

American Patriots: Soldiers, Citizens, Voters

The United States is presently at war in countries around the world where American troops are fighting and dying. At home, cars and homes display solid yellow or red, white, and blue ribbons that call for Americans to "Support Our Troops." It is patriotic for Americans to support their daughters and sons fighting in a war, but this patriotism does not mean that Americans must blindly support the decision to go to war. Being patriotic means that Americans must do the opposite: they must question their government. Questioning the government, voting, and respecting the rights of others are what make true patriots in a democratic society.

The United States government is not perfect, as evidenced by its history. For example, the government sanctioned the institution of slavery, denied women the right to vote for nearly 150 years, and prolonged a war in Vietnam that the government leaders knew they couldn't win. Fortunately for the United States, in each of those cases, there were patriots that spoke out against what the United States was doing and brought about change. The government was wrong in its official positions, and the people who opposed those positions were right. Had those right-minded people not openly voiced their disapproval of what the government was doing, our history would not reflect the democratic principles it so publicly espouses. For a democracy to work, its citizens must keep informed and vocally express their approval *and* disapproval. The United States government should not proclaim that protestors are not patriotic. By their very act of thinking independently from the government, they are being true patriots.

Questioning the government is one part of the definition of an American patriot; a second part is taking that analysis of the government and acting on it through voting. To put it simply, patriots vote. However, voting for the American patriot is not simply casting ballots; it is knowing about the issues and then casting ballots. To vote for Democrats or Republicans simply because the voter has always voted for that party or because the voter's family has always voted for that party is not being patriotic; it is again being blindly obedient. Voting requires knowledge of the candidates, knowledge of the issues, and ultimately an understanding of one's own stand on the issues.

Lastly, and most importantly, patriots respect the rights of others and demonstrate this by actively contributing to the equal rights of all Americans. One specific action that patriots perform is willingly paying taxes. Without tax income, the national, state, and local governments would not be able to function. People would go uneducated, hungry, and sick in a world without police protection, good roads, schools, and government-funded health care for those citizens who cannot afford it. Patriots may wish that they could have the tax money in their own pockets, but patriots also realize that this tax money is necessary for a country that must meet the needs of all its citizens. Paying taxes shows respect for the government and for its citizens through being an active contribution to a stable, democratic society.

The traditional picture of an American patriot is of a soldier in uniform, proudly carrying the American flag and a rifle. But that picture falls seriously short of the true picture of an American patriot. The true picture would show millions of people, of all races and heritage, some carrying protest signs, some handing out campaign literature, and everyone carrying a ballot. [579 words]