett Carl Ladd, "Nationalism, Leadership and the American Creed." *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 13.2 (1986):185-198.

²Richard Morin and David Broder, "Worries about Nation's Morals Test a Reluctance to Judge." *Washington Post*, September 1, 1998:A1.

³Cited by Laura Vanderkam, "US Patriotism Takes an Upward Tick Over Recent Years." *Washington Times*, July 4, 1998: A3.

⁴Michael Kammen, *A Machine That Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1987):22.

⁵Michael Corbett, *American Public Opinion: Trends, Processes and Patterns* (New York: Longman, 1991):102-103.

⁶James Barron, "Who Are You?" *New York Times*, February 13, 1994:A1.



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