



JAMES CARROLL

## Readers Write

# PATRIOTISM

**WHEN I FIRST BEGAN TO THINK** about becoming an American citizen, I wondered: Would they quiz me about baseball (like who'd won the World Series in 1961, the year I'd entered the U.S. as an alien)? Would they make me renounce fish and chips, bangers and mash, Yorkshire pudding, treacle tart, Christmas pudding, and everything else quintessentially English? Would they tell me that I could no longer say "garden" for "yard," or "car park" for "parking lot"?

On my first Halloween in the U.S. I didn't know what was happening: why were children knocking on doors dressed as goblins and astronauts? I turned off

the lights and pretended I wasn't home. Memorial Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving, Presidents' Day — so many new holidays to digest and understand. And so many poignant memories of holidays no longer celebrated: bonfires on Guy Fawkes Day, Christmas leftovers on Boxing Day, pancakes on Shrove Tuesday, raucous crowds along the Thames on Boat Race Day. I am trying to feel the same about pumpkin pie and Labor Day picnics. I really am.

My swearing-in ceremony took place in the Masonic Auditorium in San Francisco. "There are 103 countries represented here today," the emcee said. "As I read your country's name, I want you to

stand up and remain standing until all 1,535 of you are standing. Then we will say the oath of citizenship together." She began reading the names: "Antigua, Armenia, Aruba, Australia, Bermuda, Bosnia . . ." One by one the people around me stood up.

When she said, "China," it seemed as if half the auditorium rose. "Mexico," she said, and another large percentage stood. After the Philippines I felt as if I were the only one still sitting, surrounded by standing bodies in their Sunday best. Finally the emcee said, "The United Kingdom," and I hauled myself up, looking round to see who else was from my homeland: no one that I could tell. The days of the Irish and the English setting sail for the New World in numbers were long past. So why was I doing this? To vote. Forty-six years in the U.S., and I had never voted.

My eyes filled with tears as we sang the national anthem. I realized I'd never sung it before. The images of bombs and rockets had always bothered me. And yet seeing 1,535 people from so many different backgrounds standing to sing it together was an emotional experience.

In childhood I had heard real bombs and rockets going off. There is nothing like growing up under threat of enemy invasion to forge an unshakable sense of patriotism. I used to imagine sitting on the roof of our house with a machine gun, picking off helmeted German soldiers as they came down our driveway. But when we took the oath of citizenship in the Masonic Auditorium, I could not bring myself to say the words "I will bear arms against all enemies." (Was anyone watching to see if my lips were moving?) I pledged allegiance to the flag, but in truth, it was another red, white, and blue banner that still had my heart.

Where is home now that I am a U.S. citizen? Yesterday on the radio someone spoke of the primaries in Michigan and Florida, and I found myself repeating the names in my head — *Michigan and Florida* — and I started to cry. This is my country now.

*Clare Cooper Marcus  
Berkeley, California*

**WHEN THE U.S. INVADED IRAQ IN** March 2003, I took leave from my middle-

management job, brought a folding chair and a hand-scrawled sign down to the Federal Building, and fasted for peace for one week.

I wasn't alone. There were other antiwar protesters on the sidewalk with me, and support-the-troops counterdemonstrators across the street in front of the bank. At first I seethed at our opponents, whom we called the "pro-war people." Then came John, carrying his three-foot-high sign that read, "Peace," in neat block letters. John lived in a one-room cabin in the woods and walked into the city every day, two hours each way, to take part in the protests. A Korean War veteran, he visited the protesters across the street, chatting with a fierce-looking man with a beret, mirrored sunglasses, and a chest full of medals.

Following John's example, I sought out this veteran, whose name was Tim, and I offered to buy him coffee. He declined and offered to buy me a cup instead. I turned him down because of my fast, but an unlikely mutual admiration grew between us, and we crossed the street several times a day to talk.

As the week wore on and tensions rose, Tim came over to read me the poem "The Soldier Fights." A group of antiwar protesters surrounded him and demanded to know what he was doing on "our" side of the street. Tim snapped back at them, and I had to step in to break up the shouting match. The antiwar protesters walked away while Tim and I shook hands.

Minutes later the opposite sidewalk was wild with shouting and pushing. Tim got in the middle and broke up an argument between his crew and a veteran for peace. Afterward he crossed over and said to me, "I've got to go. I can't take it anymore." His mouth twisted. "I hate this war. I cry about it every night." Tears rolled from beneath his sunglasses. He had to do something to support the troops, he said, to keep from going insane, and I held him while he sobbed.

*Bob Hicks  
Clearlake, Washington*

**I WAS RAISED IN GDAŃSK, POLAND,** cradle of Solidarity, the noncommunist trade-union federation. My parents worked in the shipyards, and I grew up

surrounded by a spirit of opposition to the government, the ruling Communist Party, and the ominous, controlling presence of the Soviet Union. Strikes and demonstrations were commonplace, but they were often quashed by militarized police. While exports flowed freely across the eastern border into the USSR, the Polish people had to live with food stamps and shoe stamps and even, at times, school-notebook stamps.

When I was seven, my mother and I went for a "walk." Our real mission was to steal the all-red Communist flags that had been hung for the annual May 1 government-orchestrated demonstrations. (We let the white-and-red Polish flags stay.) At home my mother turned these flaming symbols of communism into kitchen aprons, garage curtains, and frilly tablecloths.

I believe that theft is wrong, but I am proud of my mother's small and creative method of civil disobedience.

*Kalina Klamann  
Reseda, California*

**WE HAD JUST PICKED UP THE TUXEDOS** for my wedding when Paul, my soon-to-be father-in-law, turned around to take a look at my best man, Ken, and me in the back seat. After a long pause, he asked if we thought that any of the countries we had visited while in the Peace Corps was better than the United States.

It was a difficult question to answer. Between the two of us, Ken and I had traveled in thirteen countries and experienced their rich customs and hospitality. We'd also seen the U.S. through the eyes of their people.

Paul, on the other hand, had left the U.S. only twice in his entire life: once to spend a day or two in Mexico, and another time to see his daughter (my future wife) in Morocco. Both times he'd longed to return home as soon as possible. It wasn't that he hated other nationalities or ethnicities — he was kind and welcoming to everyone he met, no matter where they were from or how they looked. He just knew that America

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Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

We publish only nonfiction in Readers Write. Feel free to submit your work under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Saying Yes	July 1	January 2009
Instructions	August 1	February 2009
The Dinner Table	September 1	March 2009
Faith	October 1	April 2009
Moving In	November 1	May 2009
Crushes	December 1	June 2009

was “number one,” and if you didn’t love it, you’d better leave it.

The fact that Ken and I paused to contemplate our answers was enough for Paul. “That’s OK,” he told us. “Your silence says it all.” We tried to explain, but he would have none of it. He was too hurt by our failure to tell him what he needed to hear.

*Garrett M.  
Pueblo, Colorado*

**WHILE TRAVELING IN SOUTHERN** Spain, my husband and I decided to make an unplanned side trip to Morocco. Because we imagined the Islamic nation to be anti-American, we decided to tell people we were Canadians for the duration of our time there.

On a long train ride to Marrakech, we shared a compartment with a middle-aged Moroccan businessman who politely asked in English where we were from. We replied, “Canada,” in unison. Then he asked which city in Canada.

We hadn’t prepared for this question, so I let my husband answer and learned we were from Vancouver, British Columbia. Our new friend made a few disparaging remarks about Americans, saying that he found Canadians to be more agreeable and less pushy. We nodded and squirmed in our seats. He asked what kind of work we did in Canada. I told him truthfully that I was a mental-health therapist, and my husband, who works as a transportation planner, said that he solved problems involving port negotiations.

To our surprise our talkative seatmate worked in transportation, too, and he was eager to discuss the complexities of trade between Canadian and Moroccan ports. It was a long and agonizing trip full of dumbfounded looks, pleas of ignorance to simple questions, nervous laughter at jokes about our American president, and outright lies about Canadian politics. My husband and I arrived in Marrakech exhausted and agitated, our spirits dampened.

A few days later we told our story to an American of Moroccan descent. He laughed and said we’d misjudged Moroccans. “It’s not Americans they dislike,” he said. “It’s American leaders and their policies. The man you met would have loved

to talk to a real American. Moroccans don’t often get the chance.” We haven’t lied about being Americans since.

*Charlotte Finn  
Portland, Oregon*

**IT’S JULY FOURTH, AND I’M SITTING** in my father’s living room, watching the televised fireworks from the nation’s capital. My elderly father has gone to bed early, and I am relieved to be off duty from caring for him. Then a neighbor sets off some firecrackers, waking my father, who wanders into the living room to watch the finale of the celebration in Washington, D.C.

My father is a veteran of World War II. He has never spoken to my siblings and me about his war experiences, though we have prodded him. We know by the yellowed newspaper reports my mother saved that his infantry division helped liberate a concentration camp.

On TV the citizens of our nation’s capital begin to sing our national anthem, and my father joins them. He even attempts those unreachable high notes. I remain mute, because I’m disgusted with the body count in Iraq, but my damaged, taciturn father sings at the top of his lungs.

*Mimi Moriarty  
Clarksville, New York*

**IN FIFTH GRADE I HANDED MY** teacher a note from my father that said, “Rebecca won’t be at school tomorrow, because she will be going to Washington, D.C., to protest the Vietnam War.”

Early the next morning my parents, my sister, and I boarded a bus in Red Bank, New Jersey, and made the four-hour trip to our nation’s capital. As we assembled along Pennsylvania Avenue amid hundreds of thousands of protesters, I expressed some concerns about the sign I’d been given to carry. It was painted with the stars and stripes and read, “Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God.” The “obedience to God” part gave me pause: couldn’t we keep him out of this? And why did the sign have to have an American flag? Wasn’t that a little too patriotic? We were protesting because we didn’t like what our government was doing.

One of the adults in our group, a kind,

bearded Vietnam veteran, took my questions seriously. “I see what you mean,” he said, “but think about the sign’s overall message. It’s a good one. Don’t get hung up on those three words.” After a bit more discussion, I agreed to carry it.

I am now a parent, and my ten-year-old son has attended perhaps a dozen marches with me. At my office I have a picture of him on his dad’s shoulders, marching against the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. He holds a handwritten sign I made that says, “It’s not un-American to be anti-war.” The words are different, but the message is the same as the one I carried when I was ten.

*Rebecca Bennett  
Seattle, Washington*

**MY HUSBAND WILL NOT STAND OR** salute the flag during the national anthem. He says he saw too many atrocities on the front lines in Vietnam ever to be proud of his country again. When we go to college basketball games, he stays in the concessions area with a few other long-haired Vietnam veterans until after “The Star-Spangled Banner” has been played.

Recently he and I went to a football game, and just as we reached our seats, the announcer asked everyone to stand for the national anthem. My husband rolled his eyes and remained standing, but he didn’t remove his hat. After the anthem was over, someone tapped him on the shoulder. It was John, an acquaintance who was also a Vietnam veteran.

“Hey, man,” John said, “don’t you know it’s disrespectful to leave your hat on during the national anthem? I was about to come over here and take it off your head!”

My husband laughed but said nothing.

Dissatisfied, John said, “I’m not joking.”

My husband just smiled and said, “Sure, man,” and turned back around.

On the way out of the stadium after the game, we ran into John, and my husband tried to explain: “I just don’t get into saluting the flag.” John was astonished that a veteran could fail to honor the flag.

On our way back home, my husband asked me why I always stand; he had heard me rail against our country’s policies many times. I had to think about that

for a moment. I told him that, though I had disagreed with our elected officials, I was still thankful for our system of government; that when I stood, I tried to put politics aside and honor our country and all the people who, for better or worse, had died fighting for it. Then I realized that what I'd said sounded noble, but wasn't true. In reality, I admitted, I stood because I didn't want to make a scene and alienate people.

*Susan Morris  
Murphysboro, Illinois*

**WANTING TO SEE THE COUNTRY,** I bought a Ford Falcon station wagon for forty dollars and stuffed it with camping gear, clothes, and a twin mattress. Jean-Louis, my Parisian boyfriend, had some money he'd made doing tourists' portraits on Montmartre. Together we set out to explore the American West.

When the Falcon broke down in Wyoming, a retired rancher overheard me telling Jean-Louis how much a tow would cost. "I hate to see young folks in trouble," he announced, and we piled into his Jeep and drank beer while he pushed our car to the nearest garage.

Inspired by the rancher's generosity, Jean-Louis and I started picking up hitchhikers, and we met many fascinating people. Heading east near the end of our adventure, we passed through Kansas, where the flat and featureless landscape had me feeling deflated. We gave a lift to a slender boy with a blond ponytail and a quiet demeanor. He was detached, uncommunicative, and mysterious.

At dusk we stopped at a country gas station. Inside I could see four middle-aged people playing cards, one of the women with her hair in rollers. When the owner emerged to pump our gas, his face was tight with mistrust, and he demanded to see the cash up front. There was anger in his voice. I wasn't sure what to do.

As we stood there, the young hitchhiker pulled a silver flute out of his backpack and put it to his lips. The notes slipped out clear and slow beneath the rush of a passing car, and the man's face softened. I heard the words of the song in my head: "O beautiful for spacious skies . . ."

*Sandra Douglas  
Omaha, Nebraska*

**MY AMERICAN-LITERATURE PROFESSOR** at the University of Montana was a short, feisty woman with a thick Brooklyn accent. For the first couple of weeks we read the literature of the Puritans, and our professor led lively discussions about the early settlers' preoccupation with godliness and their habit of judging and condemning others. We all scoffed at the Puritans' spiritual arrogance and outdated notions of piety.

One day our professor strode into the classroom without greeting us, set her bag down, and stood gazing out the window for a few minutes. Then she crossed to the podium and said, "Tell me, what's the difference between this," and she placed her right hand on her heart, as if to pledge allegiance to the flag, "and this?" She shot her right arm out before her in a Nazi salute.

People gasped, and several students picked up their books and stormed out of the room. The professor watched them go with a serene look on her face. After they were gone, she faced the rest of us and pointed out that no one had been offended by our impious and impolite criticism of the colonists' ideas on God, faith, sin, and morality. But today, simply by making a couple of political gestures, she had offended people enough that they'd felt the need to leave the class.

"What does that say about our priorities in this country?" she continued. "I can make fun of people's faith and thoughts about God, but I'd better not mess with anyone's idea of patriotism. This scares me. And it's something I urge you to watch out for in the coming years, because I fear that patriotism in any country carries with it the potential to go from this" — the hand on the heart — "to this," the Nazi salute.

Eight years later, political terrorists struck the Twin Towers in New York City. President George W. Bush and his administration exploited our grief, fear, and patriotism by leading us into a war against a country that had had nothing to do with the attack. Those of us who spoke against the war were told we "didn't love America." I am now a teacher myself, and every time I place my hand on my heart to lead my students in the Pledge of

Allegiance, I want to cry.

*Carrie Thiel  
Kalispell, Montana*

*(end of excerpt)*