

## *Reflections*

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### **Pledging One's Honor**

“[W]e mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.” With these words the 56 signers of America’s Declaration of Independence asserted that the 13 united colonies were free and independent states. In vowing their lives and fortunes they stated the obvious consequences of their actions. These men were deemed traitors to England, the country of which they were citizens. If the Revolution failed, many, if not all, would likely have been hanged and their property forfeited to the Crown. As it was, many of them suffered greatly. Nine died of wounds or hardships before independence was achieved. Eighteen had their homes looted or burned to the ground. Five were captured and brutally treated. Several lost wives and children. John Hart, an elderly signer from New Jersey, had his home and property destroyed; while he was being hunted through forest and mountains, his wife died and his 13 children had to seek refuge with friends and family. Some were so impoverished by the Revolution that they spent the remainder of their lives as paupers. Yet, not one defected or recanted on his pledge.

But what did they intend by the expression “sacred Honor?” The word honor has several meanings. It may refer to the public’s esteem for a position. Today, we address judges, Congressmen, and high-ranking politicians as “The Honorable,” even though the individual may have sought the position for personal fame, power or gain. The term also may refer to recognition for an achievement or accomplishment. People are honored with medals, trophies, plaques, and other material items for doing something beyond what is expected, whether in military, athletic, intellectual or other areas. Clearly, neither of these meanings fit what the signers were pledging.

In Colonial America, honor referred to traits of character of the individual. It defined a person’s sense of self-worth, his personal quality and self-esteem. It was in effect the core of his identity. One’s behavior gauged against what was expected of an honorable person often determined his reputation in the external community. When Alexander Hamilton defamed Aaron Burr’s character, to redeem his honor Burr challenged Hamilton to a duel with pistols. Honor was so strongly held that Nathan Hale could stand before the hangman’s noose and declare his regret that he had but one life to lose for his country.

When Jefferson wrote honor into the Declaration of Independence, he used the term “sacred Honor” to emphasize its virtuous aspects. It meant living a moral life, with integrity, not only in certain circumstances but fully, in all endeavors. It meant leading a life according to an internalized set of moral norms, in accordance with the natural and revealed laws.

It was their sacred honor pledged to support an idea – that there are certain unalienable rights bestowed by a Creator God – that led the signers of the Declaration to make the great sacrifices they endured in establishing this nation. They did not risk everything for land or treasure or a government based on blood or heredity, but to establish a country founded on the belief that all men are created equal and are entitled to be free. This love of country, although in their case it still was an idea, is the sentiment of patriotism.

Patriotism implies an attachment to what one's country stands for and a willingness to forego self-interest, perhaps as so often happens when the nation is at war even to sacrifice one's life for the sake of the public good, the common welfare. It means one will strive to uphold the values of those who have created this nation for the sake of those who will inherit it. It is devotion to a set of principles or ideals – in America, these ideals include freedom, equality, personal dignity.

Although patriotism is most evident in times of threat and crisis, it is something to be lived everyday. It is pride in the history, culture and achievements of the nation and its people. It is not an uncritical commitment to every aspect of the nation, but rather demands recognition of the country's failings and shortcomings and working to improve them because one is committed to the ideals upon which the nation was founded and to what it can be.

Patriotism is not innate, but must be developed through example, study and experience. One must learn about the history and government of this nation and what their meaning and implications are for Americans today. One must learn and practice the duties and responsibilities of citizenship – casting a ballot, serving on juries, paying taxes, observing the laws. One must learn how one's own well-being, prosperity, and liberties are the result of living in this country, and be willing to protect those liberties when they are under attack.

We may never be called upon to sacrifice everything we have for the future of our country. But we can display our sacred honor in its behalf by demonstrating our pride in America and supporting the values upon which our nation was founded.

