

The Academy's Duty to Define Patriotism

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The answer to this symposium's topic question, "Is Higher Education Compatible with Patriotism?" is, of course, "Yes." Yes, in thunder. Now the fun and the intrigue start. Which patriotism? Which higher education? Compatible how?

First a negative example from popular lore, always useful in the unending effort to distinguish gold from dross, for perhaps we will get somewhere if we can say what patriotism is not and what bearing higher education might have on it.

Here is a quotation from a recent editorial in the Bloomington, Indiana, *Herald-Times*—the newspaper of a university town, but not, I take it, a card-carrying member of the famous "liberal media." The editorial criticizes former President Carter for traveling to Cuba. This newspaper notes that in the immediate aftermath of 11 September, "everyone . . . rallied around Bush and showed the world that the U.S. was a unified force not [sic] to be reckoned with" but laments that this patriotic spirit has waned over the subsequent months, and concludes that "we should debate issues with great fervor . . . but we must always act as one unified body, under the direction of one president."

Patriotism is not obedience. It is not White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer's declaration that Americans should "watch what we say." It is not the admonition from Attorney General Ashcroft:

To those who pit Americans against immigrants, citizens against non-citizens, to those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty, my message is this: Your tactics only aid terrorists for they erode our national unity and diminish our resolve.

Well, obedience is obedience. There are good times for it—heeding the fire marshals in a crowded theater, and so on. But the fact that obedience can be passed off as patriotism suggests one of the current misunderstandings, and the poor condition of actual existing patriotism. I'll come back to this.

Let me take as a second negative example a proclamation intended for academics in particular.

You will perhaps recall (though it might be better for all concerned if you couldn't recall) the document called "Defending Civilization," subtitled,

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“How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done about It,” which occasioned some brief notoriety when issued in November 2001. That notoriety was partly because the group that sponsored it, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, had been cofounded by the vice president’s wife, Lynne Cheney, a quotation from whom adorned its title page. In it, she advocated studying the past, that “living in liberty is such a precious thing that generations of men and women have been willing to sacrifice everything for it. We need to know, in a war, exactly what is at stake”—a sentiment to which I wholeheartedly subscribe.

One of the roll of 117 sound-bites singled out as “campus responses” after 11 September was this incendiary sentence: “There is a lot of skepticism about the administration’s policy of going to war.” It was, like several others, culled from an article published in the *New York Daily News*, unusual but not unique in that company in simply reporting a state of affairs. The speaker was myself. (Later, after heat mounted, the organizers whited out the names of the transgressors.)

Not surprisingly, blame-America-firsters and other fierce opponents of White House policy were quick to deplore this document. Why were supporters and agnostics not quick to deplore it—or at the very least, to parody it—as well? It was and remains a caricature of scholarly seriousness. It displays not the slightest thoroughness or care. Quotations from professors (some more admirable by my lights, some less, some idiotic) mingle with quotations from students, which in turn mingle with persons not otherwise recognized. (Item 11 reads in its entirety: “Speaker at Haverford College meeting: ‘We are complicit.’” Who are “we”? Complicit with what?) Sound-bites critical of the White House mingle with modest, unexceptionable factual observations like my own. The sole criterion for inclusion is mention in a select sample of newspaper articles as if those were holy writ. This is demagoguery, and incompetent demagoguery at that. It is meant to stoke up a herd response—the nattering nabobs are restless; send them to indoctrination in American history classes.

Where, when you needed it, was a ringing defense of humor against the politically correct?

What’s wrong with this shoddy exercise in intellectual bullying goes to the heart of the question addressed by this symposium. What are universities for? They are for the conduct of learning. They are also for the conduct of civic culture—the conduct of our collective life.

So debate is one of their crucial functions—for all the John Stuart Millian reasons: the presumption going in is that everyone has something to learn, and that arguments are improved when they are forced to confront their antagonists, however few (or many) they may be. In any case, universities must be judges of the right way to conduct their debates. We do not need any patriotic correctness police.

We do not need them even if the humanities are riddled with mumbo-jumbo (which they are). What we need are discerning publics, more knowledgeable, logical, and inquisitive. We need not only higher but lower education in the reasoning to distinguish strong from weak propositions and to tell the difference between assertions and arguments. These distinctions will not be provided by the standard school tests now in use, substituting for educational reform, in proposed national legislation. They will not be implanted by bombastic punditry or MTV-style news snippets in the classroom. It is not easy to reform the way a nation learns to reason, but it's close to a sure thing that the shortcut solutions are worthless.

The fact that the patriotism alarm sounded so quickly after the massacres of 11 September is not so surprising. What is worth considering is why the discussion has taken the shallow form that it has taken. Let me offer a hypothesis: actual, lived, on-the-ground patriotism is shaky. Typically, SUV patriots who raised their flags to flutter in the freeway breezes (thereby scraping a few percentage points off their already flimsy miles-per-gallon statistics) miss the point. To further American dependency on Saudi, Iraqi, and Gulf state oil, among others, is the sort of easy, reflexive action that substitutes for patriotic endeavor.

Patriotism is love: love of one's people, love of traditions, and in America—this rare nation whose identity is formed from allegiance to ideas, not to ancestral blood—love of Constitutional principle (and not airy "values"). Alas for the malefactors of simplification, our traditions are multiple, and universities are not doing their work if they graduate students who do not know the traditions, see them whole, in all their beauty and ugliness.

Surely the World War I tradition of jailing opponents, firing them from universities, shutting down newspapers, blocking their mailing privileges, is, at the least, debatable as a contribution to the patriotic weal. (But students should know about it.)

Surely the World War II tradition of rounding up Japanese Americans deserves the denunciation, recompense, and apology that it much belatedly occasioned. Surely the fight against the original axis of evil would have benefited from some persnickety debate in wartime universities over the justice of these policies.

Traditions of literature need cultivation. So do traditions of sacrifice—among them rationing, air-raid wardens, the voluntary public service of dollar-a-year men. (Can you imagine, in today's climate, dollar-a-year men!) So do traditions of veterans, all the veterans—those in uniform who, after My Lai, wondered whether what they had done in war was right, and those outside uniform who fled to Canada or otherwise resisted the war because they saw it as a disgrace to America. Patriotism, crucially, entails readiness to sacrifice. And this means not just wishing American troops well (and, offensive as it is to me, the right not to wish them well if one should be so

appallingly inclined). It entails willingly sacrificing privilege, in the name of the greater good.

Which raises some questions so far neglected in public discussion:

- Is it a supreme act of patriotism to swell the riches of billionaires, boost subsidies for agribusiness, expedite the moving of electronic corporate headquarters offshore to tax havens, when the police and firemen, who are properly our heroes, cannot afford to live in the cities they protect?
- Do we wish to accept that one has paid one's patriotic dues by flying to Disneyland, as the president urged in the fall of 2001? To get back in the saddle, head for the mall, and shop? I do not mean to suggest that these are bad ideas in particular. But surely they are the feeblest of gestures to the great god of consumer confidence, not particularly recognitions that, in Mrs. Cheney's words, "living in liberty is such a precious thing that generations of men and women have been willing to sacrifice everything for it."
- How patriotic is it to say that America is at war with whomever the president says we are at war with, just when he says so?

Surely the halls of higher education would not be a bad place to conduct such debates.

Surely the media would not be a bad place either. Let me remind you that the stars of American news during the year, 1998, when Osama bin Laden first made headlines as the perpetrator of the East Africa embassy bombings, was not the terrorist-in-chief and al-Qaeda and the struggle against them. Rather, it was Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton. Failures of intelligence indeed. As a nation, we were cognitively disarmed.

Was it patriotic to affirm, as decades of deregulation have been affirming, that we are served by the best of all possible media systems? Surely universities might serve the public interest by stirring up not fewer but more and deeper debates on the failures of intelligence that afflicted American institutions before 11 September 2001—and I do not refer simply to the feebleness of the FBI and other investigation bureaucracies. I refer to the parochialism, the collective and individual narcissism of American news; the gluttony and shallowness of American culture; the worship of athletes as "heroes"; the notion that extensive travel around the world and even (perish the thought!) knowledge of the names of foreign leaders are somehow a disqualification for leadership of the United States; and that ignorance and unreleased grades are, while not perhaps the most admirable of traits, ingratiating qualities in a prospective commander-in-chief—to name only a few subjects.

And the shabbiness of American university life might come in for debate in other respects as well. Surely the rewarding of mediocrity and worse through grade inflation contributes to a climate in which failures of intelligence of all sorts are routine and acceptable.

Surely the cancellation of foreign language requirements is not a boon to America's ability to live in the world. Collective ignorance surely hinders the necessary fight against the thousands of criminal fundamentalists who would willingly go to their deaths in the course of their massacres.

Patriotism entails defense of the nation—the people, the air space, but also the just commitments. Surely, then, patriotism is more than compatible with higher education. What it needs, though, is not a pat on our collective back. Not self-congratulation or patriotic catechisms. It needs a ripening in all our institutions. It needs the best of our hearts and minds. Not silence, but vigor and intelligence—the highest of education.

We took the excerpts below from an article by Charles Taylor titled, "A Weekend With Buffy, Vampire Slayer and Seminar Topic," in the Arts & Leisure section of the 24 November 2002 *New York Times*.

"Blood, Text and Fears," which took place here this fall at the University of East Anglia, was the first academic conference ever devoted to "Buffy the Vampire Slayer."

It's "a tremendously rich text," said Dr. Carol O'Sullivan, the associate director of the university's British Center for Literary Translation and an organizer of the conference.

And the papers? Fears of a glut of jargon-heavy pontification might not have been assuaged by the title of the opening address: "Pain as Bright as Steel: The Monomyth and Light in 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer.'" But as it turned out, the enthusiasm that bubbled up among the participants had translated beautifully. Of the dozen or so papers I heard, none went in for more than a passing nod to theory. In fact one, presented by James Gray of Goldsmiths College, was an extended rebuke to Roland Barthes's idiotic theory of the death of the author. Gender studies made its impact felt in some of the papers, and a reasonable listener might have begun to suspect that the discipline ends up unintentionally reinforcing every stereotype it means to subvert: women who display some degree of gumption and independence are said to have been masculinized.