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Pledge of Allegiance - Annie McHale

1 message

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To: citycouncil@ci.stevenson.wa.us

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(Please include the email statement below in the council packet for the next meeting.)

Patriotism. I'm so fed up with being told what it is to be "patriotic". I'm tired of the cliches, the parroting, and mindless proclamations of people who haven't given one second of their life to serve this great country, our great democratic experiment – people who have strong opinions they foist upon others and judge the patriotic measure of their fellow citizens. Those who claim to define and exemplify all that is "patriotic" time and again only demonstrate their utter ignorance. I have known many foreigners who demonstrate a greater devotion and love for our free society, its tenets, its assurances, its promise.

The practices of true patriots during the traditional rituals of the playing of the national anthem, the passing of our stars-and-stripes, or the pledge of allegiance are the most common targets chosen by the "patriot jury". It has always been deeply mysterious to me how those who so vocally and forcefully object to someone who doesn't follow along with the crowd by taking a knee, failing to stand, or failing to regurgitate the pledge of allegiance fail to realize that they betray one of the most precious gems of our Constitution: the freedom of speech as given by our First Amendment – our Bill of Rights – rights that are not granted by our government but that are natural rights, birth rights, rights upon which the government and its citizens may not infringe.

I'm a sixth generation descendant of my pioneer family and veteran of this great nation's military. My father served in the South Pacific during WWII, then in Korea. He went on to a career as a State Policeman and as a U.S. Marshall. I devoted six years of my life during the Viet Nam War to military service. I swore a lifetime oath to our Constitution, to protect and defend it. At any time I could have been ordered to fulfill my duties which may include forfeiture of my life, if necessary. I have sweated and even bled for this nation. My family and loved ones have have suffered greatly during and since that time. When deployed, they worried about my safety during months of absolutely no contact from me. No letters. No phone calls. Nothing. My wife and children struggled to live on my meager earnings during my long absences. Our children cried when their soldier-fathers had to go away which added to our pain. They were ostracized by an ungrateful population. Ordinary people, young and old, spit on me and my brethren in airports, bus stations, and cafes. We quietly suffered these injustices not because we believed we were being treated fairly, but because it was and still is the right of our fellow Americans to exercise free speech. I resent anyone who dares tell me or my family or my loved ones or my friends and neighbors how to think, what should be said, or how to express our opinions on the matters of these United States of America so long as the rights of others are respected. To use a well known quote: "I may disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

That brings me to the sad point of this treatise. I support Annie McHale's decision to sit out the Pledge of Allegiance when recited at the Stevenson City Council meetings at her discretion. To demand, to even suggest that she should apologize or abandon the office to which she was elected for exercising her right to free speech is outrageous and, by definition, utterly unpatriotic...and shameful. When Annie first took office, she gladly took the oath of office which also declares to uphold and defend the Constitution. The Pledge and the Council's expectations of participation were discussed as an agenda item in an early council meeting. The pledge of allegiance is not required of city council officers. As an honorably discharged veteran earning several commendations and as a citizen of Stevenson, I was in attendance during that council meeting and I testified that I had adequately demonstrated my patriotism and that requiring me or anyone else to declare allegiance to any flag is unnecessary and would be, in fact, offensive. Understand that our "red, white, and blue" is very dear to me. It covered my father's remains and was folded and handed to my mother by the presiding honor guard at his funeral. It covered the casket of my high school pal when his body came back from Viet Nam – an event repeated some 58,000 times during that war and even now as the dead of that war are identified and repatriated. During my time in the military, the flag marked safe territory, warmth and shelter, a source of food, a place to get some needed rest. It marked a place where I could find my military brothers and maybe a letter from home. It defined friend over foe, safety over fear. However it doesn't change my opinion that the entire ritual should be abandoned everywhere that it is practiced.

The Pledge of Allegiance is not what people think it is. It was made popular by a Baptist minister, a Christian socialist, with the cooperation of a popular children's magazine of the time. The ritual was intended to indoctrinate the largely immigrant children attending the schools then. The magazine marketed The Pledge and promoted the doctrine of flying our national flag at every schoolhouse exploiting a rare event, a centennial celebration of our Columbus Day observation.

This, of course, resulted in the sale of flags, one of the marketing goals, and only fueled the expansion of this ritual. This isn't patriotism; this is commercialism.

The fears of WWII followed by the post-war fear of Communism resulted in widespread use of The Pledge in schools as though it would protect us and ensure loyalty to our American way of life. It has done neither. The practice has slowly percolated up into widespread use outside of classrooms. Since that time, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that students cannot be compelled to stand, salute, or recite such an allegiance as an infringement on the freedom of speech. It made clear that citizens cannot be made to confess by word or act their faith. It also questions the value and ethics of requiring children who are too young to provide true consent to such an allegiance. Quite simply, it is impossible for children to fully understand what they are saying. Photographs of early rituals show children saluting the flag as instructed with their arms and hands extended straight up toward the flag, palms down. It is chillingly reminiscent of the Seig Heil salute.

Now, we have adults who have throughout their entire lives while attending school recited The Pledge over and over, day after day, year after year, believing it to be a proper demonstration of patriotism. I warn you. It is not. Many oppressive regimes around the world and throughout time have used this simple act of childhood indoctrination to plant the dangerous seeds of nationalism. Personally, I believe the most patriotic act available to the common citizen is in service to our communities – service on City Counsel, for example. A true patriot would inspire their children to serve in such a noble manner and worry less about the need to recite the pledge of allegiance. However, God knows that public service is a thankless job, where the elected are unfairly criticized by the ungrateful, challenged by the unqualified, expected to do the impossible by the self-righteous.

Curt Gray