

## **What is Patriotism?**

What, exactly, does it mean to be patriotic? Was Barack Obama's failure to wear a flag lapel pin the Summer unpatriotic? Was Joe Biden wrong to say that paying taxes is patriotic?

My father's generation knew, back in 1942, that patriotism meant a willingness to sacrifice. Whether it was serving overseas, or rationing meat, sugar, and gasoline here at home, everyone knew that patriotism meant sharing the burden of fighting the axis powers. It meant doing your duty, whatever that duty might be.

We seem to have lost that perspective. Patriotism today seems to be nothing more than waving a flag, or attaching a magnetic ribbon to your car. We are presumably battling three wars right now, in Iraq, Afghanistan, and against Al Qaeda, but woe be it to any politician so foolish as to ask us to bear some collective cost, however small, in that effort. Other than perhaps taking our shoes off at the airport.

This trivialization of patriotism struck me nearly 7 years ago, during the winter following 9/11. I was walking down the street, the morning after a heavy snowfall. After passing a dozen houses or so, I came upon one where the sidewalk was still unshoveled. As I waded through the foot of snow, I glanced at the house, and saw a large flag hanging beside the door. And the thought struck me – who was more patriotic, the couple displaying the flag, or the other dozen or so families who had done their civic duties by clearing their sidewalks?

I have never been very impressed by flag waving or lapel pins. They're too easy – any Summer Soldier or Sunshine Patriot can hang a flag or attach a pin to his lapel. If you had to earn the right to wear a lapel pin through service to your country, be it military service, or Peace Corps service, or even community service, then a lapel pin might actually mean something to me. But it doesn't.

So is paying taxes patriotic? It's perhaps ironic that the party that most likes to call itself patriotic, the party most attached to flag waving and lapel pins, also happens to be the party most opposed to our having to bear any collective burden for their wars. It's unpatriotic to criticize the war, we were cautioned back before criticism of the war became ubiquitous. But actually asking us to pay for the war? No, no, that just won't do.

Poor Joe Biden is definitely old school. So was John McCain, back before the Straight Talk Express got derailed. Both have spent their lives in honorable service to their country. But the one is mocked for stating that sacrificing income to support the public weal is a patriotic act. And the other has succumbed to political reality, that calling for such a sacrifice is political suicide.

So what, exactly, does it mean to be patriotic? Me, I've served two years in the military, and four on the Common Council. I've got another dozen plus years of various forms of community service in as well. But please, don't think of me as patriotic. That has become a fool's boast, one that I'd just as soon have no part of.