



# The Way I See It

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## Saluting the Flag Is Not Enough

James Clavell's *The Children's Story*<sup>1</sup> is in the form of a story for children, but its message is for the adult reader. It covers the time period from 8:58 to 9:23 a.m. in what appears to be a first grade classroom somewhere in the United States. The situation is typical, the classroom is typical, the students are typical. But this day is unusual: it is the first day of school since "they" won the war. We have been vanquished in battle and today the "new" teacher is coming to take charge of this class, as other "new" teachers are doing in similar classrooms across the nation.

The gist of the tale centers on the relative ease with which the teacher begins to mold the minds of the students to the proper way of thought. She challenges their understanding of terms like "pledge," "allegiance," and "freedom," and quickly convinces most of them to scrap the democratic beliefs we assume they hold so dear.

Clavell got the idea for *The Children's Story* when his daughter asked him for a dime as a reward for learning the Pledge of Allegiance in school. She recited it proudly but had no idea what it meant. Her teacher had taught her the ritual but had not developed understanding of a democratic belief. Try it yourself: ask an elementary school child what the Pledge of Allegiance means, what the flag represents, or what freedom is all about. The answers may surprise you.

There was a time when young Americans had answers to these questions. There was a time when the terms and the rituals had meaning, before Watergate and Vietnam. In 1962, the year I left high school, writers were defining patriotism as "a firm, abiding, emotional attachment to our country and all that it stands for."<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the history of the past two decades has eroded

that attachment, and few of the young seem aware that the degree of freedom to be found in this country is not the world norm. Today such a definition is not enough; students have seen that "all that it stands for" often includes persecution of minorities and inequality of opportunity.

What is needed is a redefinition of patriotism. Too often patriotism is confused with nationalism. While the two may overlap, they are not the same. Nationalism places the nation's interests first; patriotism places the nation's ideals first. We need to realize also that there are at least two types of patriotism. Allison and Williams<sup>3</sup> defined them well a decade ago. Emotional patriotism burns white hot, then cools because it lacks an intellectual basis. We have taught our young to feel proud when the flag passes, we have stressed love of country, and therein lies the problem. Emotional responses are good for the short term, but they cannot stand up to the realities of recent history.

The better type is the "rational," which is supported by the intellect. The rational patriot is loyal to the sensible and humane ideals held by a nation, such as those set forth in our Bill of Rights. The true rational patriot not only espouses these ideals but also attempts to demonstrate them in daily life.

History has shown that people who do not understand an ideal and its applica-

tions will not fight to protect that ideal. Ours is a time of unclear values and beliefs among the young; we are raising a generation that lacks intellectual commitment to freedom and the responsibilities it entails.

Allison and Williams suggested the course to follow ten years ago, when they observed that irrational patriotism was fading and that nothing was taking its place. First, we must minimize the emotional approach; today's students need rational motivation for patriotism. Second, we must examine all phases of our history and traditions with an open mind, looking critically at our nation and its policies. We need to recognize the role of luck in our national development and cultivate a sense of debt to our forebears for their accomplishments. Third, we need to teach our students good judgment, responsibility, restraint, and reasoning skills. Finally, as educators and citizens, we need to set a good example by living out our belief in our ideals. □

<sup>1</sup>James Clavell, *The Children's Story* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1981).

<sup>2</sup>Robert N. Bush, "The High Schools and Patriotism," *Journal of Secondary Education* 37 (January 1962): 2.

<sup>3</sup>Clinton B. Allison and L. P. Williams, "Patriotism: Irrational and Rational," *Educational Forum* 35 (January 1971): 235-238.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

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