



Garry Wills Post 9-2-71

Saving Patriotism From the Patriots

IT IS DIFFICULT to defend patriotism from the "patriots"—which means, these days, defending our country from its rulers.

The President says we must be No. 1. The Vice President says any criticism of government action or policy is "masochism." Mrs. Mitchell, a charming lady Charlie McCarthy on the knee of our Attorney General (who ventriloquizes between pipe puffs), conveys the message that only Middle America loves America, and everyone else should leave it.

In this bumper-stocker sense, loving America means loving it blindly, defending it uncritically, granting it no faults at all.

Well, love is blind, isn't it? No, not really. Not real love. The current Esquire carries one of those fugitive tales by F. Scott Fitzgerald that surface, now and then, to haunt us. It is the story of a man going through the pain of watching his daughter's pain when she realizes what he is at last. It is a recurrent drama we all live through—if, that is, we ever grow up, or help our children grow.

THERE ARE TIMES, all too brief, when any father is the world's greatest comedian, strong man, oracle, and king—when merely stepping inside the door is a grand occasion, when his every frown is judgment, and all his smiles rewards.

It is fun while it lasts—but it must not last long, for child or father.

Both sides must grow, and let grow; let reality in, accommodate the fairy tales to the facts.

Everyone will admit, if forced to, that children cannot live on with the illusion that their parents are all good and do no wrong. To demand that of them would be a way of arresting growth, inducing false innocence, encouraging bad faith—an artificiality of endless pretense among intimates.

YET THAT is just the blind faith men now describe as patriotism. Our country must be what our parents were when we were two years old—that is, incapable of error, all-wise, with strength beyond challenge, with decision not subject to criticism.

But that is not love; it is not even infatuation. It is the careful reiteration of absurdity by those who doubt that they would love if they could see. Better, then, to close their eyes and chant the silly jingoist creed. Our daddy can lick your daddy, good daddy Uncle Sam, look out all you bad daddies around the world.

Those who truly love our country love it with eyes open, knowing its faults, seeing it "warts and all" and trying to save it from its blind childish votaries and fearful, uncritical rulers.

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