

## Viewpoint

# Patriotism of the heart, not lapel



Gary Varvel



Sarah Darer Littman

The Fourth of July holiday, with its profusion of flags, fireworks, and red, white and blue bunting, can lead one to ponder the meaning of patriotism, particularly if you are someone like me, whose patriotism is called into question on a regular basis.

For example, not long ago, someone asked on my blog, "Can you name me an instance where you are on the United States' side on an issue?" And a letter to the editor in this paper complained, "If you're going to continue to publish the far left ramblings of Sarah Darer Littman on your editorial page, you can at least try to balance things out by having somebody else on who actually wants to see our country win the war on terrorism."

I found myself bemused by both questions, because as far as I'm concerned, I'm on the United States'

side on every issue. It's because I love my country so much, because I believe so passionately in the ideals upon which it was founded, that I'm so vocal when I feel that our government and our elected officials are taking us down paths that diverge from those principles.

So what does it mean to be patriotic? What does "being on America's side" constitute? Does it mean taking the "My country, right or wrong" attitude? I get the impression many of my critics believe that

to be the case. But our nation was built upon dissent — as Founding Father Thomas Jefferson observed: "All tyranny needs to gain a foothold is for people of good conscience to remain silent." And one of the greatest minds of all time, Albert Einstein, said, "Unthinking respect for authority is the greatest enemy of truth."

Questioning the decisions of this government on Iraq, Guantanamo, the Military Commissions Act and so many other important issues does not mean that I am anti-American. Rather, it is a sign that I am ardently pro-American — an American who cares about her country and wants to hold those in charge accountable so that they keep to our national ideals. When I shake hands on something, my word is my bond. So it's important to me as an

American citizen that when we ratify international treaties, like the Geneva Conventions and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, we abide by our commitments.

The pundits on Fox News are trying to make Senator Obama's wearing an American flag pin or not a question of patriotism, but that's a distraction, and I only hope that the American people are smart enough to see it as such.

Patriotism isn't about wearing a pin or putting a bumper sticker on your car. It's about asking the questions, it's about fighting for what you believe in, it's about holding the government accountable, it's about making sure that our leaders don't take us down a path that is antithetical to what we stand for as a na-

tion. It's about saying "The United States does not torture. It's against our laws, and it's against our values" as Bush did, but really mean it, not come up with rationalizations for how and why we should be allowed to do so.

It's about "winning" the War on Terror without losing who we are as a nation, without compromising the core values and beliefs that made America the shining beacon of democracy in the

world.

People tell me I'm brave for writing this column. I'm not. I'm just a patriotic American, outraged at what I see happening to my country, exercising my right to free speech.

Sarah Darer Littman, who lives in Greenwich, is author of "Confessions of a Closet Catholic," published by Dutton Children's Books. E-mail her at sarahlittman@gmail.com.