America—idea or nation?

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AT first glance, American patriotism seems a simple matter. But it is simple only until one actually starts to think about it, inquire after its sources, and investigate its manifestations. Consider a small but significant case in point, an observation recently made by a distinguished rabbi who serves a large and prosperous Reform congregation in the New York suburbs. This man takes the business of premarital counseling very seriously, and therefore gets to know many of his congregation's younger members in a fairly intimate way. In the course of interviewing and counseling them over the years, he has discovered an interesting pattern: a high correlation between the level of these young people's patriotic sentiments and the extent of their opposition to intermarriage, meaning marriage to non-Jews. In other words, those with the strongest love of country were also those most firmly committed to marrying only within the Jewish faith. Conversely, those most indifferent or hostile to patriotism were also most likely to have no reservations about

intermarriage—and most likely to find fault with those who do.

Loyalties large and small

The rabbi's observation rings true to me. And yet if it is true, it would seem to throw much of our conventional wisdom about patriotism into a cocked hat. Don't we generally assume that loyalty to the nation is a form of belonging that tends, as it intensifies, to divert, diminish, or even swallow up lesser loyalties and more particular affiliations? Doesn't the study of European history indicate precisely this, that the modern nation-state grew in power and prestige at the expense of local and regional identities and affinities, including those of religion? Wouldn't it therefore be more reasonable to predict that observant American Jews would value their nation less, because they value their faith more—particularly when theirs is a faith that sets them apart from the vast majority of Americans? And by the same token, wouldn't it stand to reason that intensely patriotic American Jews would see an act of such primal loyalty to the Jewish community, particularly on a matter as personal and intimate as the question of a marriage partner, as an atavism and a betrayal of the American promise of universal liberty and equality?

Reasonable guesses all, except that they happen not to be borne out by this rabbi's experiences. To be sure, this seeming paradox may have a lot to do with the history and current state of the factions within American Jewry. But it also is wonderfully illustrative of a more general truth, which is this: A considerable part of the genius of American patriotism resides in the fact that being a proud and loyal American does not require one to yield up all of one's identity to the nation. On the contrary, American patriotism has generally affirmed and drawn upon the vibrancy and integrity of other, smaller-scale, and relatively independent loyalties. Far from weakening American national sentiment, or causing it to be half-hearted or anemically "thin," these other traditions have strengthened it immeasurably. Nor is this ideal a recent innovation, brought on by the nation's growing ethnic diversity and the vogue of multiculturalism. Instead, it is an ideal as old as the nation itself, going back to the fundamental con-

cept of a federated republic, which consisted of free and self-governing states, counties, and townships, and which loomed so large in the minds of the nation's Founders.

Needless to say, it has not been an easy ideal to realize or sustain, as recurrent crises in American history from the Whiskey Rebellion to the Civil War to the post-World War II conflicts over school desegregation and voting rights have shown. America's national government has grown steadily in power and influence, and the political, economic, legal, technological, and social forces tending to impose homogeneity upon the national culture are stronger than ever. Yet there is an enduring power in this more diffuse patriotic ideal, which seats the general in the local, and asserts that one does not become more of an American by becoming less of something else—less Southern, less Virginian, less small-town, less black, less Jewish, less whatever.

Of course, there will always be instances in which certain profound loyalties come into conflict, in ways that cannot be reconciled. Such is the human condition, and such is the stuff of civil wars, religious martyrdoms, and Sophoclean tragedies. But the American patriotic ideal has generally been wise and generous about granting the widest possible berth to our disparate loyalties and in assuming a certain respect for the multiplicity of the person. Loyalty, like love, is not necessarily a zero-sum game, in which any loyalty accorded to X is thought to take away from what Y might have received. A husband does not love his wife less because he also loves his children; if anything, the opposite is the case. And, as Burke and Tocqueville both well understood, something of the same is true of political and social life. By giving as free a hand as possible to the "little platoons," local institutions, and independent associations in a free society, the nation not only makes it possible for many citizens to be meaningfully involved in the work of public life but also elicits from them a deep, unfeigned, and uncoerced patriotism. In a word, the health of local and particular freedoms strengthens the nation.

There is another conclusion one might draw from the rabbi's observation. His young congregants' two dispositions—commitment to country and commitment to Jewish law—both presume a certain kind of person, a person who respects the

sentiment of loyalty, who has the capacity for reverence and gratitude, and who is willing to entertain the thought that it sometimes is right and good to recognize the authority of something larger and older than oneself. Small wonder that his young congregants who lack one disposition will likely lack the other. In their defense, neither attitude is much encouraged by an American society awash in the ceaseless novelty and programmatic cynicism of advertising and spin, in which the best humor is always dubbed "irreverent," the best art and scholarship are praised for their "transgressive" qualities, and the past is anything that happened more than 20 minutes ago. For them, the words of the American Founders, to say nothing of the words of Hebrew Scripture, seem as remote as the Crab Nebula, and just as irrelevant to the conduct of their lives. Nor should anyone be surprised that this strange, consumption-besotted, endlessly self-parodic milieu has produced the nervous and self-mocking joylessness one sees in so many American young people, who so often seem like aimlessly circling birds, unable to find a place to light. The wonder is that there are any of the other kind left.

The problems of commerce

So where will the next generation of American patriots come from? The particulars of the situation are not terribly encouraging. There is no iron-clad guarantee that there will even be such a generation. The heart of the problem is the well-known fact that the cultivation of patriotic virtue does not come naturally to a commercial society such as the United States. When the self-interested pursuit of material well-being, rather than the inculcation of public-spiritedness, has become the glue of social cohesion and the chief engine of social progress, where can such a society catch a glimpse of broader and longer horizons, or find compelling rationales for sacrificial acts devoted to the common good? Tocqueville showed persuasively how far the principle of "self-interest rightly understood" could go in reproducing many of the salutary effects of virtue. Rather than appealing to an obsolete standard of noble thoughts and character, the principle of "self-interest rightly understood" succeeded by persuading citizens that it was both prudent and useful for them to behave

in outwardly virtuous ways. But even that principle has its limits, and it reaches those limits at precisely the moment when the utilitarian payoff for virtuous behavior is no longer so plainly evident.

The martial virtues fall first. How can the principle of self-interest serve to persuade a soldier to lay down his life for his country or to risk life and limb by withholding confidential information when he is held prisoner? Or, on a less heroic level, how does this principle command sufficient loyalty from the general populace to fight an extended, costly war, or form affective bonds that will take precedence over self-interest in moments of national crisis? Even the self-restraints entailed by more commonplace virtues such as thrift, modesty, and marital fidelity are likely to weaken when there is no obvious utility in respecting them, and no obvious risk in disdaining them. In any event, the broad spirit of patriotism, which blends the martial virtues with the commonplace ones, cannot thrive without being nourished by moral sources, ones that the principle of self-interest cannot provide. Finding and sustaining those alternative sources turns out to be one of the perennial problems of American society. It is a problem very much facing us in the prosperous present.

Happily complicating the matter, however, is the undeniable fact that the United States has managed to produce more than its share of genuine patriots—warriors and heroes great and small, gallant and unprepossessing, romantic and gritty, aristocratic and plebeian, all united by a willingness to put their lives on the line for their country. How then, in light of the formidable obstacles mentioned above, has the United States managed to bring forth such patriots? And how can it find the means to honor them properly in the present, and—most important of all—produce more of them in the future? The answers to these questions have never been obvious, either to the generation of the Founders or to our own, but a great deal hangs upon the way they are answered, or not answered. Hence it is a fortunate event that Walter Berns, one of our most thoughtful political philosophers, has come forward with a lucid new book, *Making Patriots*,[1] the fruit of his many

[1] University of Chicago Press. 144 pp. $20.00.

years of reflection on the American polity and society, to address precisely these questions. "Designing a public-spirit curriculum for such a people" is, Berns writes, "no easy task." But few are better qualified to help initiate the process.

American exceptionalism

To begin with, Berns argues, we need to recognize that patriotism in America is an entirely different animal from patriotism in other times and places. The ancient Greek city-state of Sparta, for example, which Berns takes to represent the apex of the classical world's understanding of patriotism, was legendary for its public-spirited citizenry. But it achieved that distinction at far too high a cost, at least according to our standards, by imposing a comprehensive regime of severe, near-totalitarian control upon its people. Every aspect of life, from education to marriage to childrearing to eating, fell under the state's purview. Ruthlessly obliterating any elements of privacy or individuality in its citizen's lives, or any of the institutions that mediated between the state and the individual, Sparta sought to achieve a homogeneous, mobilized, martially virtuous populace, imbued with an overwhelming sense of duty to the collective whole, and rendered invulnerable to the siren songs of self-interest and self-gratification. All private sentiments became displaced onto the state itself, so that self-love was sublimated and absorbed entirely into the love of Sparta. Such discipline made for a mighty and disciplined war machine. But it neglected nearly every other aspect of human potentiality and would be entirely inappropriate as a model of patriotism or patriot-formation for the American republic.

This is true in part because the American polity would emphasize commerce over warmaking, and protection of men's natural rights over enforcement of their social obligations. But it also is true, Berns points out, because the classical model had long before been shattered by the advent of Christianity, which separated the spiritual duties of men from their political ones and the things of God from the things of Caesar. This decisively changed the nature of patriotism, driving a wedge between the private and public virtues, and demoting the latter to a decisively subordinate role. If Sparta had made the cultivation of public virtue and patriotic sentiment the be-

all and end-all of social existence, then Christianity did something like the opposite, downgrading the sentiment of patriotism and presenting it with an enduring dilemma. Would patriotism become conflated with religious sentiment, and thereby absorbed into the vision of a crusading worldly theocracy? Or would it remain aloof from religious sentiment, and thereby run the risk of becoming the distant junior partner of a gnostic, otherworldly faith?

The American solution, which could not have been arrived at without the clarifying help of centuries of European religious wars, managed to split the difference, with a decisive move in the direction of separation, though also with a healthy expression of generalized Protestant civil religion undergirding and enlivening the whole. It is a settlement that defies easy formulation and is more fragile than many Americans appreciate. Berns overstates matters a bit in asserting baldly that the Founders "consigned [religion] to the private sphere." In fact, that prospect didn't come fully into view until the century just past, and its effects have always been highly controversial. But Berns is right, in the end, to say that the Constitution the Framers devised did not envision the United States government as the custodian of men's souls. That was to be the task of other entities. Instead, the Constitution was designed to free men to engage in the self-interested pursuits of a bourgeois society.

Which brings us back to the central problem: How does a republic that is based upon cupidity and self-seeking make public-spirited patriots? Thomas Jefferson, like Rousseau before him, was himself dubious about the possibility, which was one reason why he preferred the agrarian ideal of a virtuous landowning yeomanry over the Hamiltonian vision of a restless and inventive commercial class of continental-minded men. A farmer, after all, lived a settled life and had a citizen's substantial stake in the land he inhabited and cultivated. But what about the holder of stocks, bonds, and bank notes? He was a man ever on the move, a citizen of no place, a man whose only home was the market.

Yet Jefferson was also principal author of the document that, for Berns, provides the one sure basis for American patriotism: the Declaration of Independence. The key to Ameri-

can patriotism, in Berns's view, is that it is twofold, entailing not only devotion to one's country but also devotion to the principles upon which that country had been founded and to which it was consecrated. These principles are not peculiar to Americans, but are thought to be universal in scope, grounded self-evidently in human nature. First among these principles are the famous assertions that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and that governments derive their legitimacy from the consent of the governed and are instituted for the purpose of securing these rights. From these principles may be derived a more generalized commitment to democratic self-government, which Lincoln called government "of the people, by the people and for the people." This is the creed to which Americans assent, Berns argues, and it is out of admiration for these ideals, and not merely out of filial loyalty to "their" country, that American patriots derive their animating sentiments.

The figure of Abraham Lincoln looms especially large for Berns. He is "patriotism's poet," the uncommon common man whose words and personal example offer eloquent testimony to the possibilities of American democracy. Hence Berns twice cites words from Lincoln's 1852 eulogy to Henry Clay as a definitive statement on the shape of American patriotism. Clay, Lincoln said, "loved his country partly because it was his own country, but mostly because it was a free country; and he burned with a zeal for its advancement, because he saw in such, the advancement, prosperity, and glory of human liberty, human right, and human nature." It was this sense of America's mission, as the carrier and leading advocate for universal ideals, and not merely as another nation seeking to preserve its territory or expand its place in the sun, that animated Clay and Lincoln. And, Berns argues, it has animated the generations of American patriots who fought to preserve the Union and to defeat the totalitarian powers of the twentieth century.

Berns does not deny the stains on the national record, particularly the institution of slavery and its aftermath. But he is determined that those failures be estimated properly, as the ex-slave Frederick Douglass himself did, as remediable de-

fects in an otherwise admirable and promising structure, rather than be exaggerated and used to denigrate the whole. Berns endorses Lincoln's contention that America represents "the last, best hope of earth," with all the enormous responsibilities that that entails. And he concludes by insisting that it is all-important to defend the legitimacy of America's liberal democracy and the ideal it embodies against the armies of its postmodernist, relativist, and multiculturalist detractors. For once this legitimacy is damaged, and once the foundational truths are no longer regarded as self-evident by the citizenry, then the American nation will be uprooted and fatally undermined to the detriment not only of America but of all humanity.

Dangerous abstractions

Berns is himself a member of the generation of patriots, now gradually disappearing from our midst, that fought in the war against Hitler. That poignant fact echoes through his pages, subtly but unmistakably, giving an added measure of authority to his words. He has written a deeply moving book, personal without being the least bit mawkish or confessional and vibrant with the full range of human emotions—pride, reverence, tenderness, and occasional flashes of anger. This is, after all, his country that he is writing about. He manages to convey a keen sense of connection to the American past, a sense that is much more than merely historical. There is a feeling of urgency, too, a concern that the rising generations have not been taught about what they have inherited, about what their inheritance cost—and about those who were willing to pay the price for it. "Ours is not a parochial patriotism," Berns insists, because "it comprises an attachment to principles that are universal." Anything less would be "un-American."

One hopes there will be young readers of Berns's book who will find themselves stirred by such a full-throated and unabashed endorsement of America's sense of heroic mission. But there will be other readers, even ones as admiring as this reviewer, who may want to pause at such words and the argument they embody. For there is a danger in coming to regard America too exclusively as an idea, the carrier of an idea, or

the custodian of a set of principles, rather than as a real nation that exists in a world of other nations, with all the features and limitations of a nation, including its particular history, institutions, and distinctive national character.

To be sure, Berns is right to stress the twofold character of American patriotism: The patriot loves America partly because it is his own country and partly because of his love for the ideals for which the country stands. The two motives are in tension, but they also are inseparable and mutually indispensable. America is not a class-ridden traditional society or a homogeneous blood-and-soil nation-state, but neither is it a universalistic ideological crusade. What is worrisome and lopsided in Berns's account of American patriotism is the near-exclusive weight he gives to the abstract and ideological dimensions of American patriotism, to the virtual exclusion of all other elements.

Indeed, at one point in his book he unfairly ridicules (and misquotes) a famous toast delivered in 1815 by the heroic American naval officer Stephen Decatur, declaring the words to be unpatriotic, even "un-American," because of their failure to endorse abstract universal principles of political right. The toast goes like this: "Our country! In her intercourse with foreign nations may she always be in the right; but our country, right or wrong!" In his rendering, Berns omits the words "In her intercourse with foreign nations," which changes the meaning of the quote rather dramatically. But even in its truncated form, the quote does not deserve the scorn Berns heaps upon it. For patriotism, like any love, withers and dies if it is not accorded some degree of instinctive assent. Berns's position could be interpreted to be that our country deserves our support only when its motives are demonstrably pure and its course of action demonstrably unassailable, that our loyalty to it is always revocable, that the nation stands every day freshly before the bar of judgment, to be assessed solely on the basis of its consonance that day with the universal principles of political right. This is much too brittle and unstable a foundation for any durable patriotism—particularly, one might add, in a nation's intercourse with foreign nations.

Berns, of course, is not advocating any such thing. But his words inadvertently point to the problem with interpreting

America exclusively as an idea. Obviously, no decent patriotism can ever be completely unconditional, blindly loyal on all occasions, deaf to the claims of morality. That way lies tyranny and human degradation. But compelling reasons of state do not always translate into readily apprehended principles of universal morality, and there are times when being a patriot means being like a soldier, following leaders who have had to make complex judgments beyond the soldier's ken. Even Berns's beloved Lincoln is vulnerable to the charge that the human rights of slaves and such fundamental rights as habeas corpus were less important to him than the preservation of the Union, that the Emancipation Proclamation was primarily a cynical and calculated war measure, and that only the relentless pressure of events and other men led Lincoln to end slavery. If those charges sound familiar, it is because they are the same charges that two generations of morally indignant historians have hurled at Lincoln, convicting him by reference to a universalistic (and unrealistic and ungenerous) standard very much like the one Berns advocates.

We are family?

So how might one arrive at a more complex understanding of the mixed nature of American patriotism? One might find some insight in an analogy to marriage, an institution in which something very much like Berns's twofold division of motives obtains. The parallels are suggestive. A man is devoted to his wife partly because she is admirable—and partly because she is his. And it is easy to see how, in a marriage, one cannot separate these two things in practice. A man may perhaps initially fall in love with a woman because she is admirable and lovely. But it is an entirely different matter to explain why he stays married and faithful to her, even when he knows full well that she is not always admirable and lovely. Should a man continue to love and honor his wife only if she is *always* admirable? Of course not. We all recognize that only a very shallow and insubstantial love would express itself in this way. Are there not occasions when a good husband honors and defends his wife, even when she may be in the wrong, simply because she is his and he is hers? Is there not a mutual obligation subsisting between them, far more deep-seated than

any transient wrong? Obviously. Are there times when the strict pursuit of justice in a marriage takes a back seat to the preservation of the union? Yes. Can a happy and healthy marriage endure when justice is *always* subordinated to the preservation of the union? No.

In other words, the nature of the commitment made in a good marriage is a complex blend of motives, ideal and primal, extrinsic and intrinsic, practical and impractical. It would be unthinkable, and in fact somewhat ludicrous, to imagine that one set of motives could exist without the counterbalance of the other. There is merit in a love that is directed toward a person who possesses abundant admirable qualities. But there is even more merit in a love that is able, over time, and within the enclosure of a mutual commitment, to acknowledge and accept—up to a point—what is less than fully admirable, what is all-too-human, about the otherwise admirable other. Where that point is located and when it is reached are questions almost impossible to answer in any general way. Tolstoy, wrong in so many other things, was also wrong in proposing that happy families are always the same. General principles may be helpful, but they always have to be weighed against other considerations.

One might also extend the analogy to encompass other relationships within the family. If a country is like a spouse, it is also like a parent, since it constitutes one of the irreducible sources of one's being. One's gratitude to one's forebears is very much like the gratitude a patriot should feel toward those, like Walter Berns, who fought to preserve their nation. So then: Is it a good thing to admire one's father (and to be an admirable father)? Of course. Should one's love for one's father be conditional upon his always having been an admirable person and having always done admirable things? Of course not. Should one love one's father even when he has behaved shamefully, as a criminal or a traitor? That is more difficult. Perhaps even then, though only up to a point. But then, who is to say? The truth of the matter is buried in the particulars.

Like all analogies, these marital and familial ones break down at some point. Mario Cuomo's famous words notwithstanding, a nation is not a family. Indeed, the analogy becomes problematic when overtaxed precisely because (as Berns

points out) Americans have never spoken of their country as a "fatherland," in the way so many Europeans spoke of their own nations in the pre-European Union era. In fact, it might be said that America was the country one came to in order to escape from one's father, both literally and figuratively. It was the country where one put aside the heavy lumber of inherited identity and tradition, and was freed to begin again. Hence Berns much prefers G. K. Chesterton's notion that America, far from being a fatherland, is "the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed," and is therefore "a nation with the soul of a church." To be an American, in this view, is not a matter of whose child you are but of what principles you accept. It is a nation of the twice-born, politically and culturally, a nation founded not upon descent but consent.

A creedal nation?

There is profound truth in this, but it is not the whole of the matter. The Chestertonian analogy breaks down too—or more precisely, it tells us more than was intended. Indeed, it goes directly to the heart of what is so troubling about Berns's view of American patriotism. For a church is much more than its creed. The creed is indispensable, as an intellectual guidepost, a check upon heresy, a means of instructing the young, and a handy distillation of church doctrine. Documents like the Westminster Confession are masterpieces of theological clarity and concision. But a church that had only a creed would be no church at all. One need only visit an old churchyard and see the gravestones of several generations of a family clustered together to understand how this is so. All churches, even the most nouveau-Protestant ones, possess a rich storehouse of conscious and unconscious traditions, liturgies, songs, rituals, and customs. Over time these become inseparable in the minds and hearts of the worshipers from the content of their faith. Creeds are useful, but the Biblical and liturgical texts and the sacraments and rituals are not finally reducible to propositional statements; they are not reducible to anything less than themselves. There is a seamless web that unites every piece of church life with every other, for better or worse. This is why any changes in the pattern of church life become fraught with peril: Such changes may seem to disturb

the bones of the dead and tamper with the very structure of the cosmos.

So a creed can be useful to shake up the musty complacency and cultural stasis that can creep into such a hidebound environment. It may also have defensive uses, as a means of keeping the train from going off the tracks. But it is not the soul of a church or a nation. Or, to put it another way, a living creed is a distillation and codification of beliefs that are grounded elsewhere—embodied in the habits and mores and institutions of the people. The words have to be made flesh and dwell among us. Without such quickening, a creed soon becomes a dead letter.

And for the same reasons, indoctrination into the principles of the Declaration of Independence alone will not make our young Americans into patriots. It is a beginning, but only a beginning. As both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams made clear, the Americans of the Revolutionary generation did not need instruction in what their Declaration declared. Their Declaration was mainly a press release to the world which attempted to put into words what most Americans already believed and embodied in their way of life. For our young people to know about it is, in the end, indispensable. But what is just as needful—perhaps even more so—is a recognition that there can be no meaningful patriotism in a society whose most privileged young people know nothing, remember nothing, respect nothing, cherish nothing, feel responsible for nothing, and are grateful for nothing.

This litany is not meant as a disparagement of the young but of those adults who have abdicated their responsibility for the young's formation, setting them free to be shaped by cable television, shopping malls, Internet chat rooms, and all the other flotsam of our feckless commercial culture. That irresponsibility, I think, is what has produced the conditions that sadden, anger, and worry Walter Berns, as they should all of us. But if no grand national program of ideological revitalization can rebuild what has been eroded, there is still hope for America in the patriotism of those young Jews mentioned earlier who have chosen to swim against the tide by paying homage to their birthright. A second birth does not have to renounce the first, and faithfulness in large things begins with

faithfulness in smaller ones. The genius of American patriotism resides here just as much as it does in the Declaration of Independence. And if taken seriously, it will do far more to change the way Americans live.

A final image. When Lincoln wondrously invoked the "mystic chords of memory" in his first inaugural address, he envisioned them as the emanations of musical strings, "stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land." It is an amazingly rich and well-considered image. We should not miss the fact that the strings are held in place not only by the deeds of warriors at one end but also by the domestic world, the world of family and home, at the other. Gratitude to one's country, however principled, must also draw upon forms of gratitude that are more primary—upon the things that are personal, particular, and singular. The things, in short, that are one's own. Without them, there can be no music, no memory, and no chorus of the Union.