

ASHLEY: Ted Johnson spent two decades in the U.S. Navy. He's an African American who loves his country.

RICHARD: What follows is a nuanced conversation about patriotism and race.

TED: Being a patriot is not about uncritical conversation. It's not about talking about only how exceptional we are, only how great the country is. Being an actual, true patriot requires that you love the nation and that you critique it so that it will be a better version of itself.

ASHLEY: This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. We release this episode to mark Memorial Day, which honors the men and women who sacrificed their lives in service to our country.

ASHLEY: We discuss different ways to think about patriotism and race with retired U.S. naval officer Ted Johnson. He writes a column for The Washington Post, and he's also a senior advisor to the nonprofit group New America.

RICHARD: Ted is the author of the book *When the Stars Begin to Fall: Overcoming Racism and Renewing the Promise of America*.

ASHLEY: We start this interview with a personal story that Ted wrote about recently in his column.

RICHARD: Ted Johnson, welcome to Let's Find Common Ground.

TED: Yeah, thank you for having me. It's great to be here.

RICHARD: Let's talk first about something that happened three years ago when you went to watch your son play at a high school football game. The crowd stood for the national anthem. Pick up the story of what happened.

TED: Yeah. Where we are in northern Virginia, a lot of schools run out with the school flag and the American flag, and the anthem plays before every high school game. I've got three sons. They all have played football, so this was nothing new. And my sons and I had actually talked about Colin Kaepernick and kneeling during the anthem, and the school had talked about it, as well, as there are lots of military veterans and active-duty military folks that attend. And there was an agreement that, basically, the kids wouldn't kneel.

But after George Floyd was murdered, the conversation changed a little bit. One of my sons asked for special permission to kneel in the first football game they had following Floyd's murder as a sign of solidarity with the protests that were happening in the summer but also a personal declaration of unhappiness with the relationships between the Black community and law enforcement. So he knelt during the anthem.

As you mentioned, I spent a couple decades in the military. I'm a retired naval officer. I didn't kneel, and won't, but I was at the position of attention in the bleachers while the anthem played. While this is happening, I notice a family off to my left who's sort of pointing at my kid and making little snide

remarks because he's kneeling during the anthem. I'm upset, but I let it slide, free speech and all that. It goes both ways.

After the anthem finishes, the team starts to rally, get ready for the game, and the flag they bring out had tumbled to the ground. So military training kicks in, I bound down the bleachers, grab the flag, repost it, and as I'm returning to my seat, the same family that was making snide remarks about my son, the dad, the father, the man steps out into the aisle and thanks me for reposting the flag for them and for honoring the flag. And I restrain myself from telling this guy a little bit about himself based on his previous actions. Instead, I just nodded at him and sidestepped him and returned to my seat and enjoyed the game.

The idea that, within the same family, people can both respect the country, love its symbols, and insist that it's fallen short, and it's not done enough to reckon with the injustice both historically and contemporarily, this isn't abnormal. This is how Americans have proceeded through this country forever. We've long expressed pride in it and also insisted it can be better, and this is especially true among Black Americans.

So, in this little moment on a Friday evening in northern Virginia, I would like to think that my family displayed how you can hold pride and reckoning together and show that you don't have to choose. You don't have to pick sides and demonize the other side, but that you can do both together. And that is actually the fulfillment of the promise of our country and not an abnegation of it.

RICHARD: So you didn't think your son was being unpatriotic.

TED: Not at all. Not at all. My kid is a military brat. We have lived around the world, in many states. We've had lots of conversations about race and the country. So we know what it means to be American, and my kid would not rather be anywhere else. You never feel more American than when you're living outside of the country.

ASHLEY: How did it make you feel when you saw that family? And I'm presuming, by the way, that—were they white?

TED: Yes, yeah. I intentionally left the race part of it out, but readers got the message.

ASHLEY: How does that make you feel when you see that?

TED: It builds on this pervasive sense that America is a white, Christian nation and that, if you are white and Christian, you are first in line of Americans, and everyone else who is not white or not a Christian is in a secondary or tertiary status in the country. This, of course, isn't true, but this is how the country has operated for much of its history. If we look at socioeconomic status and a number of other indicators, we'll see that a lot of the way our society is structured still operates in this way.

Then, what the man says to me, "Thank you for doing that for us," and I got the feeling that his "us" wasn't me and him, but the "us" was him and his family. And this was sort of an act of service to the real Americans in the audience who love the flag and love the country. And this is why it was really hard to bite my tongue, but the only way this could've gone worse is if I had gotten angry and confronted him, and now I'm the angry Black violent man accosting a true patriot for chastising the child that refuses to respect the flag. And the story ends potentially quite differently.

RICHARD: The man, the family who made snide remarks about your son were sitting a few seats away from you. What did the man say?

TED: I could hear the murmuring and sort of the, "Oh, my god," or, "Look at this," but I don't know the actual conversation. But it was clear from the facial expressions and from the bits I did hear like, "Look at this kid," and, "Oh, my god," that they weren't happy. They weren't championing an American exercising his 1st Amendment rights. They were unhappy that this Black, dreadlocked kid was doing what they had seen many Black athletes do for years. I won't say that they were using racial slurs or anything like that. Didn't hear anything of the sort and wouldn't suggest that they did, but they were clearly unhappy. And as a parent, when someone is chastising your child, especially when they're not doing anything wrong, what they said is almost inconsequential to how they behaved when it came to my kid.

ASHLEY: Your son was 16 when this happened nearly three years ago. When he kneeled, how did you feel about that? Were you proud or a bit irritated?

TED: I was proud that he took a stand. He was the only one that did, and, again, he requested special permission from the coach to do so for this one game. He had never kneeled before and has never kneeled since. But I was worried because he was drawing attention to himself, and that's, I think, more a parental worry than disagreement with the cause of his kneeling. I was actually quite proud that he was independent. He knows me. He knows that I would never do so.

He knows that if he had asked me, "Dad, should I, or shouldn't I?" which one of my older sons once did, I encouraged him to, "Go with your gut, but here's what may happen. What if your coach decides that it's a distraction for the team, and there's a punishment that follows?" So, when it was all said and done, I was very proud of my son. I didn't know beforehand that he had gotten special permission. I didn't know that until afterwards. So he went about it in a very mature way.

ASHLEY: And you said that when that flag tumbled, you instinctively went to get it and set it up again. You've written quite a bit about the American flag and its meaning. What does it mean to you?

TED: It's just a symbol that the promise laid out in the Declaration of Independence that we are all created equal, that we all have unalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and that government derives its just powers from the consent of the governed—the flag represents that for me. Together, they signal that this nation built on an idea large and diverse that began removing Native Americans from their land, enslaving Black folks, oppressing white immigrants and Asian immigrants that came over, that the pursuit of a better version of us is what the nation is about, this entire experiment, and the flag represents the potential. It represents the journey that we're on.

RICHARD: And then there's the military training that kicked in at that football game.

TED: And the reason I bounded down so quickly was because if a flag fell while we're in the middle of a drill or ag like that, it was beaten into us to immediately repost the flag. So the instinct was just sort of based on my training, but the reason it was so important is because if a flag fell, you saw people of different races, different genders, different ethnicities from different parts of the country all rallying to the flag to put it back where it belongs.

ASHLEY: What does it mean to be a patriot?

TED: This is a contested question, and I would suggest that most Americans don't agree on the answer. For me, being a patriot means to be proud of your country, to fulfill all your obligations and responsibilities as a citizen to the country, and to demand that the privileges and rights of citizenship that the State is to extend to its people, that it is extended to you, and if it's extended to you and not others, that you compel the State to extend it to them just as they have to you, and to point out where the nation has fallen short and insist on addressing those shortfalls. So being a patriot is not about uncritical conversation. It's not about talking about only how exceptional we are, only how great the country is. Being an actual, true patriot requires that you love the nation and that you critique it so that it will be a better version of itself.

RICHARD: You say you cannot love America and avoid the topic of race. Why is thinking about race fundamental to thinking about what it is to be an American?

TED: Nothing has challenged this nation, its history, our future, our ability to function well like race. And so, if this is the place you love and the principles of equality and justice and liberty, freedom are things you say you hold dear, and you avoid completely the topic of race, then your love is skin-deep. It's superficial because you're not grappling with the most challenging thing, that the thing you say you love has yet to reconcile, has yet to solve. So loving the country means requiring that it confront the demons of race from the history and the way those things play out today.

ASHLEY: You've alluded to this earlier, but you've stated that we're really uncomfortable as a society when pride coexists alongside reckoning. Can you talk a bit more about that?

TED: Yeah. When a nation has done something wrong, people are behind the actions. So, when we try to reckon with the things that the nation has done incorrectly, it's basically groups trying to reconcile how one group has benefitted from a set of structures more than the other. So the conversation between pride and reckoning gets hijacked because as soon as we say something isn't living up to its promise or there's a shortfall, we want to know who is responsible because once we identify who's responsible, then we can put it upon them to fix the thing that they broke. And we have also identified the victims who are going to be the recipients of the fixing, and that's a very contentious issue.

When you tell a group of white Americans today who never owned an enslaved person, who weren't part of Jim Crow segregation that, "It's your group's fault that my group is suffering," it now turns the question of racism in America to a fight between white people and Black people or white people and Hispanic people, Native Americans, etc. Very, very unproductive. And so that's why reckoning is so difficult, because sometimes it's reduced to an inter-group conflict instead of a group's ability to enjoy the full rights and privileges or citizenship. The pride becomes difficult because now you're asking groups that have been historically marginalized, "Why don't you love America? I mean, I know we enslaved you. I know that your ancestors were removed from their land. I know that we forced your immigrant great-great-great-grandparents to be indentured servants, or we called them all kinds of names and didn't let them live in our neighborhoods. But why can't you love us anyway?" It's a very hard thing to try and reconcile.

If you are a woman in America, you were not always part of this democracy no matter what your color. That was a fight. If you are Black in this country, you had to fight. If you were an immigrant in this

country, you had to fight. If you were poor in this country, you had to fight. So everyone is a descendant of people who recognized the nation was falling short and loved the nation so much that they were willing to fight to make this place better instead of saying, "It's a lost cause. Let's go back to where we came from," or, "Let's go find somewhere else to live."

And so, in order to reckon with a country, you have to express a kind of love and pride in it. Otherwise, why waste the effort to try to make it better. Why not go find somewhere else that's better suited for you? So pride and reckoning naturally coexist, but they've both been politicized to turn people against one another so that we can't stand together in solidarity and demand more of our country.

RICHARD: Talking about race can be painful. It can be difficult. How do we talk about race and reckoning in ways that could make us feel better rather than being angry or resentful?

TED: I think, if there's one thing that we can all do, it's to reframe the conversation from being an interpersonal issue into being a systemic or structural issue. When it's interpersonal, that means us three on this call right now need to figure out how to fix racism in America. And as smart as we are, it's not going to happen. We're not going to be able to figure out, and if you take us out of this call and put us with our groups, however we decide what those groups are, and say, "Okay, hey, you groups go sit together and hash it out, figure out racism," it's not going to happen. It's going to feel very zero sum.

So what I would suggest is that, instead of making racism an interpersonal issue, an inter-group issue, we make it an issue between the nation state and its public. So, when we reframe racism as a shortcoming of the way our country operates, now we can all come together because I want you to live in safe neighborhoods just like I want to. I want your kids to go to good schools just like I want to. I want you to be paid a fair wage just like I want to. I want you to be able to accumulate wealth, realize the American Dream, and I know that we have enough in this nation for all of us to be successful. So the reframing the debate to be something between the State and its people, which is what the Constitution is, which is what our founding documents are about, the relationship between government and its people, instead of an issue between groups of people, I think that helps take some of the animus out of the personal relationships and allows us to refocus our energies on making a better and more responsive, more efficient government.

ASHLEY: You're listening to Let's Find Common Ground. Our guest is retired U.S. Navy officer Ted Johnson. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard. There's a narrow orange and white banner right at the top of our website at Common Ground Committee, and it says, "Tell us what you'd like to hear on Let's Find Common Ground." We're asking for your ideas and suggestions.

ASHLEY: We have some exciting conversations planned in the coming weeks, including one with acclaimed PBS journalist Judy Woodruff and a discussion between a Democrat and a Republican on the electoral system. Each serves as their state's top election official.

RICHARD: But perhaps there's a Common Ground topic that we've never even thought of. Please share your suggestions.

ASHLEY: Go to commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts and take the brief survey. We read every single response.

RICHARD: Now back to our interview.

ASHLEY: You've written about many things in recent months, but you've written recently about some illiberalism on both sides of the aisle. So what do you mean when you say that illiberalism is a threat to democracy from both the Right and the Left?

TED: We're actually a liberal constitutional democratic republic. The liberal part of it means that there are rules, norms, sets of behaviors that are acceptable and those that aren't and that the rights of the people in the minority are still to be respected. In a direct democracy, 50% plus one vote means you get to have your way, and the people on the losing side, basically, are run roughshod over. But in a liberal democracy, just because you lose does not mean you lose your rights. So, in our liberal constitutional democratic republic, we believe that the rights of all in the majority and the minority, not just racial categories but political categories, should be respected. We believe that when we want to implement changes that there's a method to doing this and that the people should be engaged to vote on these changes and then a set of representative bodies to enact these changes.

What illiberalism suggests, the rights of the losers don't matter as much as the rights of the winners and that the winners get privileges that aren't extended to the losers and that the rules of the constitutional order can be bent to ensure that we win and the other side loses. And so, though it has the veneer of democracy because it still wants people to vote, it actually rigs it such that those who have power can hold onto it, and those who are seeking power to create change have a really, really, really difficult time accessing it. So, on the Right, we see things like January 6th. We see things like people not believing that elections are fair and challenging the rulings of courts and challenging the authorities laid out in the Constitution and often lead into violence and hateful rhetoric to try to address it. Whereas, on the Left, it's sort of like in order to get policy outcomes that they desire, they're willing to bend the rules a little bit. The bending of the rules is illiberal.

So the example I give in this piece is when Donald Trump used presidential emergency powers to move money out of the Department of Defense into the Department of Homeland Security to build a border wall. Those on the Left said, "This is an abuse of power. This is illiberalism." But when, after the abortion decision in Dobbs last year, there were a number of folks on the Left that said that President Biden should declare a presidential emergency and make abortion available on military bases or declare a presidential emergency to address climate change or declare a presidential emergency in order to forgive student loan debt. So now the very powers that they were critiquing on the Right in abusing for the border wall purposes, there was support for in order to deliver their policy aims. That, too, is illiberal. They're not equal. The violence is worse than forgiving people's student loans, but the illiberalism, the abuse of powers and disrespect for the Constitutional order is happening on both sides. That's something we've got to keep an eye on and in check.

RICHARD: America is going to have its 250th birthday a few years from now. I believe it's in 2026, the Semiquincentennial.

TED: That's right.

RICHARD: I had to look that up. I got to admit. Some of you are working on finding common ground as it relates to that milestone. What are you doing about this?

TED: Yeah, it's the Semiquincentennial July 4th, 2026, the 250th anniversary of the ratification of the Declaration of Independence, the founding of the country. I'm at New America. I direct its US@250 initiative, which is thinking about better ways to tell the American story that can be celebrated in 2026. We were compelled to do this because we started to see, on one side, this leaning into the pride narrative by the uncritical patriots who say America is basically the best thing that's out there, we're exceptional, and this is a moment for us to shoot fireworks and eat hotdogs and celebrate how great of a nation we have. Then, on the other side, we were seeing folks that were saying, "There's so much inequality and injustice in the country right now. This is a moment of reckoning and not a moment to celebrate but a moment to call out how far we have fallen short of who we say we are."

What we're saying at US@250 for the Semiquincentennial is you can do both. So let's think about the Semiquincentennial in terms of pride, reckoning, and aspiration. We believe that by challenging folks to hold these three things together, that's where the growth opportunity comes, both growing to be a better country but also growing together. And where we can have that conversation of putting together reckoning and pride, also the piece on aspiration forces us to acknowledge: do we have a shared vision for this country, or do we not? And if the answer is no, let's figure out where we're at odds and find some common ground because if we don't agree that pride and reckoning can be held together, and we don't agree on a vision for tomorrow for the country, we're going to be in bad shape, never mind come 250, certainly beyond it.

ASHLEY: So what do you think it is that the military can do to help find common ground and build greater tolerance?

TED: It's a great question, of course one I've thought lots about given my bio, my resume. It's also interesting to me that lots of folks look to the military as an example of how to create these multiracial coalitions of people working together for a common purpose. And it's probably the most undemocratic institution in the country. The military explicitly says you lose some of your 1st Amendment rights, some of your 4th Amendment rights when you agree to be in the military. There are things I could not say in uniform. There are parts of privacy that I no longer had.

But the one thing it does is it picks people up from where they are, and it drops them in another place surrounded by people who look different than them, pray differently than them, speak differently from them, come from a different economic class than they do, a different culture, and it puts us in the same room, puts us all in the same uniform, and says the only way you can be successful in that is if you work with the person beside you, if you're willing to sacrifice your time and talents for the people beside you. And if you do that, not only will we achieve our mission, but you will also achieve your personal goals, and all of us will get to go home to our families at the end of the day. There's not too many places in America that take Americans across difference and put them in a place together and give them a common purpose.

So, in my view, the military can be an example for national service programs, community service programs, or just creating avenues of connection across difference that Americans are opting out of today. We were sort of self-segregating into people that look like us, in the same class as us, live in the same areas, and we're not cross-contaminating the beauty of our diversity because we're self-segregated into these very homogenous circles. The military breaks those homogenous circles in a way that I think is beneficial for the country.

RICHARD: And is Memorial Day an occasion when Americans should find common ground?

TED: Yes, not finding common ground just in honoring the sacrifice of people who died for our country. There were people who were enslaved and still fought for the country. There were people who were kicked off their land, forced onto reservations, and still fought for the United States. There were people, white Americans, Asian Americans, who were treated poorly as immigrants and still fought for the country. So honoring that sacrifice is not specific to any one group at all. It's something that we can all do because we all descend from people who gave their lives.

But the other way I think it brings us, connects us is that those people died to give us more time to figure out how to make this thing work. They gave the nation more time to figure out all the things that it hadn't gotten right, to correct the things that it had gotten wrong. That time that we've been blessed with because of the sacrifices we honor on Memorial Day is something that we should all get behind, and not squandering that time is the least we can do to honor the sacrifices of those folks.

ASHLEY: Ted, you just mentioned the words "national service." Do you think America should bring back national service? Would that be a way for more Americans to get to know each other and find common ground?

TED: Yes, 100 percent. I am a proponent of national service, not just people going out, serving their communities, and saying, "Okay, I did my national service," but I think national service as in picking people up from where they are and putting them in different places in the country with different people in the country and giving them common purpose that helps build the country but also helps build connections between those folks of difference. I am an absolute believer in that, and I think to the extent that we can make it normative in our country to do national service, and those who opt out for selfish purposes have an asterisk attached to their achievements, perhaps that can be a way to do it. But there are lots of folks thinking about this, much smarter on this than I am, but the one thing we all agree on is that national service would be a good thing for the country.

ASHLEY: Ted, thanks so much for doing Let's Find Common Ground with us. It's been great conversation.

TED: Thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed it.

RICHARD: Ted Johnson speaking with us shortly before Memorial Day.

ASHLEY: Find more interviews on the website. Also, listen to the latest episode of Our Take with Common Ground Committee cofounders Bruce Bond and Erik Olsen.

RICHARD: Find all our shows at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: With Ashley Milne-Tyte. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.