

“Choosing Patriotism in a Divided Time”

By Lexi Lai, 2025

We scroll through headlines and hear the echo of division... about politics, identity, even the meaning of being American. But disagreement isn't new. It's part of our democracy. The real question is not if we disagree but how we live with our differences. And that's where patriotism begins.

For me, patriotism isn't about pretending we agree. It's about choosing unity over fracture. It's about loving our country enough to stay engaged, especially when it's difficult. Because what binds us is not perfect harmony, but a shared belief that this nation is still worth building, still worth believing in.

My parents came to America from countries on the opposite side of the globe from our beloved country, countries where freedom can be fragile and democracy too often hangs by a thread. They didn't come here chasing perfection. They came chasing possibilities. They believed in America not because it was flawless, but because it promised something rare: the right to speak, to dissent, to participate. That promise, to them, was patriotism.

It shaped how I see my country. I've learned that true patriotism is not a blind cheer for everything our nation does. It's the courage to face our shortcomings and still believe in our potential. It means holding our country to its ideals—not to criticize it, but to care for it. I see patriotism in the Constitution. I see it in veterans who've risked everything to defend our values. I see it in citizens who still show up to vote, even when they feel unheard. And I try to live that patriotism in my own actions.

As president of my school's Model United Nations club, I've seen how easily dialogue collapses when people stop listening. So, I worked to rebuild that trust. We created space for new voices. I shared my own struggles with public speaking. And over time, our meetings transformed. Members felt heard. And membership grew more than it had in the past three years since I first joined. That's patriotism, too: the choice to foster civil discourse. To help others speak up. To strengthen the democratic fabric, thread by thread.

We often picture patriotism as waving a flag or singing the anthem. But I've come to believe that real patriotism lives in smaller, quieter moments. It's in the hours we spent raising money for UNICEF. In late nights preparing for debates about diplomacy and justice. In the time we gave helping others succeed. These aren't grand gestures, but they're deeply patriotic. Because they invest in something bigger than ourselves: the health of our communities, the strength of our values, and the belief that service to others is service to country. Patriotism isn't about choosing a side. It's about choosing to care... deeply, consistently, and without fanfare.

In a divided world, I believe the most radical act of patriotism is choosing to listen. Not to argue, but to understand. Frederick Douglass once said, “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.” That’s what patriotism calls us to do: build strong, engaged citizens who uplift our country through action and empathy. Sometimes that means speaking up. Sometimes it means showing up. And sometimes, it means staying silent long enough to hear someone else’s story. I’ve learned that the loudest voices don’t always carry the greatest truths. Often, it’s the steady hands and quiet leaders—the students, the neighbors, the everyday citizens—who shape the future of this nation.

In a nation stretched by difference, I choose connection.

In a time of doubt, I choose conviction.

In a country still growing toward its ideals, I choose patriotism... not as a performance, but as a promise. A promise to show up. To speak out. To believe that we are stronger not in spite of our struggles, but because of them.

Because patriotism isn’t about what we inherit. It’s about what we contribute.