

Unpacking Patriotism: An Essay on the Necessity of Patriotism on Campus

As the smoke clears, the sounds of clamor amongst the ranks die down, the cannons armed to break through the ever-mounting tension. Boom. The cannon fire ripples through the valley, the volleys of gunfire pepper the space between the barking of orders, the cotton uniforms wreak on the Saturday afternoon: this is war. This battle rages as spectators clap at the trotting of horses and blasts of the constant musket fire—bring the kids, you wouldn't want to miss this patriotic event! What are you fighting for—my rights. Rights? These Confederate reenactors chirp about rights and the romance of southern gentry. Is this patriotism? What is Patriotism? Is it lumbering around in period accurate cotton slacks that start to bunch up around the nether regions, becoming sweaty in the worst of places? Is it grilling hot dogs and watching fireworks on the 4th of July, cracking open a cold one for good measure? Is it marching with tiki torches in hand chanting “Blood and soil!” or something along those lines? Is it understanding, appreciating and coming to terms with our nation's past? This issue of perpetuating the necessity of patriotism is the lack of instruction within being patriotic. So how can one be patriotic without a flintlock or a tiki torch?

When the question of patriotism's place at the University of Wisconsin is considered from the most nonpartisan, unbiased, and unpatriotic perspective, the most logical conclusion that is patriotism has a place within the university's walls. As will soon be discussed, patriotism must not be blind love for one's country but a continued point of criticality wherein the individual questions their love of their country and simultaneously could never be shaken; this instability of perspective would be caused by deep investment within both looking at the nation's actions retrospectively and currently. The benefits of such a volatile relationship would be constant scrutiny of one's nation, holding it up to the standards required for this endless

devotion. This engaging and non-static view of patriotism is one that falls in line with the values at the University of Wisconsin.

Attaining this critical avenue of patriotism is found through studying America's history—all of it. No cherry-picking and no skim reading or spark notes. Through an unbiased lens, all of the less glamorous parts of America's over tricentennial past must register as just as American as hot dogs on the 4th of July. This is hard to achieve. From napalm to smallpox, there are some points of American history that refuse to be embedded on mass within the psyche of those who consider themselves to be patriotic. Just ask those Confederate reenactors about slavery—it gets awkward really quick. Lots of verbal filler punctuated by excuses or workarounds, this is all you'll hear. War of rights. This awkwardness needs to be broken if any forward progress is going to be made; the trajectory of progress without these conversations is surely downward if we stay silent. How do we break the silence? Simple: just talk about it. Talking about the less savory parts of American history, keeping the conversation inclusive and productive, allows for people with different perspectives on hot-button issues to see that there is general consensus across all Americans on many things—this is key to patriotism.

These mass similarities feed patriotism appeal but also feeds tribalism. Groups of like-minded patriots can connect over their similar views and this can back-up other views that are held less so across the nation. These tribal ideas can fester and turn into radical and unsettling forms of patriotism that lose sight of the main reason for patriotism: oneness. This splintering flies in face of real patriotism and radical patriots will no longer take up the conversation because they have no place in Wisconsin; from the backwoods to the internet, these insurrections could not be further than the sense of patriotism that I am advocating for. Although, it is necessary to bring them up as precaution as to what unchecked patriotism can lead to.

Guided by the unfiltered course of history, unsubstantiated and unfavorable incarnations of patriotism are less likely to become the consensus if aspects of patriotism are constantly being questioned. This questioning, however, is idealistic and unlikely to occur anytime soon. Yet, of all the places in the U.S. of A. it could happen, a university is a good place to start. At the University of Wisconsin, a well-research, nuanced, and inquisitive form of patriotism is a plausible learning outcome. And it's this plausibility that makes patriotism worth introducing to the campus under this odd set of values. By no means would it be an easy task to indoctrinate a campus with this rhetoric but keeping an ongoing campus wide conversation on the place of patriotism on campus is an extremely worthwhile endeavor—no cash prize required but it would certainly pique the interest of many who would otherwise not think about this issue.

Returning to the fray, the commotion of the manufactured carnage reels me back into an odd sense of self awareness. As I sat listening to endless barrage of blanks and grown men moaning, I wondered if I was patriotic. I certainly would not be prancing around in a Confederate uniform—in ninety-eight degrees no less. A crescendo of Buffalo Springfield, the Allman Brothers, and Lynyrd Skynyrd—all things considered to be truly red, white, and blue—begins to overtake my mind as I wondered what it means to be American. Through the radio static, I had a moment of clarity. I raised to volume and in one voice, one clear, harmonious voice, the answer played off my ears: of course. There was no doubt in my mind that I am a patriotic American. It takes constant questioning and doubts but in maintaining the internal and external dialogue I have found that the results are worth the headache. Complacency is the most corrosive element that can inhibit a good sense of patriotism.