

How Problematic Is Patriotism?

National pride in America has plummeted in the Trump era. Is it worth trying to salvage?

By [Arthur Krystal](#) May 25, 2026

Six decades ago, my government was willing to risk my life on its behalf; the Administration didn't mind sacrificing the lives of teenagers in order to achieve peace with honor. The question I should have asked myself then is: Can someone be a patriot and not love his country but simply be glad that it exists? Illustration by David Plunkert

I did not grow up loving America—not because I thought it didn't deserve love but because I didn't think about it. America was the Pledge of Allegiance and [“The Star-Spangled Banner.”](#) It was “Maverick” and “Gunsmoke.” It was Ed Sullivan and high-school dances and big cars with big fins. It was soda fountains and Elvis and stickball. It was Valley Forge and George Washington. It was also white, mostly male, and invincibly middle class, and I hardly gave a thought to race or class or much else for that matter.

Depending on where you hail from, America could be the evening sky above Northfield, Connecticut, or the fields of bluebonnets in Ennis, Texas. To a teenager living in New York in the nineteen-sixties, America was pretty great. It had saved the world from fascism and now stood as a bulwark against communism. Mickey Mantle, good; Nikita Khrushchev, bad. My memory may be faulty, but I can't recall anyone I knew declaring a love for America—not, anyway, until I was twenty-five and living in Charleston, South Carolina.

It was the winter of 1973, and the words were spoken by a sixty-eight-year-old Brooklyn native named William McKissack Chapman. Tall and narrow, with stiff gray hair and a thin gray mustache, Bill had been a reporter for the long-defunct Brooklyn *Eagle*, an editor at Time-Life, and a founder of *Sports Illustrated*. He'd been too young to fight in the First World War but reported from Europe during the Second. In Paris in 1945, he'd got drunk with Ernest Hemingway, whom he considered a blowhard. Now, nearly thirty years later, in his elegant, slightly shopworn home, at 30 King Street, he was ruminating about Vietnam and Watergate, both of which dominated the news at the time. After a

minute or two, he put down his drink and said in a tone at once wistful and firm, “God, I love this country.”

And it took me aback. Bill was old school, not given to airing his feelings, and so I understood that he loved America in a way that was alien to me. If I had once taken the country for granted, I no longer could. The civil-rights struggle, the government’s treatment of Native Americans and the Chinese, McCarthyism and the blacklist, and the stupid, deadly war in Vietnam had seen to that. “Love it or leave it,” hard-nosed patriots urged, and at least sixty thousand young men fled to Canada or Europe to avoid the draft.

Vietnam was the first time I thought about patriotism. Military service hadn’t exactly figured in my childhood, but reporting to my draft board in 1969 made an impression. I might die for my country. Suddenly, being an American was no longer an abstraction; it had consequences, and, naturally, I wavered. This wasn’t Pearl Harbor; it was the Gulf of Tonkin. And, like Muhammad Ali, I had “no quarrel with them Vietcong.” Did that make me a bad American? An unpatriotic American? As it happened, I drew a high lottery number in the draft and didn’t have to travel eight thousand miles to stop the spread of communism. Still, I felt a flicker of guilt for missing an experience that would be formative for men of my generation.

When Bill said that he loved America, he was also expressing his disappointment in it. The Pentagon Papers, released two years earlier, revealed that the government had lied about a war the military knew to be unwinnable as early as 1965. And the Watergate scandal, which broke in 1972, wounded Bill’s generation more deeply than mine. Richard Nixon turned out to be a crook, and Henry Kissinger, I came to believe, had prolonged the war to help Nixon win reelection. By the time of the Paris Peace Accords, in January, 1973, thousands more American soldiers and untold numbers of Vietnamese and Cambodian civilians had been killed. “Peace with Honor” was the bullshit phrase that provided cover for death and maiming beyond any honest accounting. My conscience was clear. No need to feel guilty, no need at all.

Patriotism, the concept, if not the word, probably emerged during the formation of the Greek polis in the eighth century B.C. In Plato’s *Crito* (circa 399 B.C.), Socrates, unjustly condemned to death, decides not to oppose his sentence. Having chosen to live in a civic society, he feels honor bound to abide by its laws. His friend Crito disagrees: if the law is unjust, one may be permitted to disobey it. He thinks Socrates ought to reconsider and get the hell out of Athens. I think so, too.

Patriotism—from the Greek *patris*, meaning “fatherland” or “native country”—

entered Europe through a skein of political-religious turmoil. During the Thirty Years' War (1618-48), French Catholics and Protestants did not see one another as *compatriotes*. Indeed, it may not have been until around 1750 that *patriote* was first used in the modern sense, by the Duc de Saint-Simon. By then, the intellectual scaffolding for the term was already taking shape. John Locke's "Two Treatises of Government" (1689), Voltaire's "Essay on the Customs and the Spirit of Nations" (1756), and, some years later, Johann Gottfried Herder's notion of the *Geist des Volkes* all made national pride seem a rational outcome of shared habits, traditions, and language.

Since then, writers have spilled a great deal of ink over patriotism. Mark Twain, H. L. Mencken, George Bernard Shaw, and Ursula K. Le Guin distrusted it. Samuel Johnson called it "the last refuge of a scoundrel," and Leo Tolstoy likened it to slavery. Jorge Luis Borges initially felt that "there is no end to the illusions of patriotism," noting that "Plutarch mocked those who declared that the Athenian moon is better than the Corinthian moon." Years later, perhaps feeling adrift, Borges begged his gods to send someone or something into his life. "They did," he wrote. "It is my country."

George Orwell was kinder than most. Patriotism, he wrote, is "devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force on other people." The problem was nationalism, which he maintained was "inseparable from the desire for power." The line between these terms, however, is porous. Attachment to a parcel of land can easily harden into isolationism, jingoism, and racism. "It is lamentable," Voltaire observed, "that to be a good patriot one must often become the enemy of the rest of mankind." More recently, the philosopher Richard Rorty capably defended patriotism, whereas Martha Nussbaum continues to seek its curtailment.

Undeterred, the historian Michael Kammen proposed, in 1991, that American patriotism had long remained "a curiously neglected subject." His enormous, crowded study, "Mystic Chords of Memory," was intended not to fill that gap but to give substance to Robert Penn Warren's remark that being an American is not "a matter of blood; it is a matter of an idea—and history is the image of that idea." If historians are the biographers of a nation, in the grip of their own biases and affections, the notion of "one America" quickly dissolves. A nation that accumulates a history inevitably accumulates histories. For example, those bygone "mint julep" textbooks that circulated south of the Mason-Dixon Line and recast the Civil War as a valiant struggle to preserve a way of life in which enslaved people were said to be well cared for by benevolent white owners.

An avowed objectivity, to be sure, is no guarantee of truth. A hefty body of literature focusses on the dichotomy between American ideals and American realities, but are such accounts to be trusted simply because they expose what other histories suppress? Two incompatible Americas emerge, for instance, in Howard Zinn's ["A People's History of the United States"](#) and Paul Johnson's ["A History of the American People,"](#) one calling attention to feet of clay and the other to laurelled heads. Although "we can speak of a tradition of American patriotism," Kammen concluded, "it has in fact been a spasmodic tradition characterized by ups and downs."

We seem to be in a down moment. A Gallup poll found that, in the past dozen years, the percentage of people in the U.S. who say that they're "extremely proud to be American" has plunged by sixteen points. A recent Harris poll noted that roughly four in ten Americans have considered relocating outside the country, with younger Americans even more inclined. Last May, *Newsweek* published an article with the melancholy headline ["Why Dual Citizenship Is the New American Dream."](#) Some commentators ascribe this to financial prudence, but the trend dates back at least to 2016 and the election of Donald Trump.

Patriotism just isn't cool anymore. Wokeness, having rightly called attention to racial and gender injustices long endemic to American life, helped chill the left's admiration for the nation, while its clumsier performances (cancellations, cultural-appropriation scolds, and other exercises in finger-wagging) pushed centrists to the right. Patriotism, you might say, isn't dead; it's just [dressed up differently.](#) Viking helmets, star-dotted shirts, and military-style jackets, not to mention *MAGA* caps, are the preferred patriotic attire. Less an ethos than a brand, it makes it hard for the more quietly dressed to own it.

The language of patriotism is, of course, accessible to anyone who feels loyalty to any one place, or places. According to Amy Watson's recent book, ["Patriots Before Revolution: The Rise of Party Politics in the British Atlantic, 1714-1763,"](#) reform-minded politicians in Britain claimed the word as a rallying cry for a kinder, fairer empire, in which Colonial legislatures and courts held greater sway and citizens on both sides of the Atlantic enjoyed stronger constitutional liberties. Had British "Patriots" managed to keep the upper hand in imperial politics, Watson plausibly argues, North America might never have separated from the British Empire.

When [the Revolutionary War](#) began, in April, 1775, there was no United States —no Articles of Confederation, no national seal or flag or currency. There were only disgruntled colonists flying their own banners, a few with a rattlesnake and the words "*Dont Tread on Me.*" The thousand-mile stretch of land from Georgia

to New England was not a nation, and those who marched toward war did so before there was a country to be patriotic about. Did anyone actually *hear* Nathan Hale say, “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country”? Many colonists, in fact, would have quailed at the thought. Estimates of those favoring independence hover at around forty per cent, with perhaps twenty per cent remaining loyal to the Crown and the rest undecided. Indeed, the Founders frequently resorted to “patriotism” to drum the idea of liberty into the heads of the uncommitted.

When Alexis de Tocqueville arrived here, in 1831, he noticed the “irritable patriotism of the Americans,” which discouraged criticism of the new nation but, all the same, was not an “instinctive love” of country, since America was woefully short of customs and traditions. And, because the “sovereignty of the Union is factitious” and “that of the States is natural,” a citizen’s affections naturally inclined toward the near at hand: town, region, and state. Visiting the Capitol in 1860, a young Henry Adams noted that secession “was likely to be easy where there was so little to secede from. The Union was a sentiment, but not much more.” The proof arrived when Confederate forces bombarded the Union-held Fort Sumter, in Charleston Harbor.

After my talk with Bill Chapman, I thought about patriotism as much as I thought about dried fruit. Most people, I suspect, don’t bother to mull over patriotism’s finer points. Once the blather of politicians, the clichés of pundits, and the pyrotechnics of the Super Bowl die down, it’s just something that hums in the background. Then again, sometimes it gets thrust upon us. The Bicentennial, in 1976—with its stately flotilla of Tall Ships in New York Harbor—was one such moment, and, as I write, another approaches: the nation’s two-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday. According to america250.org, the Semiquincentennial is meant to be “the largest anniversary observance in our nation’s history.” Whether it will outdo the Bicentennial remains to be seen, but, given the White House’s current occupant, I’m bracing for an excess of foolish excess. I pray only that Sylvester Stallone can be prevailed upon to sing the national anthem.

It’s not that I think displays of patriotism have no place; I just prefer less noisy, less militarized forms of allegiance. Ten days after the Twin Towers fell, the New York Mets played the Atlanta Braves at Shea Stadium. Like most New Yorkers above the age of three, I watched the game on television. You can still find it on YouTube, and if you do you’ll notice that, after the national anthem, players and coaches from both teams gather between home plate and the pitcher’s mound to exchange hugs and handshakes—something you don’t see every day. Years later, the Braves’ utility infielder, Mark DeRosa, said, “It was

the only game I ever played in from the time I was nine years old I didn't mind losing." That, my friend, is patriotism.

What to my mind isn't patriotism, though it was sometimes couched as such, was the behavior of the assembled throng that, on January 6, 2021, [stormed the U.S. Capitol](#) to prevent Congress from certifying the 2020 election. Awful as it was, it felt less like an insurrection than like an ugly mob bent on destruction and self-display. Didn't it seem as if the rioters were preening for the cameras and for one another? Many carried American flags, which made them patriots in roughly the way that carrying a loaf of bread makes me a baker. And, when they broke into the Capitol and began looting, it was as though someone had scrawled obscene graffiti on the walls of my home.

The painful irony is that these self-styled patriots were being profoundly un-American, shredding the Constitution in their effort to block a peaceful transfer of power. The American Nazis who fought in court for the right to march in Skokie, Illinois, in 1977, look, by comparison, more American than [the Trump-stoked mob](#) that turned our seat of government into a crime scene. One might naïvely think that attacking the Capitol should not count as a get-out-of-jail-free card, yet Trump, on the first day of his second term, issued pardons for more than fifteen hundred charged or convicted rioters and commuted the sentences of another fourteen.

"A body of men holding themselves accountable to nobody ought not to be trusted by anybody," Thomas Paine warned two hundred and thirty-five years ago. Trump and his underlings make Nixon and his henchmen seem like amateurs. In Trumpworld, America has been given a bad rap, yet Trump has spent years slandering the country himself. In March, he issued an executive order asserting that a "revisionist movement" has sought to rewrite American history, portraying our "unparalleled legacy of advancing liberty, individual rights, and human happiness" as "inherently racist, sexist, oppressive, or otherwise irredeemably flawed."

Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

Not so fast, Mr. President. Ours is a complicated history, made more tortuous by race. Some five hundred Indigenous nations lived here before the first enslaved Africans arrived, in 1619—a year before the first Pilgrims. That, too, is American history, along with Reconstruction, Jim Crow, segregation, the Great Migration, Black anger, Black humor, and Black culture. This isn't wokeness; it's fact.

Trump's America has the virtue of simplicity: no initial divisions; no loyalists and patriots, or Native peoples and settlers, or Federalists and Anti-Federalists. He's not bothered by labor unrest, unfair imprisonment, white-nationalist undercurrents. Imperfection is for losers, and America is a winner. It had to have been great in the past—otherwise, how could Trump make it great again? After returning to office, he swiftly reinstated the 1776 Commission, to cleanse schools of “anti-American ideologies” through “patriotic education measures” that will instill “a patriotic admiration for our incredible Nation.” In practice, this essentially means learning to forget.

When the bipartisan Citizens Coinage Advisory Committee, in 2024, proposed designs for three two-hundred-and-fiftieth-anniversary quarters commemorating the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, and the civil-rights movement, the Treasury Secretary ultimately brushed them aside. Of course he did. Trump is selling an alternative America, with the messiest chapters abridged or excluded. Give him enough leeway and we'll soon see a return of the mint-julep histories popular a century ago, which found no room for the Black Americans who'd fought for this country.

Patriotism for Black Americans is its own fraught subject. Although Crispus Attucks, a freed Black man, was the first person to die in the Boston Massacre, in 1770, General George Washington initially opposed recruiting Black troops. Some colonists evidently recoiled at the sight of enslaved men bearing arms; others worried that their “property” might be damaged or lost. Only when Washington learned that the British were promising freedom to enslaved people who joined their ranks did he reverse course. Between seven and nine thousand Black Americans served in the Continental Army and Navy, but three times that number fought alongside the British. After the war, some Black Continental soldiers were manumitted; many, however, were not.

How did Black Americans regard independence? Frederick Douglass's powerful 1852 speech “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” provides one answer:

To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy.

Nine years later, Douglass watched two of his sons go off to fight in a war in which Unionists and Confederates alike claimed the mantle of patriotism. Could

the same be said of the free or enslaved Black Americans who enlisted? After all, they were not deemed fully “American.” The 1857 Dred Scott decision held that people of color were not “part of the people” who’d declared independence, and therefore could not be citizens or sue the government for their freedom. Yet, by the Civil War’s end, some hundred and seventy-nine thousand Black men had joined the Union Army, with another nineteen thousand signing up for the Navy. White Union soldiers earned thirteen dollars a month; Black soldiers, until June, 1864, were paid seven.

Military service has long offered both purpose and a paycheck. Black men enlisted during and after Reconstruction and fought in two World Wars, serving, of course, in segregated units. Was patriotism the motive? In Southern states—and in border states such as Maryland, Missouri, and Delaware—Jim Crow prevailed; lynchings were common in the Deep South, and punishment for them was rare. It seems likely that many enlisted in the hope that service might advance their prospects and those of their race, and their ambivalence about the nation runs through Black literature.

In “America,” a 1921 poem by the Jamaican-born Harlem poet Claude McKay, race goes unmentioned but imbues every line:

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger’s tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth.
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
Giving me strength erect against her hate.

Fifteen years later, [Langston Hughes](#), in “Let America Be America Again,” confided that “America never was America to me.” By “me,” he meant “the Negro bearing slavery’s scars . . . the red man driven from the land . . . the immigrant clutching the hope I seek — / And finding only the same old stupid plan / Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.” There was no reason that Hughes should have felt differently. Uncle Sam wasn’t *his* uncle. He was “the Man” who barred Black Americans from the ballot box and then ordered them overseas to fight in Vietnam. Muhammad Ali should not have had to claim exemption on religious grounds. History had made his case for him.

In the preface to “Leaves of Grass,” from 1855, Walt Whitman had used the plural: “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.” Thirty-three years later, the “poem,” in Whitman’s eyes, had coalesced into a “grand, sane, towering, seated Mother.” But aside from the Founding Fathers, the Alamo, the Gettysburg Address, Custer’s Last Stand, and westward expansion,

what was there to be patriotic about? This isn't a frivolous question. People loved their country largely because they loved the part of it they called home. Regional music, local newspapers, daguerreotypes, and the works of James Fenimore Cooper, Mark Twain, and Louisa May Alcott were around, but most of the songs, stories, and iconic images that now shout "America" simply didn't exist yet. Although "America the Beautiful," which married the words of a feminist and lesbian poet to the melody of a New Jersey organist, became popular after 1910, our national anthem did not become official until 1931.

It wasn't until the emergence of film and radio that a broader sense of national unity began to materialize. Although the Great American Songbook still lay ahead in the nineteen-twenties, people everywhere could hear the tunes of Tin Pan Alley and, starting in 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chats. Hollywood also did its part, releasing a slew of movies—"Young Mr. Lincoln" (1939), "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" (1939), "Meet John Doe" (1941)—that bathed America in a patriotic light.

Maybe that's how love of country enters the bloodstream—not through clauses and declarations but through melodies and tableaux. Had you asked me in 1969 why I might agree to kill a total stranger for my country, the Bill of Rights would not have sprung to mind. Instead, it would have been a scene from the movie version of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town," or a bombardier crew goofing around in a B-17, or the high-school dance in "It's a Wonderful Life." When Robert Penn Warren said that being an American is "a matter of an idea," he was referring to the shifting imagery haloing that idea. F. Scott Fitzgerald's story "The Swimmers" also tries to convey this, when its protagonist looks back at America's receding coastline and reflects, somewhat unfairly:

France was a land, England was a people, but America, having about it still that quality of the idea, was harder to utter—it was the graves at Shiloh and the tired, drawn, nervous faces of its great men, and the country boys dying in the Argonne for a phrase that was empty before their bodies withered. It was a willingness of the heart.

I am now ten years older than Bill Chapman was when, shaken by the Pentagon Papers and Watergate, he said, "God, I love this country." I feel that I ought to be able to say the words, too, but they do not come easily. Yet I also think there is something exceptional about America, something noble and beautiful. Exceptionalism, though, has a different connotation when linked to protectionism and isolationism. The *MAGA* movement, which wants America to be more "American," idolizes an imaginary past, before affirmative action,

feminism, diversity, and immigration “ruined” things. Not all of its adherents envision a racially sanitized America, but they sincerely believe that Trump is good for America and his critics bad for it. The truth is, they have no real appreciation for what Trump, even when he gets things right, stands for.

Tyranny, as we know, advances through scapegoating and the promise of quick fixes. It’s why tyrants love the uneducated. Hannah Arendt understood this. In 1953, at the height of McCarthyism, she shrewdly observed, “This republic, the democracy in which we live . . . is not and never will be perfect because the standard of perfection does not apply here. . . . If you try to ‘make America more American’ . . . you only destroy it. Your methods, finally, are the justified methods of the police, and only of the police.”

Nearly sixty years ago, my government was willing to risk my life on its behalf. Not because North Vietnam posed a threat to a Maine fisherman or an Indiana farmer but because the President and members of Congress didn’t mind sacrificing the lives of teen-agers in order to achieve peace with honor. The question I should have asked myself then is: Can someone be a patriot and not love his country but simply be glad that it exists? I like to think the answer is yes. Some may find this attitude unworthy, even ungrateful. But, just as obsessive love in a relationship can warp intimacy, so excessive national pride can debase the nation that one is trying to protect.

The impulse to come to the aid of one’s country ought to match the justice and urgency of the call. Does it make sense to risk life and limb because a President asks you to? Since 1973, we have relied on a volunteer army, which made our forays into Afghanistan and Iraq matters of conscience and choice. Sure, patriotism is essential to the national defense, but it should never blind us to the human toll of warfare. The British poet Wilfred Owen, who died a week before the First World War ended, knew its horrors well. His poem “Dulce et Decorum Est” asks us to imagine the visceral aftermath of combat. If we could only see, hear, smell, and touch what happens to the human body, we “would not tell with such high zest / To children ardent for some desperate glory, / The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori*”—an invocation of the Roman poet Horace’s line “It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.”

It’s never sweet, but it is sometimes fitting, and, should you decide to fight for your country, you ought to know what you’re fighting for. Flag-waving patriots may believe otherwise, but our recoverable past isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. It never was. The historian David Lowenthal reminds us that America manipulated its archives from the very beginning. When Charles Thomson, the longtime secretary of the Continental Congress, was asked to publish his notes—some

thousand pages' worth—he initially agreed, but then burned them instead. “I shall not undeceive future generations,” he reputedly explained. “I could not tell the truth without giving great offense. Let the world admire our patriots and heroes. Their supposed talents and virtues . . . will serve the cause of patriotism.”

Our first would-be historian did *his* patriotic duty by destroying evidence, installing a narrative designed to endure, whether or not it matched the facts. Maybe our first President was not “first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen,” but, for Thomson, Washington had to be seen that way because, whatever else the original patriots did or failed to do, they devised a constitution that championed the division of powers, due process, religious liberty, and a free press.

Not everyone has to see America the same way, but amnesia about its history makes us easy prey for people who trade in ignorance. Is the Constitution perfect? Far from it. “We the People” meant the signers—not women, not the poor, not the uneducated, not the enslaved. In 1788, political standing belonged almost entirely to white men with property, money, or schooling. Nonetheless, within the context and the limits of their moment, the Founders did something remarkable. They gave us a framework intended “to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” Forget the word “patriotism.” Read the Framers’ words a few times and be grateful that they’ve succeeded as well as they have. ♦