

# Dear Clinton Voters: You're Confusing Me

Dear Clinton Voters,

I confess that, as someone who voted for neither candidate in 2016, you have me baffled indeed.

During the campaign you were warning us in the public that the bellicose nationalism of your opponent was a [dark and dangerous direction](#).

Yet now, with the candidate you opposed in office, it is precisely his *lack* of national feeling—indeed, his *want* of loyalty to his country—that you are [calling into question](#).

Please do help me, an ordinary American ignoramus, to understand this riddle.

Clearly you believe loyalty to country, then, to be a good and desirable characteristic—in appropriate doses. That's fair, of course—indeed, I'm in agreement with you. But you have now accused your opponent of two polar opposite lacks: first that of *excessive loyalty* to his country, and now of *insufficient loyalty*. Both can't be true at once, and you have contradicted yourselves from the start.

Is the president simply being a hypocrite? That is, is he appealing to his voters' patriotism in order to pursue baser goals himself? I'm not averse to accepting that position as true. But he isn't really the one in question here. In order to gauge the truth of that position, the deeper question which needs to be asked is: *what is patriotism?* And how can we tell the difference between someone who is *insufficiently* loyal, and someone who is *excessively* loyal?

First off, let's define terms. I think it can be safely agreed

that a country is a *place*, which contains a certain body of *people*, who share a certain bond of common concerns. Loyalty to country—patriotism—is expressed as an *attachment* to *this* particular place, and *this* body of people, sharing *these* concerns.

Etymologically speaking, that attachment is *familial*. To be patriotic is to be loyal to your *patria*—literally, to your parents—because they loved you and raised you and sought the good for you when you were born. The land you were raised in sustained you when you were growing up. And it is only *just*—that is, only *fair and right*—to return that love and to seek the good for them. There is a certain kind of *justice* and *reciprocity*, then, that underwrites the classical sense of ‘patriotism’.

But problems begin to arise when we talk about American patriotism. When your candidate was asked about patriotism, she would make recourse not to a *place*, nor to *people*, nor even to *common concerns*, but instead to [‘values’](#): that is to say, principles of ‘inclusion’, ‘tolerance’ and ‘respect’. This is not unheard-of, because America is a peculiar nation founded not on the *family-feeling* of classical patriotism, but instead on *two ideas*: negative liberty and religious pluralism, which find their expression in various forms of *liberalism*. I would argue, in fact, that both candidates appealed to liberalism, in one form or another. Think of how the ‘right’ have set themselves up as champions of free and unrestrained speech.

Many people are, of course, loyal to such ideas, even to the point of dying for them. But is it always *just* to love an idea, the same way that it is always *just* to love one’s parents?

Following the logic to its extreme: would you say that it is always *just* to include, tolerate or respect people whose ideas differ from yours? Would you willingly include and tolerate

the presence of Nazis or Stalinists or other *genocidaires* within your body politic? Given the [reaction to the president](#) and his proxies from your 'side' (who, distasteful though many of his views are, is not yet a Nazi nor a Stalinist nor any other sort of mass butcher, and still less the people who voted for him) I think it safe to venture that you do *not* consistently see inclusion, tolerance and respect as just.

To clarify: even the elder classical patriotism can be taken to unhealthy, unjust and even murderous extremes—and these are to be condemned. But is it possible to love one's parents, one's neighbours or one's hometown to a dangerous excess, in the same way it is possible to love an idea or an ideology to a dangerous excess?

Even if it were possible, is an *excessive* or *disordered* love of community truly what is causing us to suffer now?

I highly doubt it.

Sincerely,

Matthew