

# POINT OF VIEW PIECES

## Patriotism: 'Us' and 'Them'

BY BILL BIGELOW

My stepdaughter works for a firm that gives employees demerits if they fail to use the words “we” and “our” when talking with customers about the company. It’s a policy that reminds me of a similar phenomenon in U.S. schools, where the curriculum brands students with a “USA = Us” logo. From their first recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, students are taught that the most important unit of social analysis is the nation-state and that people on this side of the border constitute “us,” whereas those on the other side of the line are “them.”

By the time students enter my global studies class as high school juniors, they’ve had years of nationalistic indoctrination. To be blunt, it’s a process that can make youngsters stupid and mean-spirited.

I was reminded of this recently while teaching a unit on the roots of Mexican immigration to the United States. In one of the unit’s key lessons, students participated in a role play I wrote on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). I wanted students to think about the treaty’s effects on both sides of the U.S./Mexican border. NAFTA has flooded Mexico with cheap corn and contributed to throwing over a million and a half farmers off the land. A higher percentage of Mexicans now live in poverty and in extreme poverty than prior to NAFTA. At the same time, the U.S. government has certified that over 800,000 U.S. workers lost their jobs because of NAFTA. And trade unions here were weakened by the greater ease with which companies can flee to Mexico for cheaper labor and lax environmental standards.

But the explosion of U.S. corn exports to Mexico benefited agricultural conglomerates here. And large Mexican farmers who grow cash crops for the U.S. market also benefited, as did many U.S. corporations that set up assembly plants in Mexico, thereby slashing their wage bills. (A \$5-a-day minimum wage can do that.)

In the role play, the students represented individuals from different social groups — poor

farmers in Chiapas, prosperous farmers in northern Mexico, U.S. executives of frozen food companies, workers in Levi’s apparel plants in the U.S., cross-border environmentalists, and others. The lesson demonstrates that the question “Did NAFTA benefit the United States?” makes no sense. Who is the United States? Archer Daniels Midland? Factory workers in Ohio? Environmental activists?

In the role play, as poor farmers in Mexico built alliances with U.S. environmentalists and U.S. factory workers, students began to recognize that “us” and “them” do not slice neatly along national lines. U.S. workers, facing lay-offs as their companies outsource production, may have more in common with subsistence farmers in Mexico than they do with corporate executives in the U.S.

But even as the students started to grasp the failure of an “us” versus “them” nationalism to explain the world, many still retreated to its reassuring simple-mindedness. Later in the unit, while discussing immigration policy, Beth said, “The United States needs to focus on the United States. We need to make sure that we’re all accounted for and okay. We need to worry about us.” Marissa echoed Beth, “Maybe it’s not nice, but it’s true. They’re taking our jobs, and it sucks.”

“We,” “us,” “our.” My 11th-graders—mostly white and working-class — view their fears about the future through a nationalistic lens. From an academic standpoint, they can’t think clearly about global issues when their chief unit of analysis is the nation-state. From a moral and political standpoint, they will consistently misplace blame for their problems as long as they can’t think more expansively about who “we” are.

And that’s where educators come in. In an era of wagon-circling patriotism, we need to have the courage to challenge our students to question the narrow nationalism that is so deeply embedded in the traditional curriculum.

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# Teaching Patriotism – with Conviction

BY CHESTER E. FINN JR.

Americans will debate for many years to come the causes and implications of the September 11 attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., as well as the foiled attack that led to the crash of United Airlines Flight 93 in a Pennsylvania field. Between the first and second “anniversaries” of 9/11, another development deepened our awareness of the dangerous world we inhabit and of America’s role therein—the successful war to liberate Iraq from its dictator and his murderous regime. Of course, the consequences – and contentiousness – of that conflict continue to resonate daily in newspaper headlines and on the evening news. In these challenging times, educators rightly wonder about their proper role. What should they teach young Americans? How should they prepare tomorrow’s citizenry? What is most important for students to learn?

These are weighty questions, and there is every reason to expect them to linger. But it is now clearer than ever that, if we wish to prepare our children for unforeseen future threats and conflicts, we must arm them with lessons from history and civics that help them learn from the victories and setbacks of their predecessors, lessons that, in Jefferson’s words, “enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom.”

Jefferson was right when he laid upon education the grave assignment of equipping tomorrow’s adults with the knowledge, values, judgment, and critical faculties to determine for themselves what “will secure or endanger” their freedom and their country’s well-being. The U.S. Supreme Court was right, half a century ago, when, in the epoch-shaping Brown decision, it declared education to be “the very foundation of good citizenship.”

Teachers know this better than anyone, and many need no help or advice in fulfilling

their responsibility. They’re knowledgeable, savvy, creative, caring, and – may I say it? – patriotic, as many fine teachers have always been. They love our country and the ideals for which it stands. Teachers must communicate to their students the crucial lessons from history and civics that our children most need to learn. The events of 9/11 and the war on terrorism that has followed create a powerful opportunity to teach our daughters and sons about heroes and villains, freedom and repression, hatred and compassion, democracy and theocracy, civic virtue and vice.

On 10 April 2003, David McCullough told a Senate committee, “We are raising a generation of people who are historically illiterate. . . . We can’t function in a society,” he continued, “if we don’t know who we are and where we came from.” The solemn duty of all educators is to make certain that all our children know who they are. Part of that can be accomplished by teaching them about America’s Founders, about their ideals, and about the character, courage, vision, and tenacity with which they acted. From that inspiring history, true patriotism cannot help but grow.

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## Second Fiddle to Fear

BY DENISE WALSH

Most of us believe that by learning about the past, students can better prepare for the future. As a teacher of U.S. history, I certainly believed it, and for seven years I enthusiastically led my students on an exploration of the American past — until history caught up with me.

I taught at a private secondary school for girls in a town that had lost a disproportionately high number of people in the September 11th attack on the World Trade Center. Perhaps as a consequence, I found that even two years later, student attitudes toward government policy, patriotism, and historical events in general were hampering my ability to create citizens who understood and would protect their rights.

Each year I had been teaching about the Alien and Sedition Acts to show that the Founders were political creatures who struggled to find a balance between individual rights and national security. During the 1790s, the Federalists labeled the Democratic-Republicans traitors and gleefully passed the Alien and Sedition Acts, which are remembered today for their condemnation of dissent and their draconian immigration policies. These acts aroused intense controversy at the time. But in the end, the Founders earned their laurels: John Adams wisely avoided a full-blown war with France, though historians have argued that doing so cost him a second term. With Thomas Jefferson as President, the Alien and Sedition Acts ignominiously expired.

In 2003, in order to bring the issue of balancing rights against security concerns into sharper focus for my students, I taught the Alien and Sedition Acts in conjunction with the Patriot Act. My goal was for the students to confront the problem, think critically about it, and take a position. I would not have predicted the outcome.

Given the white, upper-middle-class background of most of the students and our proximity to the Twin Towers, I was not surprised that most of them supported the Patriot Act. But I was astounded that nearly half of them also applauded the Alien and Sedition Acts. They identified strongly with the security concerns of the 1790s, and even though we had just finished studying the American Revolution, they believed

that government should be trusted — at the end of the 18th century as much as at the beginning of the 21st.

How do I explain my students' response? They had not grown up during the Cold War or during World War II or during the Depression. And the introduction of vulnerability into their lives had been intense and sudden. New York City was still receiving occasional "code orange" warnings, field trips were canceled, and the girls simply craved security. By the following year, the level of fear had ebbed, and the same project yielded little support for the Alien and Sedition Acts.

I still believe that we learn much about the present from our study of the past. I believe that juxtaposing past and present can help students understand that dissent can be patriotic and that the government cannot always be trusted. But these lessons will not be learned when critical thinking plays second fiddle to fear.

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## Patriotism in American Overseas Schools: What Ought to Be Taught

BY DEAN WILES

Thousands of U.S. citizens live abroad in communities whose mission is to support the nation's military and diplomatic corps. If these communities are large enough to require a school of their own, they are likely to be a lot like their counterparts stateside. There will be a bank, a commissary, a shopping center, athletic fields, teen centers, chapels with services for all faiths, and such support services as police and fire departments.

But there are also important differences. Many members of these overseas communities are deployed for many months at a time in support of U.S. military missions, and many of those so deployed will be parents of students in our overseas schools. Under these circumstances, the realities of the hardship of service to the nation are easy to bring home to students. But we also need to teach them about the substantial contributions that our military forces have

made to building our own country and to supporting democracy and opposing tyranny and oppression around the world.

The American overseas community is proud of its contribution to the national goals of fostering freedom and democracy, whenever and wherever they are in jeopardy. Whatever their age, Americans overseas all support the mission of making the world a better and safer place. That is my perspective on patriotism, and it is a message we need to deliver clearly to youngsters in our schools overseas and at home.

DEAN WILES is a retired DoDDS/DoDEA educator, who served in Europe and Asia from 1959 to 1996.

## Pledging Allegiance

BY WALTER C. PARKER

Reciting the Pledge of Allegiance may be the core civic ritual in the United States and the most common — core because it extracts a personal promise of some sort and most common because it is widely required in schools and concludes the naturalization ceremony for new citizens.

While many people have recited and memorized the pledge, few have interpreted it with others. I've come to this conclusion after leading nearly 50 interpretive discussions or seminars on the pledge. Some have been with high school students, some with elementary students, and many with their teachers and parents. Participants typically say they've not done this before; they have been putting their hands to their



hearts and promising something they have not thought much about.

To clarify, a seminar is a discussion of a text for the purpose of plumbing its depths. Discussion accomplishes this better than working alone because one's own understanding is fertilized by the views of others. If the seminar proceeds in a diverse group with a skilled facilitator, so much the better: one's own interpretation is more likely to be challenged in interesting ways.

Leading seminars on the pledge, I'm struck by three arguments that often unfold. First, and most important to many participants, is the phrase "under God" and what it does to the text when it is present or (as before 1954) absent. The mix of nationalism and theism in the pledge can evoke a torrent of opinion.

Second, to what or whom are we pledging allegiance when we recite it? To the flag, say some. To the nation, say others. No, to the republic, say others, pointing to "for which it stands." Does this argument matter? It does, because only one of these is an idea about how to live with one another. Nazis and Romans pledged allegiance to a man (Heil Hitler, Hail Caesar); countless others have pledged allegiance to a plot of land ("land where my fathers died"). But "to the republic" suggests fidelity to the principles of a constitutional democracy.

Then there's the final phrase, "with liberty and justice for all." Here the argument turns on what sort of statement this is. Is it a description or an aspiration? A reality or an ideal? Participants can believe one or the other (or both). On this question disagreement runs deep, and for good reason: one side suggests that the citizen's job is to protect democracy (because it has been accomplished); the other, that the citizen's job is to achieve it (because it has not).

There are more arguments I would like to hear, but these are a good start. Listening to them, I've concluded that recitation without interpretation is like fishing in a dry lake. This is not a case for or against reciting the pledge, but for engaging the ideas and issues it raises when you ask it questions, and for doing so with others.

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# A Small Space of Sanity

BY STUDS TERKEL

Schoolchildren should learn all they can about the people who stood up for humanity against the war-makers and the powerful. I'm talking about the abolitionists and the suffragettes, the Wobblies and labor organizers, the freedom riders and civil rights marchers, and the antiwar activists. Students should learn about Burr Tillstrom, one of the geniuses of early television, who created the Kuklapolitans and the show "Kukla, Fran, and Ollie." They were puppets, little rags that came to life in Burr's hands: Ollie was the one-toothed dragon; Buelah Witch, the outspoken and independent feminist who always refused to ride her broom sidesaddle; and Kukla, the round-headed enigma. And they became the inspiration for Jim Henson's Muppets. The Kuklapolitans lived in our world, but they created a small space of sanity within it — humane, tender, gentle, filled with humor and good will.

Burr Tillstrom graduated from Senn High School in Chicago, a place the current mayor wants to transform into a military academy, the exact opposite of the world Burr Tillstrom imagined. There's a lot to do to realize Tillstrom's vision, and opposing the militarization of our schools is a part of it. If there's one thing students need to know about patriotism, it's that the only way to love our country is to care about the humanity of the people who live in it.

STUDS TERKEL is the author of 11 books of oral history, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II*. He is also the host of the long-running radio program "The Studs Terkel Show." Terkel has won numerous awards, including the Presidential National Humanities Medal, the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, and the George Polk Career Award.

# Patriotism in Question

BY JOAN KENT KVITKA

In 1972, Michigan stipulated that I sign a loyalty oath before it granted me my first teaching license. It was a politically charged era, especially on the campus of the University of Michigan, and this requirement threw me into a quandary. Would endorsing this prerequisite to teaching in the state be

consistent with my embrace of our true democracy, a government "of, by, and for the people," or would it be an act that would compromise necessary and protected freedoms? Unbeknownst to me, the U.S. Supreme Court was deliberating on the same issue at the same time. In April 1972, the majority decision upheld the constitutionality of loyalty oaths that require an "affirmation" to "uphold and defend the Constitution [and to] oppose the overthrow of the government . . . by force, violence or by any illegal or unconstitutional method. [This would] assure that those in positions of public trust were willing to commit themselves to live by the constitutional processes." Six years previously, the Court had struck down "disclaimer" oaths that required public servants to avow that they were not and never had been members of the Communist Party.

I signed Michigan's oath. To uphold the spirit of our democratic ideals has become the cornerstone of my social science teaching practices spanning 28 years in public school classrooms from Michigan to Oregon. Although I am no longer required to swear my allegiance, investigating the concepts cherished by the framers of our Constitution has been central to the curriculum I teach, whether my students and I are excavating prehistory, mapping ancient civilizations, or debating contemporary global issues. Nothing in the examination of societies within authentic historical contexts precludes asking questions relevant to democratic ideals: How does this society view justice? Whence does power come, and how is it distributed? What protections are in place to safeguard against the abuse of power? What happens when empires or nations compete for power and resources? How are natural resources exploited or protected, and who determines this? Do tensions exist between social classes? What social institutions are in place for resolving conflicts? How is human labor valued? How do traditions forge identities? How does change occur?

My students are lively and eager to explore diverse political, economic, and cultural systems from multiple points of view. They come to understand that living in the United States in the nascence of the 21st century is both a privilege and a responsibility. They feel that, in order to navigate the road from the innocence of childhood to the responsibilities of adulthood, they must ask such questions as "What is more just for more people

more often?” They are becoming adept at viewing the world in its complexities, rather than accepting people and ideas and decisions at face value.

Over three decades of teaching, I have come to a deep understanding of the commitment I made in swearing my loyalty to a governing system dedicated to the virtues of democracy and equality for all — both those within our diverse society and those across a global mosaic of cultures. Every day in my classroom, teacher and students alike put into practice the patience and courage of citizenship. Being patriotic, my students and I are constantly learning, is not simply embracing “America right or wrong.” Being patriotic requires the audacity to explore equally what is right and wrong about our nation and the courage to accept responsibility for both.

JOAN KENT KVITKA teaches global citizens in Portland, Ore. She has led student ambassadors to China and advises the Model United Nations club. She remains loyal to democratic ideals while assisting on documentaries about Mikhail Gorbachev and Václav

## Patriotism by the Numbers

BY CINDY SHEEHAN

I receive a lot of e-mail. Just the other day, I received this message:

Dear Ms. Sheehan,

My cousin, “brave soldier,” 30, originally of Indiana, was one of the five U.S. soldiers killed on Saturday, October 15th — Iraq’s “peaceful day.” He is survived by his wife, his two children, his parents, his sister, our grandma, his aunt, his two uncles, and his two cousins. We are currently awaiting confirmation per DNA identification.

I thank you for taking notice. The loss of his life and that of his comrades does not make for a peaceful day — may their souls rest in peace.

And this one came from a “Gold Star” mother:

How?

I have so many questions. . . . How do I stop the vulgar pain in my chest? How do I do this? How do I continue to breathe but cannot live? How do I do this? How do I keep my soul in my body? How do I do this? How do I close my eyes wondering if sleep should come but yet knowing if I sleep I will awaken to know

this is not a nightmare but my life? How do I do this? How do I love someone with my very being but cannot ever hold him again? How do I do this? How do I go on without that sweet face that brought more joy to my life than I ever deserve — never to be seen by my eyes again? How do I do this? How do I stop the scream that no one hears but me? How do I do this? PLEASE TELL ME . . . how do I live without my child, my son, my heart, my soul, my joy, my validation to my life. . . . Please tell me . . . how do I do this? How does the world go on without Steven . . . how do I do this?

This letter came from a mom whose son was aggressively recruited until he finally agreed to enlist — then discovered he had made a big mistake:

I find that I can’t get Jeffrey out of my mind. I can see him at 11 or 12 years old, jumping in the car when I’d pick him up at a friend’s. It’s so real . . . it’s almost like you can reach out and touch him. What a world of hell this administration has put us in. One we will live in all the rest of our days. . . .

As you read these painful testaments, thousands of American families are going about their normal lives wondering if a terrible shoe is about to drop. Will it be their lives that are destroyed today? Or will it be another family randomly picked by the universe to suffer this violent assault on their homes?

But while these families wait, there is not one member of this Administration, not one member of Congress, not one hate-spewing, right-wing radio talk-show host who will worry that their darling child may be the next one killed in a meaningless war. Not one of these supporters of the war has any idea of the horror of lying awake at night or walking around all day with an icy-cold stomach because of hearing that soldiers were killed in Iraq today. Why? Because not one of these supporters of the war has any loved ones in harm’s way — a harm they created or support, either actively or tacitly. And they support this war in the name of democracy and patriotic duty. The day of the fraud-ridden constitutional referendum in Iraq, George Bush said: “Democracies are peaceful countries.”

If every student in every school learns only one thing about patriotism, it should be this: life is precious. We honor our country by holding precious the life of its youth. Every teacher in every school should convey this message. If students were to take signs to their congressional offices near them and



demand that each and every member of Congress do everything in his or her power to bring our precious lifeblood home, these would be profoundly patriotic acts.

My son Casey had such a bright future ahead of him. Someone asked me the other day what I miss most about him. I just miss him. I miss everything about him. I miss his presence on this planet. I miss his naive joy and heartbreaking hope for the future. I miss his future, and I remember his past with love and pain. We recently passed the sorrowful day when the 2,000th U.S. soldier was killed in Iraq, and by the time you are reading this, there will have been countless more unnecessary deaths. On the day of the 2,000th, I went to D.C. I went to the White House. Our house. I sat on the sidewalk outside of our house and demanded that the war criminals who live and work there bring our troops home.

Our young people are not just numbers. Our young people are confined to early graves because of criminals who should be confined to prison, who are profiting handsomely from the undeclared mess in Iraq. The Iraqi people are even less than numbers. If they are counted or thought of at all, they are very often wrongly counted as “insurgents,” when they are so often children and women. More than 16 young American men and women have lost their lives in Iraq each week since the Bush Administration’s March 2003 invasion. Some 30 Iraqi civilians are killed each day that the war continues.

If mere numbers will awaken America’s true patriotic spirit, then think of the predictions of Donald Rumsfeld and Condoleeza Rice: that this occupation could last a dozen years or more. What number are you comfortable with? One was too much for me.

CINDY SHEEHAN, a founding member of Gold Star Families for Peace, gained international attention in August 2005 when she camped outside President George W. Bush’s Texas ranch for five weeks. Sheehan’s son, Army Spc. Casey A. Sheehan, was killed in Sadr City, Baghdad, on 4 April 2004.

## Poetry and Patriotism

BY MAXINE GREENE

A month or so ago, I was invited to speak at a poetry slam conducted by Urban Poets, a group of teenage poets who perform their own works with the most passionate intensity. Some poems are profoundly personal; some, expressions of outrage at injustices and discrimination; others, protests against “school” and its unfairness or irrelevance to their lives; still others, outcries against the war in Iraq and the lies that sustain it.

Should schools be teaching these students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance? Liberty and justice for all? Patriotism? Enforcers of the Patriot Act lurk around libraries; recruiters for the armed services try to seduce high school boys and girls into enlisting. False promises, adult untruths, tests, achievement gaps, the sense of being human resources rather than singular persons and participants in a community. And allegiance to what? To the United States of America? To the President and his cronies?

I had trouble deciding what to say to that young generation whose world differed so much from my own. So I turned to Walt Whitman and a poem he wrote, “To the Young Poets,” telling them it was up to them to change the world. Like many artists, Whitman spoke of imagination and unrealized possibility. He knew about oppression and poverty and corruption, the rot beginning to erode democracy. But in his poetry and in his Democratic Vistas, he was asking for the kind of unease that would ward off complacency and compliance, that would awaken people enough to move them to act, to see democracy as an open possibility, always in the future, not as an achievement in the past.

This view may be the stuff of an emancipatory curriculum, something worth our teenagers’ allegiance. Patriotism — forever uncertain, forever in the making — may become a dimension of learning, directed toward what might be, what should be, rather than toward the fixed, the unshakable “is.” I apologized to the young people for the shape of the world we were leaving to them and urged them to continue imagining and making their voices audible, to continue creating occasions for hope.

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