FADED GLORY

How Broadcast Networks Trivialize Patriotism

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A Special Report from the Culture and Media Institute

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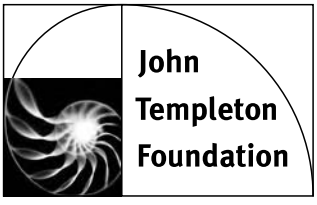
SPECIAL REPORT



Supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The word "patriotism" conjures images of Old Glory, the Liberty Bell, soldiers landing on the beaches at Normandy and the Founding Fathers – at least in the hearts of most Americans. But on the broadcast networks, "patriotism" has become little more than a marketing term. ABC, CBS and NBC gave more emphasis to the "patriotic" trappings of holidays – like patriotic potato salad and red, white and blue fashion – than either "patriotic" ideals or the men and women who defend them.

Several times each year, Americans are called to celebrate their patriotism. The Culture and Media Institute analyzed five years of network coverage surrounding five such holidays – Presidents' Day, Memorial Day, the Fourth of July and Veterans' Day. As 2005 and 2009 saw new presidential terms, researchers also included Inauguration Day 2005 and 2009 in this study.

Analysts examined 139 transcripts from ABC, CBS, and NBC for the week leading up to each holiday in which the words "patriotism" and "patriotic" appeared. Their conclusions show the broadcast networks focused on the trivial side of patriotism, treating these days as they would Halloween or any other secular holiday. Other findings included:

- **American Ideals Forgotten:** Networks only discussed patriotic ideals – such as the pursuit of happiness, self-reliance, ambition, courage, unalienable rights, entrepreneurship, economic liberty, and the freedoms of speech, press and religion – just three times during the study. NBC even used "unalienable rights" as a segue to plead for immigration reform.

- **Networks Pay Little Attention to the Military:** The three networks labeled food "patriotic" nearly twice as often as members of the armed services (20 to 11). ABC's July 4, 2008, broadcast of "Good Morning America" featured "patriotic"

[potato] salad," "patriotic" cobbler and "patriotic" chicken wings. Viewers didn't see "patriotic" soldiers, Marines, sailors or airmen in the broadcast.

• **Patriotic Potato Salad:** Of the 118 "patriotic" labels, 31 percent (37 out of 118) used in network broadcasts applied to food, fashion, music and decorations. Especially around Independence Day, networks were more concerned about helping viewers create "patriotic" picnics than anything else.

• **Media Deflect Obama's Patriotism Problem** Twenty-five references to Obama's patriotism aired around Independence Day 2008 and focused largely on the candidate's new-found willingness to wear an American flag pin on his lapel. Networks helped convince viewers he was the victim of petty criticism from his conservative rivals. Larger questions regarding Obama's patriotism were ignored. Those included his association with anti-Americans such as William Ayers, a terrorist who bombed the Pentagon, and the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, a preacher who damned America – neither of whom was mentioned during the study time period.

To improve network coverage of patriotism, CMI recommends:

• **Focusing on the meaning of holidays such as Memorial Day and July 4:** Networks can highlight the different ways people remember the troops and discuss what makes America worth celebrating. This puts the holidays in proper perspective and reminds viewers that they're not simply a day off of work.

• **Label military service patriotic:** There are disagreements as to the missions in which the U.S. military participates but that should not detract from the fact that members of the military serve America at great sacrifice to themselves.

• **Showcase different expressions of patriotism:** For some, wearing red, white and blue or eating cakes decorated like flags is window dressing, not a valid expression of love of America. Find out what average Americans consider patriotic. Ask tough questions such as is dissent ever patriotic?

• **Celebrate the great things about America:** There are hundreds of days to examine what is broken in America. Use the few days in which the focus is truly on the nation to praise its best attributes and what sets it apart from other nations – like the freedom of the press and the freedom of speech. Two of the holidays studied, Memorial Day and Veterans Day, are dedicated to people who served and sacrificed for the nation. News coverage should reflect the America that inspired them.

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By Colleen Raezler and Dan Gainor
Culture and Media Institute

It was a simple thing – just signing their names. But in doing so, 56 men pledged their lives, their fortunes and their "sacred honor" to a new nation and gave birth to American independence on July 4th, 1776. More than 230 years later, the 4th of July is still a day Americans celebrate their nation, its independence and their patriotism.

Patriotism. To most Americans that word has special meaning. It's not just love of country. Every use of the word evokes powerful images – shivering men at Valley Forge, young children saying the Pledge of Allegiance and the American flag raised by three brave firefighters over ground zero after 9-11.

Each year on July 4th, Americans reflect on those images and much more to recall what their nation means to them. It is one of several days each year when Americans are encouraged to revel in their history and life in the Land of the Free.

Four holidays each year offer broadcast networks a particular opportunity to discuss patriotism: Presidents' Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day and Veterans' Day. Every four years, a fifth holiday arises in the form of the inauguration of a new presidential administration.

Analysts at the Culture and Media Institute examined five years of broadcast network coverage of those holidays and "patriotism" A Lexis-Nexis search showed 139 broadcast news programs – morning, evening, late-night and weekend broadcasts - contained the words "patriotism" or "patriotic."

What they found says a great deal about the values TV journalists consider important. ABC, CBS and NBC focused on shallow expressions of patriotism rather than explore the questions of what made America and Americans exceptional.

NBC "Today" co-hosts Hoda Kotb and Kathie Lee Gifford illustrated this during the July 3, 2008, broadcast of the show's weekly quiz segment. Billed as "all about

patriotism," the questions largely ignored the history of America's founding or the kind of knowledge required for the citizenship test and focused a great deal on pop culture references such as, "What is sticking out of Bruce Springsteen's pocket on the 'Born in the USA' album cover?" and "A Fourth of July favorite, the Frisbee, originated in what American city?" Only two out the six questions pertained to American history.

Americans found much advice on how to celebrate their nation's holidays on the broadcast networks but did not find the "meaning" of the celebrations or gratitude for what makes this country great.

American Ideals?

It seems only natural that any discussion that includes the words "patriotism" or "patriotic" would celebrate American ideals, especially around Independence Day and other similar national holidays. But someone forgot to tell TV journalists.

In the five years of news coverage related to patriotism, there was no coverage of American ideals such as self-reliance or entrepreneurship. No gratitude from the networks for the liberties Americans enjoy such as a free press and free speech. No celebration of the fact that America is still the land of opportunity, where hard work and determination can allow poor boys and girls to grow up to become leaders in business, politics and medicine.

Of all the great things about America, broadcast networks could only find three to discuss within the last five years that they called "patriotic." All three mentions appeared during July 4 coverage. NBC made two mentions, one in 2005 and the other in 2006, and CBS the other.

In the hands of NBC's Mike Taibbi, the nation's most fundamental principle became a liberal talking point supporting illegal immigration. Taibbi asserted in the July 4, 2006 "Nightly News" broadcast that America's Independence Day was "about a simple powerful idea that's been fought over, fought for and reaffirmed for 230 years. The idea that unalienable rights for all of us … come with a guarantee of equality." That was his jumping off point to highlight the need for "humane" immigration reform "that both welcomes immigrants and is good for America." He continued, "It's been a season of discontent in this immigrant nation over the unresolved issue of immigration reform. Lawyer Deborah Notgren says it isn't enough today to just celebrate."

But the year before, NBC had been able to show how American freedom of religion set the nation apart. A year before on "Nightly News," Capt. John Smathers of the Army Reserves told correspondent Rehema Ellis that America "can be an example to other countries how Christians and Muslims and Jews can live together."

CBS drew on the Declaration of Independence to highlight another benefit of freedom. "Sunday Morning" host Charles Osgood introduced the show's July 2, 2006, cover story

with "As patriotic rights go, the pursuit of happiness seems to be everybody's favorite." The segment drew attention to "positive psychology," the study of happiness. Marty Seligman, director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania told CBS, "Happiness breaks down into three things. One is what Hollywood means by happiness, which is the pleasant life. The second notion into which happiness dissolves is engagement in life, the engaged life. And the third notion, which is different yet, is a meaningful life, belonging to and serving something that you think is larger than you are."

ABC failed to highlight American ideals in its coverage.

Seligman had it right that Americans celebrate being part of something rare and exceptional – a nation where anyone can succeed. And, as Barack Obama proved in November, where anyone of any race can grow up and be president. Those ideas were hard to find on the three networks.

Trivial Patriotism

Few Americans would consider food – even Mom's apple pie – to be more patriotic than the men and women who defend the very ideals that made this nation great. The same would be true for fashion. Except for those in the mainstream media.

"Patriotic" references to food appeared in network newscasts nearly twice as often as references to service members' patriotism. ABC's July 4, 2008, "Good Morning America" even featured tips on how to make "patriotic chicken wings," "patriotic [potato] salad," and "patriotic" cobbler. "Patriotic" soldiers or sailors or airmen were much harder to find.

In fact, 31 percent (37 out of 118) of the uses of "patriotic" referred to food, fashion, music or decorations – more than three times the uses of "patriotic" or "patriotism" applied to service members (11). "Patriotic" food references alone nearly doubled the times the networks referred to the "patriotic" military (20 to 11).

NBC chose to commemorate Memorial Day not by honoring America's fallen heroes, but by honoring a dessert. "Today" invited Martha Stewart on to make a "patriotic tart" for Memorial Day picnics on May 24, 2006. Just like ABC, NBC failed to apply the "patriotic" label or to discuss the patriotism of military members.

"Patriotic" food segments aired most often around Memorial Day and Independence Day. Part of that was due to the holiday tradition of barbecues and picnics. But clearly, the networks cared more about menus than meanings.

In the case of NBC, it was Martha Stewart who had to school anchor Katie Couric on the origins of Memorial Day during her 2006 segment. Couric was unimpressed:

MARTHA STEWART: And you know – do you know about Memorial Day? Do you know when it was started?

KATIE COURIC: I actually knew that at one point, but it …

STEWART: 1868.

COURIC: And why?

STEWART: Well, to commemorate the Civil War soldiers that fought in our nation.

COURIC: Oh, OK.

The food theme was consistent on all three major networks. Buddy Valastro, baker and star of TLC's "Cake Boss," demonstrated how to create cupcakes on the May 25, 2009, "Good Morning America." Host Elizabeth Vargas told viewers, "Today we're going to make cupcakes with a Memorial Day theme." Valestro continued, "With it being Memorial Day, I wanted to go with a beach theme." The finished cupcakes depicted beach scenes, complete with umbrellas, brown sugar "sand" and oceans of blue frosting.

Vargas praised Valastro for a cake decorated in red, white and blue at the end of the segment. Again, it wasn't the journalists, but the chef who understood the true meaning of the holiday. "Well, being Memorial Day we tried to do something very patriotic and you know, I'm so happy to be here in New York during Fleet Week and see all these wonderful soldiers who serve our country and you know, God bless them all."

Networks sometimes recognized soldiers' patriotism. In the introduction to a July 4, 2004, "Nightline" segment, ABC's Cynthia McFadden stated of the military, "Lives are sacrificed in quiet patriotism." NBC correspondent Jim Miklaszewski noted that World War II veterans "enlisted with a burning sense of patriotism and purpose" during his May 23, 2009, report on Honor Air, an organization that helped World War II veterans visit their memorial in Washington, D.C.

Yet these brief notations of soldiers' patriotism were overshadowed by "patriotic" food and clothing options.

Although red, white and blue was en vogue for picnic options, for fashion elites the colors of the flag could be "tacky."

"Flags are in fashion, of course, every Fourth of July, but that doesn't mean you should dress your family like the Grand Old Flag," said Katie Couric, then co-host of NBC's "Today" as she teased an upcoming segment on patriotic fashion with Stacy London, co-host of TLC's "What Not to Wear" on July 4, 2005.

London is known for telling people exactly how bad they look in certain outfits.

Her "patriotic" fashion tips for "Today" included "Leave the stars and stripes for the flags and think about the colors. And the colors themselves can be so beautiful and so flattering and, yes, very patriotic." Later in the segment London praised a red, white and blue outfit for not being "tacky red, white and blue."

Party planners missed the mark even when they attempted to instill meaning into celebrations. Nancy Soriano of Country Living visited ABC's "Good Morning America" on July 3, 2008 to advise viewers on decorating for a Fourth of July party, "As a giveaway, a take-home," she told co-host Diane Sawyer, "we printed out copies of the Constitution to give to everybody … so they can really understand what the holiday is all about." But the Constitution isn't simply a document to be given as party favor; it's a way of life.

Cupcakes, cobblers and Constitution party favors – the networks drain meaning from America's patriotic holidays and treat them little different than Halloween or Valentine's Day.

Support of the Military

America's military members sacrifice every day. They can't take off on weekends or holidays. They live and work far from their families in dangerous conditions. Comforts many Americans take for granted – driving safely to the office each day, hot showers, and picking up a phone to call a loved one at anytime – are true luxuries for them. Yet these selfless men and women willingly forego such every-day comforts to ensure Americans never have to experience another 9/11 or Pearl Harbor.

These service members embody everything that makes America great – honor, commitment, self-reliance, courage – but the media couldn't seem to label these same servicemen and women "patriotic."

Broadcast networks used "patriotic" or "patriotism" in reference to military service only 11 times in five years. That was just 9 percent.

During the May 28, 2007, edition of "Good Morning America," ABC's Chris Cuomo recounted time spent with troops during a trip to Iraq. Relating an anecdote about encountering an IED, he noted "the grace under courage that these men and women have." Cuomo also said, "they say, 'Let us not forget that freedom is not free and remember those that have paid the ultimate sacrifice for freedom'" but at no point labeled the troops' service "patriotic."

"Good Morning America" did much better when staffers arranged for two military families to speak to their soldiers stationed in Iraq on July 4, 2005. Charles Gibson, then co-host, introduced the segment and brought the sacrifice of these families front and center, "On this most patriotic of days when families across America celebrate the nation's independence, we're gonna introduce you to three Americans who can't hug

their loved ones because they are far away in Iraq."

Mostly, the networks focused on how others honor the troops.

During Memorial Day coverage in 2005, ABC and NBC both featured the story of Collin Kelly, a nine-year-old boy who wanted to remember deceased veterans. Kelly expressed his wish to honor deceased veterans in a Framingham, Mass., cemetery by placing flowers on their graves but was told that the cemetery's policy allowed only the families of the deceased to do so. Anybody else needed the permission of the soldiers' families. Kelly persevered, and the cemetery ultimately allowed him to express his gratitude to the fallen troops.

For Memorial Day 2008, CBS "The Early Show" showcased the efforts of David DeJonge, a photographer who spent 18 months photographing World War I veterans and began fundraising for a national monument to the American soldiers who served in the Great War.

Identification as a service member presumes a deep love for America. Network reporting should reflect that, and apply the words "patriotic" or "patriotism" to U.S. troops.

Patriotism Gap

One of the most controversial elements of the 2008 campaign was the issue of patriotism. Nothing indicated the media obsession with shallow displays of patriotism more than their coverage of questions about then-candidate Barack Obama's patriotism in the summer of 2008. Twenty-five out of the 85 patriotism mentions (29 percent) referenced Obama's patriotism and aired around July 4, 2008. Five of these mentions also included references to Obama's refusal to wear an American flag pin. Essentially, ABC, CBS and NBC reported that Obama needed to overcome the questions about his patriotism without ever critically examining the root of those questions.

Throughout the early summer of 2008 Obama faced lingering questions about his patriotism, in part, because of his refusal to wear a flag pin on his lapel. It was that point the networks pushed, ignoring other more significant issues, such as Obama's connection to William Ayers, whose organization The Weathermen bombed the U.S. Capitol and the Pentagon in the early 1970s, and his connection to his former pastor Rev. Jeremiah Wright, who in a sermon said "Not God bless America, but God damn America!"

Shortly before Memorial Day 2008, reporters observed that Obama began to wear a flag pin. Obama told ABC's Robin Roberts during a May 19, 2008 "Good Morning America" interview that his decision to wear the pin was because his supporters "wanted the issue taken off the table." He continued, "I'm happy to wear a flag pin. It's something that I'm proud to do."

Roberts failed to ask the obvious follow-up question of, "If you're happy and proud to wear the flag pin, why wait to do so until the issue has become a political liability?"

Following a June 30 speech Obama gave on patriotism, CBS' Dean Reynolds reported on "Evening News," "Obama now wears an American flag pin on his lapel and is often at events where Old Glory is prominent. He clearly believes patriotism should be off the table."

ABC's John Berman gave a similar report the same night on "World News with Charles Gibson," saying, "Standing in front of four American flags with yet another pinned to his lapel, Barack Obama declared he has always been a patriot." Later Berman noted that Obama "has worn a flag lapel pin every day on the trail since May 12."

Peter Beinart, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, provided the only insight into Obama's change of heart. He told Berman, "Barack Obama and the people around him are shrewd enough to recognize that political campaigns are often about symbols."

According to the media, the decision to wear a flag pin and position himself in front of American flags was enough to lay to rest any concerns the media had about Obama's patriotism. This assumption by the media allowed unexplored concerns about Obama's connections to remain so.

Conclusion

Patriotism is more than wearing red, white and blue a few days out of the year or knowing some useless trivia. It's also gratitude to those who came before and ensured the freedoms we enjoy now. It's acceptance and celebration of things done right. It's the correction of those things wrongly executed. It's appreciation for the opportunities Americans have to better their lives. It's optimism in the face of hardship that truth and justice will prevail.

According to CMI's National Cultural Values Survey, 68 percent of Americans believe the media negatively influence moral values on America. In the case of patriotism, and what it means to be patriotic, researchers found that the news media go for the "quick-hit" by focusing on vapid expressions. According the networks, patriotism is defined as wearing red, white and blue or eating foods deemed "patriotic." Devoting one's career to the protection of America is not viewed as a redeemable manifestation of patriotism. Patriotism is viewed as a political tool, not a deep love of country.

To the broadcast news organizations, patriotic holidays are for barbecues and picnics and fireworks, something to cook or decorate the house for, not for reflection on the blessings of freedom, security and prosperity we Americans enjoy.

To improve network coverage of patriotism, CMI recommends:

• **Focusing on the meaning of holidays such as Memorial Day and July 4:** Networks can highlight the different ways people remember the troops and discuss what makes America worth celebrating. This puts the holidays in proper perspective and reminds viewers that they're not simply a day off of work.

• **Label military service patriotic:** There are disagreements as to the missions in which the U.S. military participates but that should not detract from the fact that members of the military serve America at great sacrifice to themselves.

• **Showcase different expressions of patriotism:** For some, wearing red, white and blue or eating cakes decorated like flags is window dressing, not a valid expression of love of America. Find out what average Americans consider patriotic. Ask tough questions such as is dissent ever patriotic?

• **Celebrate the great things about America:** There are hundreds of days to examine what is broken in America. Use the few days in which the focus is truly on the nation to praise its best attributes and what sets it apart from other nations – like the freedom of the press and the freedom of speech. Two of the holidays studied, Memorial Day and Veterans Day, are dedicated to people who served and sacrificed for the nation. News coverage should reflect the America that inspired them.

• **Don't trivialize charges of un-patriotic behavior:** Investigate why people make such charges. To focus solely on a symbolic gesture ignores very real concerns and questions.

About the Culture and Media Institute

The Culture and Media Institute's mission is to advance, preserve, and help restore America's culture, character, traditional values, and morals against the assault of the liberal media elite. Founded in October 2006 with a challenge grant from the Templeton Foundation, CMI has already attracted attention from the Rush Limbaugh Show, Fox News Channel, CNN and many other news outlets.

Using the unique resources at Media Research Center, CMI is exposing media campaigns against the traditional values of faith, self-reliance, patriotism, marriage, decency, civic pride, gratitude, industriousness and good manners. CMI staffers regularly appear on TV, radio and in print, and publish periodic reports as well as articles for outside publications.

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About the MRC

Founded in 1987, the Media Research Center (MRC) is America's largest and most respected media watchdog group. Its mission is to create a media culture where truth and liberty flourish in America.

The Alexandria, Virginia-based organization brings balance and responsibility to the news media through its News Analysis Division, which documents, exposes and neutralizes liberal media bias; the Business & Media Institute, which audits the media's coverage of economic issues; TimesWatch.org, which monitors the New York Times; and Newsbusters.org, the MRC blog, which exposes liberal media bias 24 hours a day.

The MRC is also home to the Cybercast News Service (CNSNews.com), an Internet news outlet that is dedicated to providing unbiased coverage of the news of the day.

In 2006, the MRC launched the Culture and Media Institute with a mission to advance and help restore America's culture, character, traditional values and morals against the assault of the liberal media elite.

Former CBS reporter and now best-selling author Bernard Goldberg says of the MRC, "The Media Research Center folks don't give the media hell; they just tell the truth and the media thinks it's hell."

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