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In days past, to be patriotic was a simple and clearly executable act. Families toiled their land and provided for their communities, and towns raised militias to maintain public safety. The instruction from the founding fathers was simple: care for the people around you and protect the ideals which our country was founded on. Revolutionary-era Americans could not choose to live apathetically, refusing to show any meaningful material support to the imperiled republic. They were faced with liberty with the possibility of death or safety in slavery to a monarch and chose the former. But as technology advanced and life became more comfortable, the American dream and the agreed upon definition of patriotism snapped into pieces, splintered by the breakneck jolt of progress. It quickly became clear that the seemingly simple doctrine of "natural rights" meant very different things to different people, some arguing that while all men are created equal, certain classes of people should be considered more equal than others. And, of course, wars have driven schisms through the heart of our country. The resulting situation is a current generation which has been born in a world divorced from any concept of national brotherhood. The children graduating high school this year were born seven years after the last memorable moment of nationwide unity, the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. The fact that I, someone who has never known real hardship and simply benefitted from the fruits of the labor of others, am speaking to a group of people who have sacrificed everything they had for their country is a hard to reconcile notion. What right do I have to speak to you all on what it means to be patriotic? How is it even possible for a civilian in this day and age to contribute anything as meaningful to the American project? In recent times, our patriotic duty as civilians has often been reframed as a duty to consume, to hoard. I believe that the exact opposite is true. Our responsibility is not to mindlessly consume; it is to thoughtfully distribute. It is not to vote once every four years; it is to

participate in local community action. Civilians have lost the ability to exercise patriotism as effectively as our military through our disconnect from reality and blissful acceptance of the comfortable accommodations available to us. To be patriotic is to be unified as we once or perhaps never truly were, it is to seek an education, it is to study the history of this country and the people who fought for it. It is to defend your community, and it is to raise a family or start a business. I will never truly viscerally understand war, but I can follow in the footsteps of the volunteers who gave their time and lives for their community. Since the true sacrifices our warriors have made remain incomprehensible to the average citizen, the least one can do is exercise the rights those brave men and women fought for in the first place.