

Can Patriotism Survive Democracy?

Walter Berns

Making Patriots

University of Chicago, 150 pages.

Reviewed by Jeremy Rabkin

The title is misleading. If you are seeking instruction on how to make people patriots, you will find Walter Berns' *Making Patriots* disappointing. What it presents, rather, is a meditation on why patriotism is hard to sustain in a modern liberal democracy. Berns does offer a very eloquent restatement of a perspective on politics that many great thinkers once embraced—namely, that the good citizen must be faithful to the political ideals of the community. Many who share this vision feel that something important is lacking in liberal democracies today.

Among its other merits, *Making Patriots* makes one think again about what can be claimed for democratic

politics. But in the final analysis, its most important conclusion—that liberal democracy makes it especially difficult to be a patriot—seems fundamentally misdirected.

Berns himself is an excellent example of modern patriotism: A veteran of the Second World War and a decades-long scholar and teacher of American constitutional thought, Berns expresses a proud commitment to the principles and ideals of his government. For him, patriotism is the distinctive virtue of the citizen. Citizenship is not, he insists, just a legal classification; rather, it demands “a sense of belonging to a community for which one bears some responsibility.” In this sense, patriotism is synonymous with public-spiritedness, and reflects a genuine concern for the welfare of the nation.

No country, particularly a liberal democracy like America, can take this sense of belonging for granted. “No one is born loving his country,” Berns

writes. “Such love is not natural, but has to be somehow taught or acquired.”

What comes naturally, he explains, is self-interest, and unless something is done about it, a concern for country and fellow countrymen is extremely unlikely to emerge. All polities since the city-states of classical antiquity have attempted to resolve this problem in different ways, although education and the influence of religion almost always played a primary role. Yet the modern liberal democracy can no longer rely on religion for the encouragement of patriotism. Instead, democracies have sought to inspire loyalty by promising to protect the rights of citizens. But a preoccupation with freedom and rights, Berns believes, can encourage selfishness and dilute the sense of duty that is crucial for making loyal citizens. To the extent that modern democracies have increasingly focused on these ideals, then, they have gone a long way toward undermining the citizen’s basic commitment to his country.

Berns presents the problem of patriotism in America by contrasting modern polities with the city-states of ancient Greece. In Sparta, for example, civic life was so all-embracing that citizens even took their meals together at common public tables, and “were not supposed to know the meaning of privacy.” And while there was a

freer atmosphere in democratic Athens, every Athenian citizen was still expected to worship the special gods of the city, to take personal pride in the city’s exploits, and “to find his fulfillment in and through the city.”

Christianity’s rise meant the separation, at least in principle, of God’s claims from those of any particular political entity, and this, according to Berns, “made it impossible for a Christian to be a patriotic citizen in the classical sense.” Citizens’ loyalties were now divided between two masters—one civil, the other ecclesiastical—and there often ensued bitter disputes over jurisdiction. Religious obligations, then, far from reinforcing communal bonds, often divided communities along lines of allegiance, and sometimes fueled fierce war and repression. Liberal thinkers in the seventeenth century tried to calm religious strife by insisting on a firmer separation between government and religion. Unlike the classical republics, the modern state, in their view, should concern itself “with the protection of the life, liberty, and property of its people, not with the care of their souls.”

The architects of the American republic, however, understood that religion can in fact play a role in supporting, rather than undermining, public-spiritedness. While they endorsed the modern view that civil law

must take precedence over religious beliefs, they nevertheless sought to protect and promote religion because, Berns explains, “they had reason to believe that, in certain important respects, the religious make better citizens than do the irreligious.” They believed that religious people would be “more likely than the irreligious to come to the aid of their fellow citizens in time of need and, generally, to see themselves as members of a community to which they have obligations.” Thus Berns laments that even indirect encouragements of religion, such as moral education in public schools, have been severely constrained by Supreme Court rulings of recent decades.

Yet the real problem, as Berns sees it, is not that modern democracies such as the United States leave religion to private choice; it is that modern democracies seem to leave almost everything to private choice. The American Declaration of Independence proclaims that all men are endowed with “inalienable rights” to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” and so implies, in Berns’ words, that men’s “only duties are of their own creation.” Berns therefore asks, “Why should such a man, a man who institutes government in order to secure his private rights, have any

concern for anyone else? Why should he be public-spirited?”

The answer provided by thinkers such as John Locke, Adam Smith, and Thomas Paine was that the individual citizen’s prosperity depends on the general fortunes of his country. The reasonable citizen will see that it is in fact to his own advantage to obey the country’s laws and work toward the common good. Arguments of this sort, as Berns notes, encouraged the view that nations would achieve more political stability—as well as more wealth—by promoting commerce. But commercial activity, he points out, also has the ability to erode civic loyalty:

Rather than being attached to his country, the capitalist is said to be at home in the market, and the market, as we have ever greater reason to know, has no national boundaries. Not love of country, but the market determines where the capitalist buys his supplies, sells his products, and, of greatest consequence, invests his money; it also determines whom, and how many, he would allow to enter the country as immigrants.

According to Berns, American patriotism draws its strength not from tradition or tribal loyalty, but from an appeal to abstract principles. Thus when a busy commercial republic became embroiled in a terrible civil war,

it was Abraham Lincoln who, through his poetic wartime rhetoric as much as through his policy, linked the preservation of the Union with the emancipation of slaves and, perhaps even more important, with the larger cause of human freedom in the world. Lincoln's famous speeches, memorized by generations of American schoolchildren, made him, in Berns' words, "our poet"—the American counterpart of "what Shakespeare was for the English or Homer for the Greeks."

Ordinary Americans are moved by these words, sometimes to tears.... Lincoln speaks to them as only a great poet can speak, reminding them of the cause that binds the generations, that freedom is more than being left alone, that there is a price to be paid for it, and that they are indebted to those who have already paid it.

For generations of Americans after Lincoln, the national memory of heroism and sacrifice in the Civil War was inextricably linked to America's most noble ideals, and inspired patriotic sentiment.

But if the hope for patriotism in a democracy rests on citizens' dedication to ideals, then it follows that neglecting these ideals undermines the entire fabric of the republic. Berns, therefore, laments that American schools no longer devote as much attention to patriotic traditions as they

once did. He protests the Supreme Court decision allowing protestors to burn the American flag, and complains that, in their eagerness to promote free speech, both judges and educators often cultivate a poisonous cultural relativism. "Would Americans have fought for the Union... if they had been taught in their schools that the Union was founded on nothing more than an *opinion* concerning human nature and the rights affixed to it?" Put differently, is it possible for a nation to inculcate the love of country when citizens are taught that their country's highest ideals are not grounded in truth?

If ideals are the underpinnings of patriotism, Berns suggests, then we should not be surprised when patriotism ends up being scarce in a liberal society—where so much conspires to encourage individual self-indulgence at the expense of higher ideals.

Undoubtedly Berns is right to insist that every country must, in some fashion, appeal to the patriotic feeling of its citizens. And he is often quite persuasive in his plea that we not take patriotism for granted. *Making Patriots* is not convincing, however, in its claim that patriotism is seriously endangered in modern democratic society. Nor do I think that Berns is right to suggest that

patriotism depends on leaders like Lincoln for its sustenance. Patriotism is not quite so fragile, nor quite so dependent on noble sentiment.

To start with, Berns' contrast between modern democracies and ancient republics is misleading. Citizens of Sparta may have been exemplary patriots in some sense. But how patriotic were the Helots, the class of slaves or serfs who far outnumbered the actual "citizens"? Ancient republics were actually aristocracies, in which political life remained the responsibility of the privileged few. In contrast, a modern democracy opens its citizenship to almost everyone who makes his permanent home in its territory. It is true that few people in a modern democracy are so selfless or devoted to their city as were the Spartans, but a modern democratic nation surely retains more loyalty in its overall population than any Greek polis even aspired to do.

Greek city-states were, in any case, exceptional. The advantages of modern democracy are more striking if one takes a longer view. For centuries, European peasants watched armed knights, marching under one or another banner, trampling through their fields. The peasants scarcely imagined that these banners could ever matter to them. It has been much the same for tillers of the soil in almost all parts

of the world, through almost all of human history. Successive empires rose and fell around them, but the life of villagers was hardly altered. In modern democracies, however, where one's responsibilities extend beyond the family to include a share in the successes and failures of government, ordinary people demonstrate a degree of continuous engagement with politics far greater than what has been achieved in other forms of government.

Democracy's advantages are even clearer when compared with the failed idealistic experiments of the last century. Communist countries, for example, sought to stimulate patriotic feeling with imposing parades and grand ceremonies, but they were far from successful. Today, even after decades of Communist mobilization, post-Communist Russia seems to suffer from a pervasive cynicism, which in turn feeds a general mood of political apathy and resignation. Of course, it is hard to devote attention to politics when your most pressing concerns are the attainment of the basic necessities of life. But it is for just this reason that a society in which people are free to pursue their own interests in private life may do better, over time, at providing the conditions for patriotism and public-spiritedness. Even in more affluent countries, middle-class voters tend to be more attentive

to a wider range of public issues than their poorer fellow citizens. This is partly because middle-class voters usually have more education, and therefore have more patience for extended political debates. But it also seems to be true that citizens who, as a result of their own efforts, have experienced success in their private lives are more willing to form opinions and take a definite stance on political issues.

Perhaps it is true that the typical voter in a modern democracy is not entirely motivated by unselfish concern for the good of his country. Perhaps he does, after all, give more weight to his own particular concerns and his own narrow interests. But states whose citizens are politically free, and therefore politically responsible, do tend to stimulate more interest in political issues. People tend to take more interest in matters that affect them directly, and take still more interest when they have some reasonable hope of affecting the way these matters are settled. When people are accustomed to taking responsibility for the fate of their country, they are far more likely to fight in its defense.

At the same time, a sense of commitment to one's country does not seem to depend on the notion that the government stands for high ideals. There was plenty of patriotic feeling in the United States, for example,

before Lincoln's wartime rhetoric sought to inspire a nobler sense of American purpose. After his visit to America in the 1830s, the French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville even complained that Americans took their patriotic pride to childish excess:

The American, taking part in everything that is done in his country, feels a duty to defend anything criticized there, for it is not only his country that is being attacked, but himself; hence one finds that his national pride... descends to every childishness of personal vanity... the foreign [visitor] may speak freely neither... about public undertakings nor about private ones—indeed, about nothing that one comes across, except perhaps the climate and the soil, but yet one meets Americans ready to defend both of these, as if they had a share in forming them.

No doubt it is easier to take pride in a nation's success if it is, in fact, successful, or, at the very least, if it functions according to the priorities of its citizens. To maintain a democratic form of government over a long period is an achievement in which people take genuine pride. Thus, for example, doubts about a European supranational government have been most persistent in Britain and in Scandinavia—precisely those countries in which democratic institutions have been most securely established for the longest

period. After all, the desire to protect traditional political institutions is, in itself, a patriotic instinct, and a long experience with stable democracy can encourage it.

But even pride in democratic government does not seem indispensable for inspiring some level of patriotic feeling. People have fought to defend their homelands even when their governments were brutal and corrupt and not devoted to any inspiring principle. Perhaps for most people, the love of one's own is noble enough. There is no reason to think that democracies should have any more difficulty summoning this patriotic spirit. At least, they have often succeeded very well in doing so.

In Berns' account, patriotism might suffer if not connected with some nobler end than the security or prosperity of the citizenry. But devotion to

higher ideals has inspired traitors as well as patriots. Thus the Soviet Union was able to recruit highly placed graduates of the finest Western European universities to share official secrets because these people felt more loyalty to the cause of Communism than to the security of their own nations.

It is often the ordinary person, skeptical of abstract ideals, who is the more reliable patriot. Defense of what is one's own may in fact come much more naturally to people than commitment to an abstract cause. In the end, patriotism is more enduring than ideological loyalties precisely because it asks ordinary people to feel loyalty to something that is not abstract: Their own country.

Jeremy Rabkin is a professor of government at Cornell University.