

## Patriotic Speech

4 July 2015

Bristol, RI

I want to begin by thanking the Bristol Fourth of July Committee for selecting me to give this year's Patriotic Speech. It is an enormous honor and privilege to be speaking as the 230<sup>th</sup> speaker at our country's oldest Fourth of July parade, and I am very grateful and humbled. I also want to congratulate Ray Gallison, our local assemblyman, for his selection as Chief Marshall of the parade, and I'd like as well to acknowledge all the public servants, elected and appointed, who are here today to celebrate Independence Day in beautiful Bristol, Rhode Island.

I looked at the list of dignitaries and people of accomplishment who were my predecessors in this honor, and I wondered what might be left to say on the issue and importance of patriotism. It helps, of course, that I have no idea what the great majority of these past speakers actually said. It also occurs to me that the great majority of them were obliged to speak without the aid of electronic amplification—so it's quite possible that, even on the day of their speech, the audience didn't actually know what they said either. So perhaps my problem of trying to find

something new to say about patriotism isn't as daunting an issue as I first thought.

Patriotism is most easily defined as “love of one’s country.” If love of one’s country is measured by the frequency and depth of expression of that love, then Bristol must be the most patriotic town in America. For any of you who are new to this community, you must by now realize that the Fourth of July in Bristol is not just a single day. Rather, it goes on for weeks. The 12 days of Christmas have nothing on the month of the 4<sup>th</sup>, as we celebrate it in Bristol.

There are many in our community—perhaps right in this audience—who trace their ancestry to our state’s founder, Roger Williams. Others are descendants of those who arrived on the Mayflower. Still others are the grandchildren, three or four times removed, of the soldiers of the American Revolution.

If patriotism were measured in years, and in generations, then any of those individuals would be a better choice than me for this task—because, you see, I can claim none of those connections. I am an immigrant, having arrived here from my birth country of Canada in 1963. So, in accepting this invitation, I first had to answer

my own question: “Can someone from another country claim to be a patriotic American? In other words, are patriots born, or can they be made?”

In answering that question, I had two immediate points of reference. First, there is Roger Williams himself, who fled religious persecution in both England and Massachusetts to found a new colony. Was he a patriot? Well, he worked for years to thwart the efforts of Connecticut and Massachusetts to divide our state between them—and to devise agreements and charters with the rulers of England, be they named Cromwell or Stuart, in order to make his colony legitimate in the eyes of authority. We owe our existence as a state, and to having the first state to separate religion from government, to his efforts, and to those of a few of his friends. Yes, I think we would have to call Roger Williams a Rhode Island patriot, even though he was born in another country.

Closer to home, I am acutely aware of how many proud Bristolites—I understand that term is preferred to “Bristolians”—began life in another country—and in Bristol, that means, in particular, Italy or Portugal. Many people of Italian or Portuguese descent have been patriotic speakers

or even chief marshals—the highest award Bristol can confer. No one questioned their patriotism—nor should they.

So to answer my earlier question, I believe patriotism can be acquired. In fact, I would go further: Love of country—patriotism—is not automatic, merely because someone is a native of that country. Patriotism is not just an emotion, but instead it requires being evidenced by action. A true patriot is someone who celebrates all that is good about America, but who also recognizes that a democracy does not thrive when it is neglected. Working, as our Founding Fathers urged upon us, to make “a more perfect union” requires us to hold our leaders accountable for governing well and fairly. It also requires some of us—those who protect and serve, and I refer to police, firefighters, and the military—to defend us, as individuals and as a country, from those who would do us harm.

I do think I qualify as a patriot by the first standard: holding our leaders accountable. I inform myself on the issues, I speak directly to many elected officials, and I never miss the opportunity to vote. But I fall short on the second standard. I have never worked as a police officer or

a firefighter, and I have never served in the armed forces. Those who have, or do, have greater claims to patriotism than I do. So as this year's Patriotic Speaker, I would not be doing my job properly if I ended without giving a heartfelt salute to those who live their patriotism every day: our police, fire, and military personnel. Happy Fourth to those who have worn the uniform! Now let's enjoy the parade!