Should America be First?: Questions for Teaching about Patriotism During Trump's Presidency

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The purpose of this article is twofold: first, to consider the nature of U.S. President Donald Trump's patriotism in relation to Westheimer's (2007) framework of authoritarian and democratic patriotism; second, to ask a series of questions for teachers at all levels (including myself) about teaching about patriotism during Trump's presidency. The questions are raised from a place of critical inquiry, with the belief that not all teachers need to answer the questions similarly but they do need to teach about the complexity of patriotism, challenging any simplistic, authoritarian notions of patriotism.

Introduction

On December 15, 2016, U.S. President-Elect Donald Trump held a "Thank You Tour" rally in Hershey, Pennsylvania. One topic that he addressed to the 10,000 attendees was respect for the U.S. flag. Referencing seeing "punks burning the flag and stomping on it" on nightly news shows, Trump commented, "No good, no good. We're going to maybe have to do something about that…Patriotism will be celebrated in our cities and taught very, very strongly to our children" (Schwartz, 2016, para. 5).

Trump's remarks about the teaching of patriotism had precedent in a speech that he gave to the annual conference of the American Legion in Cincinnati three months earlier:

> I want to begin by discussing one goal that I know is so important to all of you: promoting American pride and patriotism in America's schools. In a Trump Administration, I plan to work directly with the American Legion to uphold our common values and to help ensure they are taught to America's children. We want our kids to learn the incredible achievements of America's history, its institutions, and its heroes. We will stop apologizing for America, and we will start celebrating America. (Trump, 2016b, paras. 6-8)

Candidate Trump did not share further specifics for his plan for patriotism in schools but it is clear that the last two sentences above align strongly with Westheimer's (2007) conception of "authoritarian patriotism," in which critical thought and allegiance to democratic principles are suppressed in favor of unwavering allegiance to power. Yet patriotism is far more complex than simple obedience to the president, as some of my recent work shows (Kissling, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018).

The purpose of this article is to consider the authoritarian nature of President Trump's patriotism and then ask a series of questions for teachers at all levels (including myself) about teaching about patriotism during Trump's presidency. I raise these questions from a place of critical inquiry: While I have my own answers to these questions, the point is not for all

teachers to respond similarly (to me). Rather, the point is for us to grapple explicitly with how we teach about patriotism.

I do believe all teachers must explicitly teach about the complexity of patriotism, which includes directly challenging any simplistic, authoritarian constructions of patriotism. As I argue below that President Trump is promoting such a notion of patriotism, this means that we need to complicate the president's patriotism-related rhetoric and actions, regardless of whether we approve or disapprove of some or all of his actions and policies.

Trump's Authoritarian Patriotism

Westheimer (2007) theorizes "two umbrella categories of patriotism" (p. 173): authoritarian patriotism and democratic patriotism. While the categories are not meant to be exhaustive, authoritarian patriotism is marked by a "belief that one's country is inherently superior to others" (Westheimer, 2009, p. 318) and coupled with this is a strict obedience to the country's leaders. Democratic patriotism is marked by a "belief that one's country's ideals are worthy of admiration and respect" (p. 318) and thus there is strict obedience to the country's founding principles (like liberty and justice).

One of the main distinctions between the two categories is the handling of dissent, and this can be seen in slogans representative of each. While authoritarian patriotism is attached to calls like "My country, right or wrong" and "America: Love it or leave it," democratic patriotism hinges on rallying cries such as "Dissent is patriotic" and "You have the right to NOT remain silent" (Westheimer, 2009, p. 318). With these umbrellas in mind, I consider how Trump's construction of patriotism reflects authoritarian patriotism.

The foundation for Trump's authoritarian patriotism is his belief in his own personal greatness. At the 2016 Republican National Convention, during his speech in which he accepted the Republican Party's nomination for president, Trump explained, "I have joined the political arena so that the powerful can no longer beat up on people that cannot defend themselves. Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why *I alone* can fix it" (2016a, para. 44; italics added). He does not mince words about his perceived superiority, and this belief in personal greatness is coupled with a belief in "American greatness."[1] In his first speech to a joint Congress, Trump proclaimed, "A new chapter of American Greatness is now beginning. A new national pride is sweeping across our Nation. And a new surge of optimism is placing impossible dreams firmly within our grasp" (Trump, 2017c, paras. 5-7). The subtext, of course, is that he is the reason for this "new chapter of American Greatness." Three months later, in "The Budget Message of the President"—a letter from Trump to Congress in his administration's proposed budget—he wrote that the budget would "unleash the dreams of the American people…[and lay] a new foundation for American Greatness" (Trump, 2017f, p.1).

Importantly, American greatness is not a standalone sign of authoritarian patriotism as democratic patriotism can also be swayed by similar notions. But Trump's belief in himself as great has become intricately tied to American greatness. Therefore, rhetoric like "American greatness" is repeated over and over, regardless if it is evidenced or not, because the whole foundation crumbles if America (and thus Trump) isn't great. The presidency is held as the leading point of American greatness (although this was not the case during President Obama's presidency). Thus, he perceives that he has unrivaled authority: as the foremost representation of America, all citizens and organizations (including the news media) should be loyal to him by

supporting and not questioning his rhetoric and actions. Following some of the main tenets of authoritarian patriotism, then, Trump expects absolute loyalty while seeking to silence all critical scrutiny. In his inaugural address, he stated, "At the bedrock of our politics will be a total allegiance to the United States of America, and through our loyalty to our country, we will rediscover our loyalty to each other" (2017a, para. 50). Time and again through his months in office, a longing for loyalty has been front and center. His firing of FBI Director James Comey is a prominent example: When Trump repeatedly demanded "loyalty" from Comey, Comey offered "honesty" (Schmidt, 2017). Trump's frequent diatribes against the media for being "fake news" are another prominent example (Rosen, 2017).

While "fake news" has become one of Trump's many sound bites, his two most prominent campaign-turned-presidential slogans—"Make America Great Again" and "America First"—are steeped in authoritarian patriotism. Although "Make America Great Again" offers that America has faltered in its greatness, the framing around the slogan is nonetheless that America is exceptional and that it just needs to better live out its exceptionality. During the campaign, this allowed Trump to both tout American greatness and still attack his opponent Hillary Clinton and recent past presidents, particularly Obama, for their supposed efforts to undermine American greatness. The "Again" in the slogan is essential: to omit it would be to mar American greatness; to rely on it trumpets American greatness while messaging that Trump himself can facilitate America's return to greatness.

A hallmark of authoritarian patriotism, there is a simplistic, grand narrative activated in Trump's use of "Make America Great Again": America used to be great; it is no longer great, but with Trump as president, the country will return to being great. This simplicity was central to his Republican Convention speech and it returned in his inaugural address, as he spoke of "American carnage":

> Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system, flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of knowledge; and the crime and gangs and drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential…We've made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has disappeared over the horizon. One by one, the factories shuttered and left our shores, with not even a thought about the millions upon millions of American workers left behind. The wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their homes and then redistributed across the entire world. (2017a, paras. 24, 32-34)

This supposed clear-cut fall from greatness was the context for Trump's declaring in the address: "We, the citizens of America, are now joined in a great national effort to rebuild our country and to restore its promise for all of our people" (Trump, 2017a, para. 2).

"Make America Great Again" also whitewashes U.S. history through longing for a return to a perceived prior Golden Age. Thinly veiled is a call for a return to various forms of wide-scale discrimination. Asserting that America used to be great—explicitly or implicitly—longs for earlier eras marked by racism, sexism, and other discriminatory injustices since the country's history is one rooted in these overt forms of oppression (Zinn, 1980/2003). It is this context of "Make America Great Again" that helps to explain Trump's comments to the American Legion's 2016 annual conference: "We want our kids to learn the incredible achievements of America's

history, its institutions, and its heroes. We will stop apologizing for America, and we will start celebrating America" (2016b, paras. 6-8).

This effort to simplify and glorify America's history is an attempt to erase the importance of difference while blindly trumpeting American unity. Diversity—including diverse ways of living and knowing—is a threat to authoritarian patriotism. Thus, on his first day in office, Trump issued a proclamation for a "National Day of Patriotic Devotion," writing, "A new national pride stirs the American soul and inspires the American heart. We are one people, united by a common destiny and a shared purpose" (2017b, p. 1). His inaugural address delivered on the same day spoke repeatedly to "you, the American people" with scant attention to the tremendous diversity of Americans. He said, "We are one nation…We share one heart, one home, and one glorious destiny. The oath of office I take today is an oath of allegiance to all Americans" (2017a, paras. 26-27). He then ended the address returning to his campaign slogan, "And, yes, together, we will make America great again" (para. 75).

This slogan, according to Trump in an interview a few days before his inauguration, "meant jobs. It meant industry, and meant military strength. It meant taking care of our veterans. It meant so much" (Tumulty, 2017, p. 4). When asked in the interview how greatness can be measured or sensed, he answered, "Being a great president has to do with a lot of things, but one of them is being a great cheerleader for the country" (p. 5). He then talked about building up the military and displaying it prominently through "parades" and "marching down Pennsylvania Avenue." Such framing falls squarely under Westheimer's umbrella of authoritarian patriotism. It's about possessing strength and flaunting it, not too dissimilar from the actions of North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un during Trump's first months as president (e.g., Fisher, 2017).

This framing for "Make America Great Again," which serves primarily as a rally cry for Trump, is tied to Trump's other frequently-uttered slogan, "America First," which is an explicit policy statement. In his inaugural address, he offered:

> For many decades, we've enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry; Subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military; We've defended other nation's borders while refusing to defend our own; And spent trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay…But that is the past. And now we are looking only to the future. We assembled here today are issuing a new decree to be heard in every city, in every foreign capital, and in every hall of power. From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this moment on, it's going to be America First. (2017a, paras. 28-31, 35-38)

In terms of domestic affairs, this policy was on display in his "Budget blueprint" that he released ahead of his 2017 budget. Taking "America First" as the blueprint's title, it asserted that the budget would "put America first," thus funding, among a host of other things, "a wall on the southern border with Mexico" (2017d, p.1).

Internationally, this policy assumes an endless competition among countries—other countries are no longer allies, they are foremost threats to America. Trump's withdrawal from the 2015 Paris climate agreement signed by 195 countries is a prime example. While many found it less than perfect, the accord was the broadest international action yet taken on global climate change (McKibben, 2017). In his justification for withdrawing, Trump offered that the

accord "is simply the latest example of Washington entering into an agreement that disadvantages the United States" (Trump, 2017g, para. 11). He stressed that through "draconian financial and economic burdens" (para. 12) and "a massive redistribution of United States wealth" (para. 26), other countries would benefit at the expense of the United States. Thus, "the bottom line is that the Paris accord is very unfair at the highest level to the United States" (para. 20).

Toward the end of his speech, Trump said, "The Paris agreement handicaps the United States economy in order to win praise from the very foreign capitals and global activists that have long sought to gain wealth at our country's expense. They don't put America first. I do and I always will" (para. 49). He then ended the speech by saying, "It is time to put Youngstown, Ohio, Detroit, Michigan, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, along with many, many other locations within our great country, before Paris, France. It is time to make America great again" (para. 66). Operationalizing and connecting his two main slogans, Trump suggested that withdrawing from the accord put "America First" instead of the rest of the world, and thus, in doing this, he was seeking to "Make America Great Again."

As seen in this reaction to the Paris climate accord, competition is an organizing frame for Trump. Certainly market-based competition has been central to Trump's work as a businessman, but he has brought a win-at-all-costs approach to all matters as president. His speeches are riddled with talk of "winning." In his inaugural address, he offered that "America will start winning again, winning like never before" (2017a, para. 46). In his commencement speech at Liberty University (2017e), he fixated on Liberty's football team winning. In his speech to tens of thousands of Boy Scouts, he remarked, "If you do what we say, I promise you that you will live scouting's adventure every single day of your life, and you will win, win, win and help people in doing so" (2017h, para. 81). As seen in these examples, Trump stresses the importance of winning in all aspects of living. However, there is rarely any critical consideration of the parameters of competition, or the stakes, especially for those who are harmed by it.

The preceding paragraphs document Trump's authoritarian patriotism, steeped in American greatness and exceptionalism, uncritical loyalty, simplistic slogans, whitewashed and shallow narratives about what America is and who Americans are, dismissal of difference in favor of all-encompassing unity, and competition. Embedded in these are the workings of nationalism, nostalgia, xenophobia, white supremacy, male supremacy, Christian supremacy, neoliberalism, and isolationism. Commitment to democratic principles—a hallmark of democratic patriotism—is often absent or buried underneath unyielding loyalty and sacrifice to the country.

I contend that Trump's authoritarian patriotism is a massive, immediate threat to the future of justice-oriented citizenship and liberal democracy in the United States, including the teaching and learning of effective participation as a citizen in a liberal democracy. Thus, I turn to a series of questions about patriotism that I believe teachers at all levels (including myself) need to ask ourselves and explore deeply at the present moment.

Questions for Teaching about Patriotism *Now*

There are no fixed answers for the questions below. However, I believe that generation of explicit responses to these questions is a must if we are going to teach thoughtfully about patriotism at the present time.

- Is America great? Was America ever great? Should schooling teach that America is/was great? (To what am I referring when I say 'America?' Who/what, exactly, is (an) 'American?' What do I mean by 'great?')
- In what respects, if any, should America be first: As general, foundational public policy? In the schooling curriculum? (Is life on Earth a competition [of nations]? If so, what are the parameters?)
- How do I define 'patriotism?' (Are there different kinds of patriotism? Can patriotism simply be good or bad? Is patriotism only about the nation/country or are there other scales? What does it mean for someone or something to be 'unpatriotic?' What is the relationship between patriotism and nationalism?)
- Am I patriotic? If so, what does my patriotism look like?
- Should my teaching be patriotic?
- Should I teach about patriotism any differently during Trump's presidency than Obama's or any other president's?
- How do I feel about students reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in my classroom/school? How about the playing of the national anthem before events at my school?
- If Trump wants to address all K-12 students in a speech (perhaps at the start of a school year), how might I feel and teach about that?
- If Trump releases a specific plan about teaching patriotism in schools, perhaps developed in conjunction with the American Legion, how might I react to it?

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[1]Because President Trump often abbreviates "United States of America" by saying simply "America," I work within this practice that is common well beyond Trump. However, I wish to note the complexity of using the terms *America* and *American*: while in mainstream U.S. discourse these are U.S.-specific, "America" can and does refer to the entirety of North America, Central America, and South America, and thus an "American" might well be a person who has never set foot in the United States and has no familial ties to someone that has.