

A proper patriot

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [December 13, 2011](#) issue



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Conservative commentator Pat Buchanan has given up on America. In his new book, *Suicide of a Superpower*, he writes: "Our nation is disintegrating, ethnically, culturally, morally, politically. . . . we seem to detest each other in ways as deep as Southerners detested a mercantile North and Northerners detested an agrarian slaveholding South."

To be fair, Buchanan's book bears the subtitle *Will America Survive to 2025?* and Buchanan allows there is just enough time to snatch victory from defeat—if his prescriptions are followed right now. But it remains clear that Buchanan is deeply alienated from much that actually is America today.

I can understand such alienation. For reasons very different from Buchanan's, I was sorely tempted toward alienation during the George W. Bush years. But I recognized alienation as a temptation to be fought.

In fact, we owe our country of origin patriotism. But not just any kind of patriotism. The term *patriot* drives from the Latin word for father, *pater*. The proper patriot realizes and expresses gratitude to her fatherland. Just as our biological mothers and fathers gift us with life and nurture, so too does the country of our origin gift and nurture us—giving us a language to speak and stories to tell and songs to sing. And just as we don't choose our parents, neither do we choose our country of origin.

"We are part of a country for better or worse," wrote the American essayist Randolph Bourne. "We have arrived in it through the operation of physiological laws, and not in any way through our own choice. By the time we have reached what are called years of discretion, its influences have molded our habits, our values, our ways of thinking, so that however aware we may become, we never really lose the stamp of our civilization, or could become the child of another country."

Similarly, George Orwell wrote, "Good or evil, [your country] is yours, you belong to it, and this side of the grave you will never get away from the marks it has given you."

Notice the logic of patriotism. It is very much like the love for parents. We don't choose our parents, but they have marked us and we owe them love and gratitude. We love not just parents in general, but particularly our own parents, and so too do we love a specific country.

Take the similarity another step: in loving our parents, we do not deny others the right to love their parents. Orwell remarks that patriotism is "devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life, one which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force upon other people."

For me, my parents are the best in the world. But I am not aggressive or exclusive in this claim—in fact, I expect you to make the same claim for your parents. I have "no wish to force upon other people" the conviction that my mother is the greatest of all mothers. The very nature of love for parents not only allows but demands that we each embrace our particular parents above all others—and so, too, with our country. We love our particular homeland, but nonexclusively and noncoercively, leaving others free to embrace their own, different homelands.

For good or ill, we love our parents. You can disapprove of your father's philandering and yet retain him as your beloved father. You can regret your mother's alcoholism and still claim her wholeheartedly as your mother. So too, the patriot may take issue with his or her country's conduct without ceasing to be a patriot. In fact, we would say that an adult child who stood by passively and let his parents undertake a destructive course of action was not as loving as the adult child who intervened and resisted parental self-destruction.

Like love for parents, patriotism is "essentially noncompetitive" (says Bourne) and does not seek "competitive prestige" (says Orwell) in that it allows citizens of other

countries to be loyal patriots to their own homes. It does not live or die by a series of loyalty tests that endorses its current government's latest actions. Patriotism is inwardly focused on one's own country, and so it is, in Bourne's words, "intensive and nonbelligerent."

As such, and perhaps surprisingly, true patriotism does not find its essence in war. War, with its terrible demands to kill and die, can exact sacrifices that test the mettle of a citizen's patriotism and maturity. But in its all-consuming nature it can also tempt the patriot to revert to a childlike state, become totally dependent on the state/father, and regress to a savage primal unity shrunken of all responsibility and discernment. Thus, a true and properly circumspect patriotism is born of blood but not of bloodshed.