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Cover Story
What Is Patriotism Really About?
Between the Lines
By Dr. Anthony Asadullah Samad, PhD
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The Fourth of July is a date that historically brings about much confliction in the African American community. Never one to miss a great party, black people spend considerable money on bar-b-ques and fireworks. And you see as many American flags hanging on the porches of black homes as any other. Why? Because as Langston Hughes once said, "We too are America." We sing America; we work America and we love America - even when America hasn't always loved us. The African in America built America, and then became America as the social construct was left with no choice but to include Africa in America's melting pot. Ever since slavery was abolish in 1865, black people have had to demonstrate their love of country beyond any reasonable expectation, despite a continuing racial animus toward them. Black people have fought in every war, from the Revolutionary War to the Iraqi War, despite America's exclusionary politics of Slavery, Segregation and Colorblindness. Black

soldiers suffered the greater indignities of false promises of freedom, separation from their own ranks, treatment worse than prisoners of war and constant assaults on their humanity. From Fort Pillow (where Black Union Soldiers were captured and executed) to Port Chicago (where black WWII soldiers were court marshaled after a mass mutiny in the aftermath of an explosion that killed 202 black ammunition loaders), from Tuskegee (where they never lost a fighter) to Viet Nam (where they were disproportionately frontline fighters), there has been no greater demonstration of love of country than that of the African American. So what is patriotism really about? What does it mean to be a patriot? And who determines another's patriotism is sufficient, particularly in the current applications of Barack Obama's run for President of the United States.

"Love of country," the primary definition of Patriotism, has always served as a subterfuge for the subversion of criticism about what America is, what America is not and what America could be. To criticize America is a public right, but doing so is perverted into somehow making one less patriotic. When you don't love what America is, and say so, you somehow don't love America. When you call out the imperfections in America that really exacerbate our cultural and social differences, you somehow don't stand for America - if you don't stand for what America (right or wrong) stands for. And when you challenge America (and Americans) to be better, to do better, to want better - you somehow don't appreciate "how good things are" because you live in America. It's become a discourse in relativism where "a bad life" here is rationalized in the context of it, at least, not being as bad as where some communist regime or third world developing nation might be. White people are considered "Patriots" no matter how bad they might have been - "they loved their country."

Black people's patriotism is always suspect, no matter how good they are or how dedicated they may be. Recent examples of this affirm this inconsistency. On this past fourth of July, former North Carolina Senator, Jesse Helms died. Jesse Helms, unlike former Alabama Governor, George Wallace, or former South Carolina Senator, Strom Thurman, died an unrepentant segregationist. Yet former North Carolina GOP Rep, Bill Robey called him a "patriot" in the mold of other great "giants" that died on the fourth of July (Thomas Jefferson and John Adams). On the other hand, the Republican Party has now sought to challenge Barack Obama's patriotism. So dominate is the discussion that it was the cover story of last week's *Time* magazine and has put Obama (and his flag pin) of the cover of this month's *Rolling Stone* magazine. It started with the claim that Barack didn't say the Pledge of Allegiance at a public event, and then it rolled over to him not wearing a flag pin, and continued with him not putting his hand over his heart. Then, of course, there is the whisper campaign about Obama being a Muslim and they use his last name being too close to "Osama" (Bin Laden) and his middle name, Hussein, as validation that this man can't possibly be patriotic enough to be President of the United States. What would they have him do? Change his name to a good ole' American name, like Barack Johnson, or Patrick Henry Obama? And while he seems to have the flag pin thing arrested, Barack Obama could put both hands over his heart and somebody, SOMEBODY, would say, "Well, he didn't have them high enough?" It's like a jungle sometimes; it makes me wonder how we keep from going under.

But Barack hasn't gone under. In fact, he has sustained, and maintained, that America can be better if it is willing to change. Just as black America has sustained over the


notion, throughout the past 400 years, that America is not what it was but is not what it could be. Even when we say things are getting better, our patriotism is called into question. Michelle Obama’s “really proud” comment is a case in point. She never said she wasn’t proud of her country. She said she was “really” proud of her country. In the black community, we call that “Mo Better,” meaning more proud than we’d previously been able to acknowledge. Because black America doesn’t have many opportunities to brag on the greatness of America, this was a significant moment, but it was twisted and spinned in a way that deflected her love of country, and was accentuated in the context of a critique, when it wasn’t meant to be a critique. That’s how discussions around patriotism land. Many have taken offense at any critique of John McCain’s service record, but patriotism can’t be solely based on serving our country because most of the members of his party, who voted for the war, didn’t serve a day - hiding behind deferments and exemptions. Are they less Patriotic for not going into the military, or serving their country? You rarely hear that criticism. The conffliction around patriotism is real. Such conffliction is the greatest black leader of all-time, Frederick Douglass, refused to speak on July 4th in 1852. He spoke on July 5th instead because he knew patriotism in America was a shell game, and like any game of three card Mollie, black America was always tricked into picking the wrong card. The Constitution of the United States was rarely under the card we turned over and we are always doped into saying we love America even when America didn’t love us. It’s the same today. Barack must say he loves America, flaws and all, to change it. Anything less, and he will never be seen as patriotic enough to lead the country. What a deal...


Until we really understand what Patriotism means, we will never really know what patriotism is all about - beyond defending “the American way of life.” For African Americans, that’s a SCARY thought because it means business as usual - in a twisted, kinda’ “patriotic” way.

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