

Not Teaching in Order to Teach

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Prompt: Should the University of Wisconsin teach patriotism?

In a starkly divided political climate, an action like kneeling for the national anthem before an NFL game appears patriotic to some because it protests racial inequality in the United States. Others view the act as unpatriotic and a blatant disregard for the values embodied by the American flag and the sacrifices of the men and women in the armed forces. This demonstrates the impossibility of determining what content is deemed patriotic because patriotism differs among individuals. Therefore, the University of Wisconsin should not directly teach patriotism, but rather protect the values of freedom of thought, speech, and expression which in turn will lead to a naturally rejuvenated form of patriotism.

Throughout history many college students rebelled against societal restrictions and authority embodied by the university. Directly teaching patriotism, via a mandated class or other required acts, will fracture the United States further rather than promote unity. Student protests have a long history against authority in and outside of America. For example, in 1901 ethnically Polish youth students under German rule in the town of Września went on strike because of the decision the “previous year to substitute German for Polish in all schools in [the nearby town of] Poznań.”¹ In 1924-1925 at Fisk University in Nashville, students supported by W. E. B. Du Bois protested against University President Fayette McKenzie’s decision to suppress student expression on campus. He hoped this suppression would raise money for the university’s endowment from foundations that wanted universities to teach students to abide by, instead of challenge, Jim Crow laws. McKenzie called in riot police to arrest certain students involved in the peaceful protest. Eventually, McKenzie resigned his post when public support turned against

¹ Stanislaus Blejwas, “American Polonia and the School Strike in Września,” *Polish American Studies* 59, no. 1 (2002): 19, www.jstor.org/stable/20148625.

him.² Student protest movements, like the Berkeley Free Speech Movement or frequent anti-Vietnam War protests, also filled 1960s and 70s America.

Regardless of the varying degree of university involvement, each protest demonstrated students challenging decisions made by individuals or groups in positions of authority. The Polish students protested a decision made by their powerful German rulers. Fisk University students protested their President Fayette McKenzie. The 60s and 70s witnessed protests against the Vietnam War and segregationist policies enacted by powerful governmental officials. While being the site of major protests, universities, and schools more generally, continue to be an extension of the authority which many students have and will continue to protest. The aforementioned protests attracted support but also drew staunch opposition. Directly teaching patriotism at the University of Wisconsin would lead to student protest because one or both sides of the political spectrum would disagree over what the course designates as patriotic. This would unnecessarily further divide an already polarized American political atmosphere. Patriotism theoretically serves as a unifying factor and teaching it would undermine its supposed overarching purpose. To view effective patriotism intertwined between multiple levels of authority one must look back at the Greatest Generation.

Tom Brokaw's eponymous book *The Greatest Generation* coined the term for an era. It is an apt name given the unity that the men and women of that generation exhibited in defeating the Nazi scourge. They demonstrated the power of common decency, respect, and collective responsibility in promoting patriotism. For example, victory gardens permeated the homes of millions of Americans. Kids like John Cassell scavenged for scrap bits of iron or metal to donate

² "The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow. Jim Crow Stories. Fisk Student Protests: PBS," The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow. Jim Crow Stories. Fisk Student Protests | PBS (Educational Broadcasting Corporation), accessed December 31, 2019, https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_fisk.html

to the war effort.³ Mothers like Marie Tsucalas volunteered at the Red Cross.⁴ Millions of young men and women served overseas in the armed forces. Private manufacturing industries turned out munitions or guns instead of homeware appliances. Individuals felt patriotic because of the atmosphere surrounding the war effort in the United States. No course instructed them to feel patriotic or defined the ways in which they could express their feelings of love and loyalty to the United States. It was a natural form of patriotism brought about by both belief and faith in the ideals of the country. Their beliefs were not constrained by rigid academic lessons but rather flowed from a fervent conviction in America's cause.

The common decency and respect that defined the Greatest Generation was also violated by the internment of thousands of Japanese American citizens because of Executive Order 9066. Despite this egregious offense to their rights, hundreds of interned men volunteered to fight for the United States in WWII.⁵ In 1943 the government formed the famed 442nd Regimental Combat Team made up of Japanese American soldiers. The distinction of being the most decorated unit in United States military history bespoke the patriotism the soldiers felt towards a country that, due to racial prejudice, violated their constitutional rights in an atrocious fashion.⁶ Patriotism for these members of the Greatest Generation remained rooted in the collective responsibility they felt to defend their American homeland even when it would not defend them. Educational lessons on patriotism would never provoke this type of selfless response. Only

³ Susan Levine, "In WWII, Patriotism Unified A Nation," The Washington Post (WP Company, May 23, 2004), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2004/05/23/in-wwii-patriotism-unified-a-nation/a605dcd6-f2da-42e0-ae00-83d990429aba/>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "442nd Regimental Combat Team," Go For Broke National Education Center - Preserving the Legacy of the Japanese American Veterans of World War II (Go For Broke National Education Center), accessed December 31, 2019, http://www.goforbroke.org/learn/history/military_units/442nd.php

⁶ "Japanese Relocation During World War II," National Archives and Records Administration (National Archives and Records Administration, April 10, 2017), <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/japanese-relocation>

through comprehensive education about the past and protection of individuals' constitutional rights will the University of Wisconsin imbue sentiments of patriotism in its students. Directly teaching patriotism never has been nor ever will be the solution.

The University of Wisconsin must protect freedom of thought, speech, and expression and avoid directly teaching patriotism. By evoking these values every citizen becomes responsible for the country where they live. Generating this collective responsibility and pride in the place one resides will yield a naturally rejuvenated form of patriotism that, instead of further splintering the polarized political atmosphere, will heal a divided nation.

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