

October 28, 2008

Dear Editor:

One presidential candidate has been criticized for not being patriotic. What is the basis for this criticism? That he didn't wear a flag lapel pin? That he didn't place his hand over his heart during the playing of the National Anthem? That he stood against the popular tide in the run up to the war in Iraq? That his middle name is Hussein? What is the definition of patriotism? Who defines it? Is it "My country, right or wrong?" Does only one political party with its slogan of "Country First" own the patriotism issue?

In our free country each citizen can define patriotism in his own way. In my mind patriotism is the adherence to certain ideals that have distinguished our great experiment in liberty for many years. Ideals like all men are created equal, government derives its just powers from the consent of the governed, due process, tolerance, helping the least among us. Patriotism should involve a recognition of how fortunate we are to be Americans while we continually strive to perfect our union. It requires that we be willing to sacrifice to preserve our great experiment.

An American patriot is not blinded by the "My country, right or wrong" argument. The example of twentieth century Germans surrendering their own civil rights while following their Nazi leaders in aggressive war against their neighbors should dispel that notion. In our own recent past a patriot would have called for more deliberation before launching preemptive war in Iraq. In any international dispute he would have recognized that war is the final option after all other options have been exhausted, and that if war is required, then overwhelming force should be applied, and a clear exit strategy should be defined.

Patriotism is taken to a higher level by those Americans who have the courage to speak out when their country heads in the wrong direction. In his 1847 "Spot of Blood" speech freshman U.S. Congressman Abraham Lincoln had the courage to challenge President Polk's reason for taking the United States to war against Mexico. In his Pulitzer Prize winning book Profiles in Courage President Kennedy wrote about Sam Houston who was elected governor of Texas prior to the Civil War. As a loyal Union man Governor Houston opposed his state's separation from the United States in the face of Texans' clamor for secession. When Texas did secede, he refused to take a loyalty oath to the Confederacy and was removed from office.

American patriots stood against fear-mongering, witch-hunting McCarthyism in the 1940's and 1950's when innocent citizens were recklessly branded as Communists. In 1964 a courageous LBJ pushed for passage of the Civil Rights Act during a time of institutionalized racism in our country even though he knew that he would be vilified by many of his fellow citizens.

No president should take his country to war unless war is the absolute final option. This macho President and Vice-President's "Bring 'Er On" bravado in taking us to war in Iraq would be laughable if it weren't so tragic. This President with his murky Texas Air National Guard service while a hot war was being fought in Viet Nam. This Vice-President with his five deferments, unwilling to serve when he was able but all too willing to commit his fellow citizens to an ill-conceived war. Can't you picture this

gung-ho stalwart warrior Vice-President teeth clenched personally leading a brigade sweep of Baghdad Rambo-style with a flaming red bandana around his head and a bandolier slung over his shoulder? Neither can I. He and his boss recklessly diverted our limited military resources by leading us to war in one country while the perpetrator of 9/11 was holed up in a cave in another country.

Does the Republican Party own the patriotism issue? Barack Obama correctly stated in his acceptance speech in Denver that Democrats, Republicans, and Independents have all served, bled, and died for their country. No draft board ever asked the political affiliation of a draftee. No recruiter ever declared "Democrats need not apply." Chanting "USA, USA, USA" and displaying a "Support Our Troops" sticker on your bumper doesn't make you a patriot. Thomas Paine's criticism many years ago of "Sunshine Patriots" applies to some Americans today.

Barack Obama has every reason to be a patriot. This country gave him the opportunity to achieve the "American Dream." An "elitist"? Hardly. For the most part he was raised by a single parent and grandparents. With diligence and student loans, which he repaid a few years ago, he was able to attend Columbia and Harvard Law School where he excelled. Editor of the Harvard Law Review? Not bad for a guy who who started out in life with far fewer advantages than his opponent in this election. Maybe that's why you continually hear him talk about the need for every young American to have the opportunity to attend college. The "American Dream"? He earned it. He will fight to protect and preserve our great experiment in liberty and will promote every citizen's opportunity to realize the "American Dream."

Mike Hobbs