

Education of a Patriot
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On January 6, 2021, I think, for about an hour or two, I lost touch with reality.

On that day a joint session of the US Congress had gathered to certify the Electoral College's votes for President. I watched my TV. Protestors attacked the Capitol. Police retreated. Legislators sheltered in place. The election certification stopped.

Was I watching a Civil War unfold, I wondered? If so, what should I do?

My next steps were, I admit, impulsive.

I went to my computer, looked up some information, picked up my landline, and dialed. On the other end, a man picked up and said, quickly, almost as one syllable, "This-is-Staff-Sergeant-Mike-Jones-Maine-National-Guard Portland-Recruitment-office-how-many-I-help-you-sir-mam?" "Staff Sergeant Jones, my name is Brian Purnell. I am 43 years old. I want to enlist in the Maine National Guard."

I am a patriot. I have always identified that way. Until I turned 18, my ambition was to serve in the military.

My father is Vietnam War veteran. His best friend, my mother's older brother, is also a veteran of Vietnam. My father and uncle met in high school. After graduation, they joined the Marines together. They both volunteered for Vietnam.

You may be wondering, why did they do *that*?

For my dad, military service was part of his family's tradition. His father and two older brothers had served. After the Marines, he served in the Army Reserves for another 20 years.

My mother's brother had a different tradition of patriotism. He and my mother are immigrants. Their family came from Barbados, a small island in the Caribbean Sea. Some immigrants look on their homeland with fond nostalgia, but for my mother's family, Barbados was sickness and poverty. America was opportunity.

These were my first and most powerful examples of patriotism.

In the United States, my mother earned a high school diploma. For generations, women in her family were servants and slaves on plantations. She joined the first wave of women of color break into the all-white world of professional secretaries in Manhattan offices.

From my father and my uncle, I learned the United States was worthy of personal sacrifice. People, no matter what their color or where they were born, who loved the country, served it its military. I planned to do the same.

From first grade through college, I attended Catholic schools. My high school was all-boys and Jesuit. The Jesuits are priests who stress critical thinking and lifelong devotion to service.

Before the Vietnam war had divided and embittered the country, my high school had a mandatory military cadet program. By the time I attended, the military program was optional. I volunteered for it and thrived.

My best friend remains a guy I met through that high school military program. He was one year ahead of me. We lived in the same neighborhood. For three years we were inseparable. We became brothers. He attended the US Military Academy at West Point. I experienced his freshman, or plebe, year through letters and visits. It looked miserable. I wanted a normal college experience *before* I joined the service.

In high school, I loved learning. I enjoyed how the Jesuit style pushed me to never settle for easy answers. I desired more of that kind of education. I also wanted a school with a program that trained people to become military officers after graduation. Fordham University met my requirements. The school accepted me; but would the Army?

The university's army instructor interviewed me. We reviewed my grades and discussed why I desired military service. He was impressed.

Then he reviewed my medical record. "Says here you take medicine for asthma," he said. Yes, I said; but I reminded him about my strong physical fitness test scores; and I told him, you know, it wasn't really a big deal. "Maybe not to you," he said, "but what if you're in situation, people are depending on you, you don't have your medication, you can't breathe. What then?"

I had never thought about that. My dream had blinded me from my reality.

He said if I could get a doctor to approve my health, and if I signed a waiver that absolved the Army from any liability for my medical condition, then I had a provisional spot in the program. I felt optimistic; until I told my father.

My dad didn't think this was a good idea. He didn't tell me what to do, but he stressed that if signed that paper, and sustained serious injury, I probably would not receive full medical care. I followed his advice.

I began college feeling lost. I was not the person I had thought I would be, and I didn't see a way to become him. I didn't know what to do. I floundered academically. Midway through my first semester, I was failing one class and barely passing another. I improved, but my grades were mediocre.

History saved me. When I took required history and literature courses, I signed up for anything that said, "American." And I loved it. I could spend hours reading about the United

States. I excelled in class discussions and debates. In military history courses, I studied about common soldiers, people like my father and uncle: the shoeless, frostbitten militiamen at Valley Forge; the runaway slaves who served in the Union Army; the Marines who raised the flag at Iwo Jima; the grunts and POWs in Vietnam. In Native American history, I learned about the horrors of colonialism. In African American and women's history courses, I learned about painful contradictions in my nation's past, but also its powerful promise of liberty and equity.

I began thinking that being an historian could be a way to be a patriot.

When I graduated college in 2000, I immediately started PhD studies in US history. I quickly learned how historians define themselves through complicated and contentious debates over interpretations of the past and divide themselves into competing intellectual camps. Once again, my orientation of what it meant to be a patriot was challenged significantly.

I was not then, and am not now, interested in faddish "schools-of-thought," or politically influenced interpretations. History, I think, helps us ask good questions, hard questions, and seek out difficult truths. History can show us at our good moments and our worse moments and inspire us to do and be better. But that is not how professional historians are trained. I slogged through the first year of PhD studies, a bit adrift, wondering if I would or should finish.

And my desire to be a patriot-historian became even more difficult one bright Tuesday morning when, within a few hours, the entire world changed.

During the fall of my second year in graduate school, I was a teaching assistant for an Intro to US history class. I was scheduled to lead my first discussion section with college students on September 11, 2001. Because I was nervous, I had arrived at the NYU library very early. The sun had started to rise on my walk from the subway to campus. I sat in my usual seat

in the library's basement. After a few hours, I noticed that, except for me, the room was eerily empty. I went upstairs. The streets were packed with people. On the corner of W 3rd and LaGuardia Place there was a one-mile sight line to the World Trade center. Smoke and fire billowed from the towers and darkened the clear blue sky. I found a friend in the crowd. We watched the first tower fall, then ran to her apartment, and watched the second one fall on TV.

I knew the world had changed, but I was not sure how to change with it. I was 23. Guys from high school and my neighborhood were rushing to volunteer for military service. Maybe I could have joined then, even with my medical history. But something troubled me about the country's mood. Those first months after the attacks were balls of confusion.

One night I was in Manhattan with friends from high school. There was a party for another classmate who had just joined the Marines. He said he wanted to kill terrorists. I thought, but did not say aloud, if we rush to war, what about the other people, who are not terrorists, who will die? And who were we even fighting – what country – and why, and how would we know when we won?

My best friend from high school was in the Army. My younger cousin – the son of the uncle who was in the Marines with my father – he had joined the Marines. When America went to war, they would inevitably have to serve in it. I started to think, for the first time it seemed, about what responsibilities a citizen and a patriot had beyond military service. Was I responsible, in some small way, for making sure our leaders did not send my best friend, my cousin, and so many others into combat unnecessarily; or recklessly endanger the lives of noncombatants who, along with soldiers, are war's inevitable casualties?

War broke out first in Afghanistan. Quickly thereafter – about a year – America was preparing to invade Iraq. I had spent a lot of time with my cousin, the new Marine, whenever he

was home on leave. One night, he told me he was shipping out to the Middle East and would probably be part of the Marine forces that invaded Iraq.

I told him I disagreed with this war, but that I loved him, and I loved my best friend, who would also eventually serve in Iraq. I told my cousin this war seemed wrong, and that I was going to protest it. He reminded me that he did not have the freedom to say which wars he agreed with, and which he didn't. We hugged and wished each other well.

The only time I ever went to jail was for joining a nonviolent protest during the early weeks of the 2003 Iraq invasion. While my cousin was driving in a Humvee down burning streets in Baghdad, I joined other protestors and demonstrated against the war. I was completely off-script from everything I had learned from my family about patriotism, but I also knew that civil disobedience was a longstanding way to express dissent in a free society. When I was arrested for protesting the Iraq invasion, I never for a second felt I was not supporting my cousin, my best friend, or other troops. I felt – and still feel – that nonviolent civil disobedience is an important way to express one's patriotism.

I am not a pacifist. I do think some wars – like the American Civil War and World War II – were necessary. The 2003 Iraq war seemed, to me, unnecessary. In moments like that, citizens in a free republic have a right, and maybe a duty to protest; to raise their voices, and peacefully put their bodies on the line to disrupt business-as-usual.

After my arrest, though, I learned quickly that jail is terrible. Plastic handcuffs tied behind your back become incredibly painful to wear after an hour. Your wrists hurt. Your shoulders burn. Your eyes water. And jail itself was miserable. At first, I was in a large holding pen large with other roughly 50 other protestors. Hours passed. Demonstrators were released. But my name wasn't called.

I fell asleep under harsh fluorescent lights that never went off. I had been in police custody for almost 24 hours. My stomach groaned. The jail diet – Oscar Meyer baloney on moldy white bread – looked appetizing. I was the last protestor in the cell. I was scared. I used a payphone in the corner of the pen to call to the one person who I thought would show me some sympathy.

I called my mother.

She was furious. You're going to ruin your career. You're going to get kicked out of school over this foolishness.

I tried to explain that it was important to express dissent when the cause was right; that this would help the country; that it was wrong for my cousin to be in this war.

She wasn't hearing it.

When she stopped yelling to catch a breath, I said the one thing I thought would get my very religious mother on my side.

"But Ma," I said, "Jesus was a political prisoner."

"How dare you bring the Lord into this," she seethed. And then she hung up.

At that moment, I didn't feel like a patriot. I just felt alone. I felt like crying. But by that time, the non-political prisoners began arriving. I didn't really want to be crying in front of them.

I asked an officer when I might leave. "I'll check," he said, and walked off. "You may have to spend the weekend. Hope you have a toothbrush!"

He returned. "This you? Brian Pummel?"

"I'm Brian *Purnell*," I said.

He double checked my information. The arresting officers' handwriting was so sloppy, they had been calling my name for hours, but saying it incorrectly.

“Yeah – that’s me,” I said. “I’m Brian Pummel. Now, can I please go home?”

The guard laughed.

As he processed me for release, the guard, who was about my age, brown skinned and dark haired, started calmly asking me questions. He sincerely wanted to know why I got arrested that day.

I explained.

He asked what else I was doing with my life. I told him I was going to school to become a historian.

And what will you do with that, he asked.

I hope to teach in a college or university, and to write about American history.

Why, he asked.

So, we can learn how to make our country better, I said.

So, how you gonna do that by getting arrested, he asked.

I got his point.

You can write better history if you’re not locked up, he said.

I smiled because he was right. He smiled back.

Obviously, I did not join the National Guard on January 6 of last year. The recruiter told me I was too old. When I reminded him that people up to 43 years old were eligible, he asked, “Are you superman.” I am sorry, can you repeat that, I said. “Are you the physical fitness equivalent of Captain America,” he asked. No. Well that’s the only type of 43-year-old we take.

I felt dejected. The election was still being held up by violence. It was hard to know what to do.

My wife came upstairs from her home office and asked me what was wrong. I can't join the National Guard, I said. Befuddled, she asked me to explain. I did. She signed and calmly said, "If Staff Sergeant Jones didn't say no, I most certainly would have. You must be out your mind thinking you're going to leave me here with 4 children." She was right. "There are other ways to serve your country," she reminded me, as she walked away. Right again.

There are many ways one can help build up, rather than tear down, their country. There are many ways to be a patriot. Being a patriot does not come from a uniform, or self-righteousness, or martyrdom. Devotion to one's country is not only, or even best, measured in what you give up, but what you invest in; it does not come from what we tear down, but what we build up. America has a lot of problems, but we can solve them if we learn from our past mistakes, and work towards our future with intelligence, patience, and care.

I am a teacher, historian, and a writer. In my personal life, I am a father and a husband. Those are the ways I live my life as a patriot and serve my country.

Patriotism does not belong to one political party, or one type of person. It doesn't come from a uniform or a gun or anger or yelling or saying who we are against. It comes from saying what we are for.

I hope you will live your patriotism in ways that make sense to you, and in ways that build up our country into a place that is just, equitable, and good. America's future depends on those kinds of patriots.