

The National Society of the Colonial Dames of America
Arlington Memorial Service
At the Spanish-American War Monument
Memorial Address
By James Schlesinger
Patriotism in Our Era
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Ladies and Gentlemen:

As we gather here today in the setting of Arlington National Cemetery, reminding us, as the plaque on the monument behind us states, of those who “have given their lives in the service of their country,” our attention turns quite naturally to the subject of patriotism—its meaning, its present status, and the trends affecting its future. The word patriotism comes, of course, from the Latin word, patria, meaning country or nation. Patriotism is intimately tied to the history of the nation-state, most notably in Europe. In those European nations (unlike the United States today), patriotic feelings developed, as feudalism decayed, from bonds of language and ethnicity. In England and France, the sentiment can be traced as far back as the Hundred Years War between the two. By the time of the Elizabethan age—and the plays of Shakespeare—patriotism clearly was flourishing in England. Think of Henry V’s oration to the English troops before the Battle of Agincourt. Or better yet, recall John of Gaunt’s peroration in *Richard II*, written in 1596:

“This precious stone set in the silver sea...
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.”

American patriotism can look back to the sixties and seventies of the 18th century—and arose in opposition to the English monarchy. (In fact, initially in the American Revolution the patriots were insisting on their “rights of Englishmen.” That period, of course, has a special place of honor for this Society.

By contrast, on the European continent the rise of nationalisms came rather later—in the 19th century—in such places as Germany and Italy. And in much of the Third World, nationalism or patriotism has been a 20th century development.

Ladies and gentlemen, patriotism is an essential ingredient for binding a society together. It permits that society to take coherent action, and, if steady and sustained, such action is most likely to be effective. Most of us, particularly those of the older generation, have always taken patriotism for granted. Yet, today, there is cause for concern, for patriotism is under fire from many quarters.

Although patriotism originated in the Western world, we should recognize that Western cultures have been changing and continue to change. The climate of opinion—especially so-called elite opinion—has increasingly been inclined to challenge the concept of patriotism. In parts of the Western world, the spirit of the age, what the Germans called the Zeitgeist, has been increasingly skeptical about, if not downright hostile to, patriotism.

In Europe, patriotism has clearly gone out of favor. In part, this has been associated with the attempt to foster a European consciousness. In part, this also reflects the conviction that the destructiveness of European wars reflected a misguided nationalism—or patriotic impulses gone awry. George Bernard Shaw, to cite one example, once opined that “you’ll never have a quiet world till you knock the patriotism out of the human race.” It is notable that the recent spirit of cosmopolitanism, now rampant in Europe, has not yet affected China, Russia, Japan, Korea, Turkey, Iran, or most other nations.

No doubt that in Europe there have been excesses of nationalism, sometimes grotesque. In an earlier era, any such excess of patriotism went by the name of jingoism. (Here in the United States, it has been suggested that the Spanish-American War, whose monument towers above us, was itself an example of such jingoism.) In the United States today, European opinion continues to have an immense and disproportionate influence on American elite opinion, more so than opinion in those other countries I have just mentioned. And what is fashionable in Europe and appeals to American elites will regularly be picked up by the American press.

In recent years, partly stimulated by the disappearance of the threat to Europe of the Soviet Union and partly by the more recent quarrels about American foreign policy, much of Europe has reverted to a long-standing tradition within the European intelligentsia of disdain for the United States, in brief anti-Americanism.

None of these trends have passed America by. A recent poll by the American Association of Retired Persons reveals the problem. After posing a provocative question: “Why Is Patriotism Slipping?” The AARP Bulletin reveals some sharp differences in its “Fourth of July Poll.” For adults over 50, over 74 percent described themselves as highly patriotic. This was a generation that went to public schools with the portrait of George Washington hanging on every classroom wall, regularly singing—and memorizing—patriotic songs, and generally being indoctrinated in Americanism. It is also a generation that had the unifying experience of World War II. What was revealing—and disturbing—about the poll was that for those 18 to 34 years of age, only 32 percent identified themselves as highly patriotic. Perhaps this reflects the reality that the many forces cultivating patriotism in the past are now absent.

As I shall stress later, I believe that these trends, however fashionable, are more than regrettable. They are pernicious. They come down to a form of cultural disarmament—in an era in which all parties recognize we are confronted with a “battle of ideas.” For those who accept the concept of “the long war” (what President Kennedy himself might again describe as “a long twilight struggle”)—against both the actions and the propaganda of militant Islamists, these fashions seriously undermine our efforts in this struggle. It seems to me that in most societies that patriotism or something akin to patriotism—the desire to protect the society’s standards and beliefs against outside challenges—is for ordinary citizens instinctive. It takes a good deal of “sophisticated proselytizing” to counteract that instinct. Rather surprisingly, for in the past it has been the elites who most firmly articulated the patriotic creed, in our time it is the very elites that have fashioned the “enlightened attitudes” that downplay, scoff at, or even condemn, the traditional beliefs of the society.

Consider what has been the practice at many of our universities. There the fashions that I referred to have reigned supreme. These are, moreover, the institutions that train, i.e. indoctrinate, our youth. In the name of openness and multiculturalism, the expression of any and all opinions is supposedly welcome. I might add, it is a somewhat indiscriminate multiculturalism—but also one that exhibits a kind of specialized selectivity. The apparent rule is that one must avoid under any circumstances giving offense to anybody. At one university, the Vice Provost banned the American flag on the university bus—on the grounds that it was “insensitive” to foreign students. At another university, an administrator tells the students to remove patriotic posters (in this case, an American flag and an eagle) from the dormitory on the grounds that such displays are “offensive.” At another university, a professor observes that he believes that he is the only university employee, except for the janitorial and cafeteria staff, to wear an American flag on his lapel. He adds that “professing patriotism does not constitute a witch hunt.” At Duke University, long a hotbed of political correctness, the university shut down the website of a faculty member after he posted an article entitled “Terrorism and Its Appeasement.” Subsequently, the web page was restored, but the professor was obliged to include a disclaimer that his views did not reflect the views of the university—a requirement not imposed on other professors. So much for institutions that profess adherence to the free expression of ideas!

Now, admittedly, it is desirable to avoid giving any needless offense. But foreign students, when they come to the United States, know what country they are coming to—and should be inured against being surprised by displays of the American flag or other national symbols (of the type that they would surely encounter in their own countries). It is perhaps clear that in many of our universities the dominant force in the faculty tends to be people drawn from the rebellious late sixties and early seventies. Of course, these people have a right to their views, but they do not have a license to suppress the views of others that may be different. After 9/11, to the dismay of many faculty members, a burst of patriotism occurred on many of the same campuses, students hanging out flags and the like. As the Iraq war has dragged on, however, that flicker of renewed patriotism tended to fade, and universities reverted to the condition I have described.

One additional problem that should be mentioned, some of this behavior—suppressing the display of American flags and other such symbols—has unfortunately trickled down to the high school level, where some administrators have suppressed the expression of patriotic inclinations in the name of “avoiding offensiveness.”

Let us turn then to another “elite” institution: the American media. Our prestige newspapers and our networks are peopled by the products of our university instruction, many of them drawn from that same era of rebelliousness starting in the sixties mentioned previously. This may be particularly so for the editors who choose the subjects to be pursued, whether stories are to be printed, and the placement of the stories. The biases of what is referred to as the mainstream press have been commented on and documented elsewhere. And such news organizations are not impervious to groupthink. Moreover, as in all organizations, to be recognized and to get ahead, it is best to get along. The upshot is a somewhat distorted image of the world that affects the outlook of all citizens subject to the daily bombardment of news.

In the past, with rare and usually minor exceptions, the American press had no inhibitions in showing that it wanted the American side to win—and showing keen regret at every setback to the American cause. That changed, rather suddenly, during the Vietnam War.

A new attitude emerged—best expressed in what are stated to be the standards of professional journalism. The guiding principle, at least nominally, is objectivity—to exhibit impartiality and to avoid seeming to favor what is one’s own side. Indeed, in order to avoid any appearance of partiality, one should lean over backwards to be fair, if not overly generous, to the other side and to point to the defects, real and imagined, of one’s own side. But this leads, perhaps inevitably, to uneven treatment. One winds up treating lightly the misdeeds, if not the depravity, of the other side and, equally importantly, glorying in the supposed defects of one’s own side.

Some of these tendencies can be discerned in the treatment of the war in Iraq or, more recently, Israel’s engagement in Lebanon. I do not need to dwell on the susceptibility of the American media, and even more clearly Western media generally, to the staged events and to the doctored photographs so readily recorded by our news organizations. One must bear in mind that such supposed events are not witnessed by Western reporters, but are reported by stringers and other locals who can go into dangerous areas without attracting attention. Some may simply have an ax to grind. Others may be easily intimidated, because they themselves or their families can readily be threatened—and thus are placed at risk. The susceptibility of Western media to such mendacious accounts has regrettably been well demonstrated—and is consciously exploited by terrorists or insurgents.

Rather than dwell on such naiveté, I want, instead, to talk about the issue of self-censorship, based upon conviction about what is going on, as opposed to the reality reported by American reporters themselves. Let me illustrate this condition of editorial bias by citing a paragraph of an account by a participant in a retired general and flag officer conference at Fort Carson, Colorado.

“(T)he stories that are filed by reporters in the field very seldom reach the American public as written. An anecdote from Col. McMaster illustrates this dramatically. TIME magazine recently sent a reporter to spend six weeks with the 3rd ACR as they were in the battle of Tal Afar. When the battle was over, the reporter filed his story and also included close to 100 pictures that the accompanying photographer took. TIME published a cover story on the battle a week later, allegedly using the story sent in by their reporter. When the issue came out, the guts had been edited out of their reporter’s story and none of the pictures he submitted were used. Instead they showed a weeping child on the cover, taken from stock photos. When the reporter questioned why his story was eviscerated, his editors in New York responded that the story and pictures were “too heroic.” McMaster had read both and told me that the editors had completely changed the thrust and context of the material their reporter had submitted.”

Note from this illustration that the editors at TIME wholly altered reports from the field, suppressing the accounts of the courageous action of American soldiers, eliminating the photographs taken at the place of action, and substituting an irrelevant and misleading picture of a weeping child, no doubt clearly to demonstrate the heart-rending consequences of American bullying.

Ladies and gentlemen, whatever you may think about the way in which this nation entered the war in Iraq, *we are there*. If America were to fail in Iraq; if we prove unable to stabilize that country, it would be a severe setback for American foreign policy and an unbelievable triumph both for the terrorists and for militant Islamists generally.

We do not know what the outcome in Iraq will be. Whatever the outcome, however, this nation will be engaged in an ongoing struggle with the militant Islamist movement probably for decades ahead. So, we must strive to again revive the spirit of patriotism. We must battle against the fashions current among so many of our elites. To deal with the future we must re-arm ourselves psychologically. In brief, we must seek again to alter the Zeitgeist. If we fail to do so, we shall suffer additional setbacks. Then, ultimately, circumstances will force us to change our ways.

It was Aristotle, who at the dawn of Western civilization, put his finger on the issue of civic virtue. He stated succinctly: "Courage is that virtue that makes all other virtues possible." In modern parlance, other virtues are far less likely to be exhibited in the absence of courage. Patriotism inspires, and may be a necessary ingredient for, courage. Both will be essential for any country or any civilization which is to flourish for the balance of this century.

THANK YOU.