



Pinning down patriotism

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It would never have occurred to me to ask Barack Obama why he doesn't wear an American flag pin on his lapel, let alone to draw any inference from such a seemingly trivial fact -- perhaps because I don't wear one either. But it did occur to a journalist in Iowa City, Iowa, to [ask that question](#) last week, and the answer it elicited wasn't trivial at all.

Wrapping up an interview on "kind of a lighter note," a KCRG-TV reporter observed that Obama wasn't wearing a flag pin and inquired: "Is this a fashion statement? Those have been on politicians since Sept. 12, 2001."

Obama could have lightly waved off the query -- "Nope, no fashion statement; I'm just not a lapel-pin kind of guy" -- and nobody would have given the matter a second

thought. Instead he went out of his way to politicize it.

"The truth is that right after 9/11, I had a pin," he said. But "that became a substitute for . . . true patriotism, which is speaking out on issues that are of importance to our national security." And so, he [declared](#), "I decided I won't wear that pin on my chest. Instead, I'm going to try to tell the American people what I believe will make this country great, and hopefully that will be a testimony to my patriotism."

Obama brought up the subject again a day later. "I probably haven't worn a flag pin in a very long time," he told a campaign crowd in Independence, Iowa. "My attitude is that I'm less concerned about what you're wearing on your lapel than what's in your heart. You show your

patriotism by how you treat your fellow Americans, especially those who serve. You show your patriotism by being true to our values and ideals." As for Americans who do wear a flag pin, Obama was scornful: "I noticed people wearing a lapel pin and not acting very patriotic."

This, surely, is [something new under the sun](#): a candidate for president disparaging the sincerity of voters who wear the American flag, and loftily insisting that he "won't wear that pin." Of course Obama is free to believe that "speaking out on issues" is the best way to show "true patriotism." But does he really imagine that the many Americans who do "wear that pin" do so as a *"substitute"* for true patriotism -- as a hypocritical affectation, in other words -- rather than as a *symbol* of it?

Perhaps Obama, reflecting the post-1960s culture in which he came of age, simply doesn't recognize the power and significance of such symbols in sustaining a nation's identity and values. Many contemporary Americans, raised on the dogma that what they feel in their hearts matters more than how they conduct themselves in public, have little appreciation for traditions, manners, and emblems that earlier generations were taught to honor. We live in an era, after all, when worshippers attend church in shorts and flip-flops; when the civic inspiration of Washington's Birthday has been replaced with the antiseptic nullity of Presidents Day; when smoking is taboo but foul language

is ubiquitous; when countless couples disdain a marriage license as "just a piece of paper." So why should the American flag pin on someone's lapel be entitled to deference or respect?

And yet it's hard to imagine Obama being quite so dismissive about other kinds of symbols. As UPI's editor-in-chief [John O'Sullivan](#) asked, would the senator also refuse to wear an AIDS ribbon on the grounds that it's a mere "substitute" for true charity?

Some critics have interpreted Obama's comments as a genuflection toward his party's hard-left base -- the nearly one-fifth of Democrats, according to a new Fox News/Opinion Dynamics [poll](#), who "think the world would be better off if the United States loses the war in Iraq." Whether true or not, Obama certainly isn't alone in finding something distasteful about personal displays of the flag. At the National Press Club recently, CBS news anchor [Katie Couric lamented](#) the public patriotism that was so widespread after Sept. 11, 2001, complaining about, among other things, "the whole culture of wearing flags on our lapel and saying 'we' when referring to the United States."

But Obama isn't a television anchor, he is a presidential candidate. And candidates don't get elected to the White House by curling their lip at dignified expressions of patriotic feeling. Sure, there are some phonies in every crowd, but my guess is that most Americans who wear a flag pin are citizens who genuinely love

their country. My guess is that most of them vote, too -- and probably

not for the candidate who questions their patriotism.