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Deval Patrick

A different understanding of American patriotism

Listen, I'm worried about our democracy. Nowadays, we have leaders who use division itself as a political tool. They downplay or even encourage, in some cases, a deadly assault to overturn an election. And a bunch of them are working really hard to make it harder to vote. The retreat from these processes of democracy, you know, ballot access, legislative debate, judicial review, they are worrisome enough. But what's even more concerning to me is the retreat from the purposes of democracy. These old-fashioned notions of government of, by and for the people. The rule of law as superior to the rule of any one personality. Liberty and justice for all.

COVID made it harder to overlook deep disparities among us in health and wealth and education, and deep unfairness in too much of our policing, leaving a lot of Americans questioning whether our national commitment to social and economic justice is real. For some time now, in the words of one friend of mine, the self-evident truth that all people deserve life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness seems a long way from settled in the American mind.

So to me, American democracy, the supposed model of the form, is up for grabs.

I'm worried, not just as a lawyer or a former public official, but also and mainly as a patriot. I grew up on the south side of Chicago, in a crowded two-bedroom tenement, with my mother, my sister, my grandparents and various relatives who came and went. I went to big, overcrowded, underresourced, sometimes violent public schools. And yet my grandmother would never permit us to say we were poor. Just broke, she'd say, because broke is temporary. Think about it. Here is this refugee from the Jim Crow¹ South who still believed in an America where with hard work, preparation and faith, both religious and civic, you could lift yourself from your circumstances of birth. I am for her the result and the symbol of her faith in America, so you better believe I'm a patriot.

But patriotism for Black Americans is tricky. It's tricky to love a country that doesn't always love you back. I think of the Black men who set off to fight for freedom in the world wars and then came home to be denied those very freedoms. Some of them lynched² while wearing their military uniforms. I think of the Black laborers who built great public universities, whose doors were closed to them. The Black voters who elected great public leaders whose policies like the GI Bill³ were closed to them. For a lot of our

¹ *Jim Crow*: the Jim Crow laws enforced racial segregation in the American South

² killed by a mob without a legal trial

³ *GI Bill*: law assisting war veterans

history, American democracy itself has been closed to Black people. Lots of grandmothers like mine have grandsons and granddaughters who never had their chance. Still don't.

30 I remember in college, a white classmate asked me, "Why on earth would you want to be Black?" When I told her I hadn't considered the alternative – and never would, she seemed startled and confused. I attribute this in part to the fact that I spoke and dressed like a preppy. I get that part. But mostly I think she was confused because she couldn't imagine why any Black person in his or her right mind wouldn't trade places with her. I think it would blow her mind, as it may some of yours, when I say I am also proud to be a patriot. Given our history, being Black and patriotic will certainly strike some people as strange, if not
35 absurd.

I don't know when patriotism turned into, you know, lapel pins and flyovers⁴ and silly arguments about pro football players taking a knee. My love of country is about national aspiration. America is the only nation in human history organized not by geography or a common culture or language or religion or even race, but by a handful of civic ideals. And we've come to define those ideals over time and through struggle as
40 equality, opportunity and fair play. Why? Because that's what makes freedom possible. That's the America my grandmother believed in. That's the America that has made us a magnet to talent from all over the world. That's the America that makes me and countless other men and women from every race and background a patriot.

In a way, the founders, for all their flaws, designed America to be a nation of values, a sort of a country with a conscience. And we've struggled with and against that conscience from the start. But true patriots
45 understand, given that context, that America cannot be great without also being good. So when we cage refugee children to discourage their parents from seeking sanctuary here, true patriots know we cannot be great without being good. When bullets fly in houses of worship or in schools or in nightclubs or in grocery stores, and our leaders choose the slogans of the gun lobby over the lives of innocents, patriots know we
50 cannot be great without being good. When unarmed Black and brown citizens are shot down by unaccountable police, when our justice system is not yet consistently just, patriots know we cannot be great without being good. When the economy moves on and leaves broken lives and broken expectations behind it, and our leaders just shrug, or when the public schools continue to fail poor children, and when we can always find the money for a weapons system the military doesn't want, but not the money for the
55 health care a young family or senior needs, patriots know or must ask themselves: Can we be great without being good? And when we choose a power grab over a fair vote ... every true patriot knows we cannot be great without being good.

Patriotism demands more than ceremony and sanctimony. It's about more than what you say you believe. It's about living the values of equality, opportunity and fair play. Even when it's inconvenient, even
60 when it gets in the way of partisan advantage, even when it compels us to be mindful of and compassionate towards the lowly, the vulnerable, the different and the despised. Because that's what American democracy is for.

Of course, we have policies to fix, whether in job growth or education, in immigration or the justice system, or in these processes of democracy itself. But before we can fix our policies, we have to fix our
65 politics. And by that, I am not just talking about better tone or hyper-partisanship or a willingness to compromise. As important as all of that is, I'm talking about our purpose. Sure, we should debate, and we always do, what role government should play in any of this, in meeting our civic obligations. But let's try for

⁴ aircraft flying in formation as part of a ceremony

once not to forget in the heat of the debate that social and economic justice was the point from the start. But I think saving our democracy will take more, not just from elected officials or civic leaders or the media, but more from each one of us. And we're going to have to start, I think, by putting our cynicism down. I'm going to give you an example of what I mean.

Near the end of my time in office, America faced a crisis not unlike today's when there were all these unaccompanied children, some as young as three and four years old, who were flooding across the southern border, having fled over thousands of miles from violence in Central America. And then, just like now, the federal authorities were overwhelmed. So President Obama, who was in office at the time, called on a number of states to temporarily shelter and care for some of these children while they were being processed under our laws. Feelings around immigration ran hot then, just like now. Even so, I agreed that our Commonwealth⁵ would help because sheltering poor children fleeing unspeakable violence was, to me, an act of patriotism. America has given sanctuary to desperate children for more than a century. We rescued Irish children from famine, Russian and Ukrainian children from religious persecution, Cambodian children from genocide, Haitian children from earthquakes, Sudanese children from civil war, our own New Orleans children from Hurricane Katrina. Once in 1939, we turned our backs on Jewish children fleeing the Nazis. And it remains a blight on our national reputation, as I fear the separation of children in the last administration⁶ will be remembered. The point is that our esteem and our power is enhanced when we rescue the desperate – and diminished when we don't.

Still, I'm not naive. I knew my decision⁷ would be controversial, and indeed, for that decision, I was called on hate radio and in social media everything but a child of God. A couple of days after I announced my decision, on an unusually quiet Saturday morning, my wife Diane gave me a list of stuff to go get at the Home Depot⁸, proving for some of you who know her that there is no office high enough that excuses you from one of her honey-do lists.

It was early in the day, and I thought I'd just slip out quickly, you know, on my own, without bothering my security detail. What harm could come of that, right? I knew exactly where I was going and where to find everything on my list. So I set off in the truck, in a T-shirt and jeans and flip-flops, dark glasses and a baseball cap. And it didn't matter. I was outed⁹ by the manager in the very first aisle. "Good morning, governor! Welcome to the Home Depot. How can I help you?" I encountered a man in the checkout line who was red-hot mad. You know, not hostile or threatening, just really angry and loud, and he let me have it. "Governor," he said, "I couldn't disagree with you more about your decision," he said. "My own wife is an immigrant. She came here legally. That's the way it ought to be. And I just want you to know I think you're wrong."

Now, in that circumstance, there was no point in trying to engage with him about how being a refugee is legal under American law. I just thanked him for his feedback. But everybody in the checkout line and in that area of the store knew who was mad at whom and what he was mad about. Now I had six other encounters in the store on the same subject. And in every one of those someone came up and whispered: "Governor, you're doing the right thing." "Governor, thanks for looking out for those kids." "Governor, I'm with you." The calls to the office were two and three to one in favor of sheltering those children. And when I reflect on that, I think to myself: When did we learn to shout our anger and to

⁵ the State of Massachusetts

⁶ *the last administration*: the presidency of Donald Trump (b. 1947) from 2017-2021

⁷ during his time as governor of Massachusetts, Deval decided to shelter illegal immigrants in the state

⁸ *Home Depot*: home improvement store

⁹ recognised

whisper our kindness? It's completely upside down. I don't know if that's the reality TV culture we live in or what, but it's totally backwards. It's time we learned again to shout kindness, to shout compassion, to shout justice. That's the purpose of American democracy and the source of our greatness.

110 Blessedly, we're starting to see more and more expressions of this kind of thing across this country. More
and more people coming off the sidelines, overcoming their cynicism and fatalism and standing up for
America at her generous and optimistic best. From women who are demanding to be treated with the
respect and decency everyone deserves. From survivors of domestic violence and abuse demanding to be
115 seen and heard and believed. From Black and brown people who are demanding consistent
professionalism and the presumption of innocence from police. From students who are demanding we
choose their lives and safety over the proliferation of military weapons in civilian hands. From all those
lawyers who showed up at polling places in 2020 or at airports after the so-called Muslim ban, demanding
respect for the rule of law. Black Lives Matter. Time's Up. Black Girl Magic. Occupy Wall Street. Families
Belong Together¹⁰. At any given time on any given issue, they may make any one of us uncomfortable. But
120 they have taken to the legislatures, to the ballot boxes, to the courtrooms and peacefully to the streets to
lay claim to their democracy, its purpose as well as its processes, and ultimately to affirm the American
conscience. They are shouting kindness.

If American-style democracy is to have a chance, more of us had better put our own cynicism
down, summon up our own patriotism and join them.

125 Thank you very much.

(2022)

¹⁰ *Black Lives Matter [...] Families Belong Together: protest movements*