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*Christianity Today, July, 2021***BOOK REVIEW**

At Its Best, American Patriotism Is Blessed with Two-Dimensional Vision

A healthy love of country looks backward and forward, recognizes triumphs and failures, and flows from the head and the heart alike.

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In the pre-dawn hours of May 15, 1918, Private Henry Johnson was pulling sentry duty with Private Needham Roberts in a French trench that faced the German line just west of the Argonne Forest. Johnson and Roberts were members of the 369th Infantry Regiment from New York. The 369th, known as the “Harlem Hellfighters,” was an African American regiment, one of the first led by Black officers and NCOs in the US Army. The regiment had joined the French line as replacements, and its soldiers were given French equipment to face German front-line veterans of four years of trench warfare.

At 2 a.m., Johnson and Roberts heard German trench raiders clipping wire, preparing to surprise the Allied troops, spread mayhem, and seize prisoners in hopes of gathering intelligence. Johnson started throwing grenades into the darkness, toward the sound of the Germans, while Roberts ran back to the main line to alert the French. In the melee that followed, Johnson expended all of his grenades and grappled with the Germans in hand-to-hand combat, armed with a 14-inch bolo knife. He killed four Germans, plunging his knife into the head of one of them, and wounded 20 more, all while sustaining over 20 gunshot wounds. He also saved the severely wounded Roberts from being taken prisoner.

From then on, the 369th never lost a man to capture. It endured more uninterrupted combat time than any American regiment in the war, and its fighters were the first to reach the Rhine. Johnson and Roberts were also the first American privates to receive the Croix de Guerre from the French government in World War I.

But when Johnson returned home to Jim Crow America, his discharge papers did not mention anything about his combat record. He received no disability pay, and he was unable to return to his pre-war work as a railroad porter. He died in 1929 at 32 years of age, largely forgotten. But in 1996, President Bill Clinton awarded him the Purple Heart. In 2001, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. And in 2015, President Barack Obama bestowed on him the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Reason and love

Johnson's biography, along with recent efforts to recover the memory of his valiant service, stands as a testament to the uniqueness of American patriotism. Yale University political science professor Steven B. Smith explains the essence of this patriotism in his new book *Reclaiming Patriotism in an Age of Extremes*.

One of the salient features of American patriotism is its willingness to reflect on America's failures as well as its glories. As Smith writes, "Patriotism can be self-critical. Consider the belated recognition of war heroes who had been overlooked due to their race, but were then awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor decades after their actions. What does this demonstrate, other than an enlarged conception of who belongs in the American family?" American patriotism, according to Smith, should be sharply distinguished from the extremes of national self-hatred, cosmopolitanism that naively universalizes humanity, and a nationalism that breeds dangerous divisiveness and suspicion. Patriotism, unlike these intemperate attitudes, is found in a blend of reason and love. As Smith defines it, patriotism "is an expression of our highest ideals and commitments, not only to what we are, but also to what we might be."

In a cultural moment marked by divisions surrounding issues of race, class, sexuality, gender identity, religion, economic disparities, and a host of other challenges, Smith's book is deeply necessary. How can a nation like the United States cohere without a set of fundamentally shared ideals, hopes, symbols, texts, and mores? How can Americans avoid the lure of retreating into bunkers defined by various "identities" and "communities" that see themselves as pure and others as wicked? How do we resist the intuitive tendency to ignore our faults and exaggerate our triumphs? How do we embrace the demands our country makes on us while at the same time attending to global responsibilities that surpass national boundaries, like championing universal human rights and caring for the environment? In a short but lucid and thoughtful work, Smith considers these questions with care and offers Americans a path forward through the maelstrom of partisan shouting that pervades social media, 24-hour news coverage, Hollywood, and even professional sports.

American patriotism is a loyalty that emerges from two methods of situating the nation in time. Conservative patriots tend to stress the elements of its past, such as the deeds and declarations of the founders. Progressive patriots are oriented toward the future, imagining what America can become when and if it will be true to its ideals. Both of these postures can lead to harmful thinking—conservatives can deify the nation, while progressives can repudiate its legitimacy.

In the history of American exceptionalism, most conceptions of national identity have been progressive. The Puritans looked ahead to the millennium; revolutionary patriots believed they had it in their power to make the world anew; heralds of Manifest Destiny considered theirs the “great nation of futurity”; Wilsonian idealists hoped to “make the world safe for democracy.” Since the late 1970s, however, most expressions of American exceptionalism have been conservative, in that they were more oriented to recovering the past. Today’s Christian nationalists usually cast a narrative of decline: Our founding was noble, but we have lost our way morally, and we must return to the right path.

Genuine patriotism calls the citizen to a loyalty that Smith frequently analogizes to the relationships within a family. We love our family members, and we prefer them to others, but that love does not necessitate hatred for, or apathy toward, members of other families. As with our families, we think of our country in neither idealistic nor fatalistic terms. Our nation, just like our family, has its assets, its defects, and everything in between. But our nation, as our family, is made up of our people. We have a history that shapes our understanding of contemporary times, and we have a future in which our collective hopes are rooted. As Smith describes it, “Patriotism is rooted in a rudimentary, even primordial love of one’s own; the customs, habits, manners, and traditions that makes us who and what we are.”

Interestingly, ours is not the only generation that has needed voices to give guidance on what healthy patriotism (or “enlightened patriotism,” as Smith puts it) entails. Americans in all times have looked to examples and guides—Jefferson, Tocqueville, Lincoln, Anthony, Douglass, Parks, and King, for example. Smith looks to Lincoln as the quintessential enlightened patriot, rightly commending his patriotism as an example to follow. The features of Lincoln’s patriotism—egalitarianism, aspirationalism, and inclusiveness—are timeless. They are also necessary to the survival, establishment, and extension of American founding ideals. In this way, enlightened patriotism needs an orientation both to the past and to the future. This dual orientation fosters the kind of loyalty necessary for patriotism. “Loyalty,” as Smith argues, “is an affirmation of what we care about, and our cares are not momentary whims or desires but a structure of loyalties.”

To what are we loyal, and how do we express loyalty to our nation? Here is where Smith’s argument is truly worth the price of the book. He describes patriotism as “constitutional loyalty.” We feel and express loyalty to the people of the United States as our own people, but also to the constitutional democracy under which our society and government are ordered. The result is a combination of heart and mind directed toward love for the nation, and an actively cultivated habit of engagement with one another through political and civic association. When we engage our hearts and minds in love and loyalty to the nation, we find ourselves taking joy and pleasure in the nation’s achievements, but we also confront its failures head on. We are shamed by them. And as Smith reminds us, “We are not shamed about things to which we have no emotional connection. Pride and shame are the two sides of loyalty, and patriotism is inconceivable without them.”

Vigilance and hope

Take the example of Henry Johnson. There are lessons we can learn about Smith’s enlightened patriotism in the example he set through his actions. There is also instruction we can take from the years after Johnson returned to the United States when the war was over, and the years after his death. Johnson went to fight for a nation that regarded him as a second-class citizen, one that victimized him on the basis of his skin color. He

was willing to die for that country and its ideals, considering them his own. It is reasonable to believe that he considered Americans he had never met “his people,” and he fought alongside his fellow soldiers in the 369th, saving their lives by offering his own in their place. This is loyalty of the highest order. But Johnson’s country did not requite that loyalty upon his return. It continued to treat him as a second-class citizen, neglecting him in his suffering after the war.

It would be easy to point to the example of Henry Johnson as evidence that America is irredeemable, that its faults and flaws are unforgiveable, and that its ideals are nothing more than rank hypocrisy. How perfect an episode to demonstrate for all time that America’s promise is reserved only for white people. But Johnson’s own son was surprised to learn that his father’s body had not been kicked into a pauper’s grave in 1929. The Army had buried him with full honors at Arlington National Cemetery. And while condemning the injustice of neglecting his service and sacrifice is absolutely warranted, we must observe that Americans came around to doing what they could to rectify that injustice. In addition to the posthumous awards he received, Johnson is now memorialized in the Hall of Heroes at the Pentagon.

Should Johnson have received the appropriate honors in 1920 rather than 2015? Assuredly, yes. But American patriotism is morally aspirational, self-reflective, and self-correcting. Patriots recognize their flaws and sins, and they resolve to learn from those sins. They do not overcorrect, nor do they abandon hope in the ideals established in the founding documents, those ideals that define the essential nature of the republic. Gratitude is at the heart of patriotism, and as Smith rightly states: “Anyone who shares hope for America and faith in America may participate.” Patriotism takes vigilance, but patriotism ultimately yields blessings that are reflected in the nation’s hopes and aspirations.

Smith’s book is a word of encouragement, especially for those who may be tempted to give up hope in America. His is a needed light while we walk together on a dark path.

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