

From History to the Present: Navigating the Road to Patriotism

By Ilana Gratch

Patriotism: noun. \pā-trē-ə-ti-zəm, love for or devotion to one's country. Until this year, that is exactly what patriotism was to me: a definition. It was something I had learned about in Global History, and that I had heard expressed through song, but never something I completely understood or felt. In all honesty, until this year, I was never distinctly "proud to be an American." However, recently, something changed, something that would forever alter my emotional response to the word "*American*." Learning American History in depth for the first time has had a profound effect on me as a student, as a person, as an American. Now, I truly believe that learning and knowing and embracing the United States' collective history sparks sincere American pride.

I'm sitting in class on the first day of school. I'm nervous to begin my first AP course, and I'm skeptical that the class material will hold my interest all year. I am handed a syllabus. I skim through all of the events (listed chronologically) that we will learn about, and am surprised at how unfamiliar I am with the majority of the information on the page. I leave the room shaking, aware that regardless of whether or not I enjoy learning American History, this will be an intense and demanding class.

Week 1: The American Revolution. For the first time, I am proud to be American. I am thrilled to be a product of the ideals that crafted our country's independence. I am *amazed* that the colonists put such emphasis on democracy and representation. I am excited by the prospect that this is how the United State came into existence, and I want to keep learning.

Week 3: Slavery. I am angered. I am offended that Americans could ever have supported and relied on such an awful institution. I am confused, and I wonder if the ideals of the American Revolution were for naught. I am eager to see how the establishment will transform and eventually dissolve.

Week 7: Civil War. Abraham Lincoln's speeches give me the shivers and I'm inspired by his determination. I learn that he's not truly an extreme abolitionist, and I struggle to understand why that's the case. I feel victorious when the Union dominates, and I truly hope that the country will be able to join back together peacefully.

Week 9: Reconstruction. "A splendid failure," we learn. An accurate description, I think, for a time when African Americans were given important roles in the government for the first time, only to be replaced by literacy poll tests for African Americans and other Jim Crow laws. I wonder, what took *so* long? Why was the concept of equality so foreign to average Americans? And what is taking so long *now* to end discrimination against other minority groups?

Week 12: The Great Depression. The stock market crashes and jobs are scarce. Average people must go to great lengths merely to support their families. I sympathize with these Americans who put their faith in the bank, just like my own parents do today. I'm impressed, later, by FDR's New Deal and "Alphabet Soup" programs. I wonder if something like his program to create jobs that also benefit infrastructure could be implemented currently in urban areas.

Week 15: Civil Rights Movement. I am both frightened and touched by the lack of progress and the extreme development that the government has established for African Americans. The passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 makes me want to take action today. After hearing about thousands of

African Americans in Tennessee that walked 54 miles to their local governor, I understand what it really means to be devoted to one's country, to be patriotic.

2011. Don't Ask Don't Tell repealed. National Healthcare Bill passed.

After weeks upon weeks of learning American History with 23 other students I've learned what it means to be patriotic, and I've figured out what drives this patriotism in Americans. The shared history of our people brings patriotism alive. It keeps us going, reminds us that there is a reason to fight for equal rights for everyone today. After learning American History, I know the feeling of squirming in my seat, nervous to find out the outcome of a certain war or debate. I know the feeling of wanting to take action, of being inspired by reformers like Robert La Follette and Martin Luther King. I understand patriotism, and I am proud to be an American. I am proud to carry on the legacy of the soldiers who fought to gain independence in the American Revolution. By the same token, I am not proud of everything that takes place in America today. I am not a proponent of the ban on gay marriage, nor do I feel that continued racism deserves any place in our society. However, it is U.S. history that has taught me that it is okay to be patriotic, despite these matters, because being American means taking action, marching on Washington, discussing, and yearning to bring about progressive and positive change. Today, I am patriotic, as are countless other Americans, because of the history that ties us all together, the history that allows us to believe in the power of the people, the history that causes us to stand up and voice the truth. I am connected to America because of its rich history, and, therefore, hope to be a part of shaping its future.