

## Pop Patriotism

Blanketing homes, businesses, and automobiles in the American flag in response to the terrorist attacks of September may have been more about hysteria than patriotism, but don't tell that to your neighbor. Like a medieval town frantically dispensing garlic to its citizens to ward off the vampire that haunts their nights, the swiftness with which the flag was dispatched across the nation suggested a sustained panic from the shock of those surprise attacks, rather than an expression of belief in the merits of its democracy. As Americans drown themselves in red, white, and blue to mask the anxiety of wondering how or where terrorism will strike next, the fearful climate caused many to practice a kind of media fundamentalism suggested by their inability or reluctance to try to distinguish fact from fiction. Those who sought the invocation of patriotism as a sincere reflection of support for "America Under Siege" or "America Attacked" or "America Strikes Back" are willing customers for a commodity that has replaced the pre-9/11 Dot-Com travesty (which will now forever remain unexamined) with a "wartime" diet of nostalgia and sentimentality.



*Pledge 2001*  
Barbara Cliffe

If Dot-Coms offered novelty and technology fetish, the rhetoric of the New Patriotism is a re-run of Reagan's "Morning in America". Reagan's campaign commercials made liberal use of small town flag waving, and his cold war reference to the "Evil Empire" finds its current parallel in Bush's "Axis of Evil". It would be a mistake though, to imagine that the influence of the man who sold patriotism like soap had suddenly reemerged out of nowhere. The long shadow of the Reagan years could clearly be seen, if one looked closely enough, in the background of the hyper-consumerism that characterized the Clinton era. In the decades that spanned from Reagan to Clinton, the collusion between government and business to usurp citizenship with consumerism has neared its completion. Unfortunately, for Bush, the freewheeling new economy was beginning to ebb when it was his turn to host the party, leaving him in need of some meaningful distraction to take the public's attention away from that tawdry election business that placed him in the White House.

The overachieving consumer culture of the mid to late nineties, having lost some steam, was in danger of being revealed for what it mostly was, a mass hypnosis that depended a great deal on what is known in theatre as the “suspension of disbelief”. As long as the obsessive acquisition of goods and services functioned as an end in itself, separated from actual need, consumer culture could continue to manufacture needs through advertising. This was part of a process known as “Freedom”, and the fact that our country had it and others did not made it a commodity that should not be taken for granted. As the Internet bubble burst and people lost jobs in other sectors of the economy as well, “Freedom” started to lose its luster, or, if you had bought into the Dot-Com thing, it wasn’t quite as “cool”. The next best interpretation of “Freedom”, and one that is implemented in times of perceived or actual threats to America’s sovereignty, is being “For” or “Against” something. This kind of freedom functions on a different kind of suspension of disbelief, requiring wholesale investment in basic concepts such as good and evil. Like consumerism, this type of freedom functions best when engaged in by a huge majority.

### Correcting the Politically Incorrect



Pop culture, the great arbiter of tastes and polls, was clearly up for the job of helping us make the shift from one form of freedom to the next. In helping the country transition from the ethos of absolute self-indulgence to unfettered pride in our nation’s true purpose, no time was wasted in identifying which sentiments would be embraced and which were suspect. With the consumer/citizen in no mood for the media’s usual combination of laugh tracks and Armageddon, pious statements blossomed in late September/ early October as we were told that irony was most likely finished and that popular culture would certainly reevaluate its dependence on violent imagery (this as the Twin Towers were burning as dependably as a Yule Log in our living rooms). A sudden surge in World War II nostalgia brought Spielberg’s “Band of Brother’s” much needed attention, while repeated television broadcasts of the “Die Hard’s 1- 5”, as well as a steady diet of Chuck Norris, Jean-Claude Van Damme and Sylvester Stallone beginning in late September are some indication of where the reevaluations lead.

*Lower Broadway, NYC 2001*  
Jody Culkin

Aggressive responses were clearly in and rational equivocation was out. One of the more ironic instances of an outrage moment came on the television show "Politically Incorrect". A show that normally contains such gems as Inside Edition's Deborah Norville shrieking, " I live in New York and I've never even heard of the Brooklyn Museum!" during a debate about that museum's censorship crisis, was suddenly under fire from its advertisers because of a comment made by its host, Bill Maher. After Maher, usually not one to find himself associated with leftist causes, had echoed Susan Sontag's New Yorker piece that questioned Bush's characterization of terrorists willing to die for their cause as cowards, the threat of mass defections on the part of their sponsors forced Maher to apologize on his never so aptly named show.



© United States Department of Justice

In contrast, a television personality that we could have complete faith in was one of America's land-marked talking heads, Dan Rather. Mixing up a bit of groveling with not one, but two tearful displays during a spot on David Letterman's September 17th show, Rather proclaimed that all his President had to do was tell him where to show up and he would "get in line" to support our country. For all its sincerity (Letterman held Rather's hand during one of his trying moments) even this event was not without irony. For those who could recall, back in the 1980's, Rather was celebrated for being one of the few American journalists to crawl up and down the Afghan terrain that we've now become so familiar with, reporting on the then heroic mujhadeens' (read: future Taliban) use of billions of dollars of U.S military aid funneled to them through Pakistan in America's final Cold War effort to destabilize Russia.

American responsibility, though, was not what the media's sights were going to focus on. Through a combination of calls for retribution and efforts to cajole a fearful public to resume its patriotic duty and return to airports and shopping malls, the goals of our trusted pundits and leaders was to side-step at all costs the possibility that the shock of what had happened would be jarring enough to cause some Americans to reexamine their lives.

The trauma from thousands of deaths combined with the symbolic loss of both a great monument to the strength of the American economy as well as the sudden vulnerability of our military's center of power threatened to break the daunting spell under which many citizens have unquestioningly conducted their business. While ground zero continued to smolder, Giuliani, the formerly lame duck mayor but lately the newly anointed hero of New York, took a cue from his President and encouraged consumers that "now more than ever" their duty to their country, regardless of the repeated yet ambiguous warnings from Homeland Security that another terrorist action was imminent, was to present themselves at stores, restaurants, and airports and consume their way back to normality.

### **Four-Wheel Drives and the Fight for Freedom**

*"The most important thing for citizens of any age—for themselves and for their Uncle Sam and as a tribute for the thousands who likely died—would be to call a broker and buy stock in American companies this week, and the next, and the next"; "this is a time to stop worrying about your future, your 'career', your nest egg."*

Liz Smith, syndicated gossip columnist, 9/18/01

The dual role that mass culture played, as both the public's protectorate in the "aftermath", and eventual cheerleader, prodding the consumer/citizen to shake off all doubt in these uncertain times and "stay in the game", was crafted with care. The first signs of "cultural adjustment" appeared in the week following the attacks, with many seemingly benign pop songs suffering the indignities of a "suggested" no-play list from anxious PR people at Clear Channel, a Texas-based radio network that owns 1,100 stations across the country. The list seemed to be the product of hastily scanning America's traumatized psyche and arriving at a selection that, in order to protect a suffering patient, judiciously avoids even the most remote connection to all details associated with September 11. Carol King's "I feel the Earth Move" was out, as well as "Ruby Tuesday" by the Rolling Stones. "Leaving on a Jet Plane", "Ticket to Ride", "Benny and the Jets", Steve Millers "Jet Airliner", the Zombies "She's Not There" and also "everything by Rage Against the Machine" made the list of cultural untouchables that was cobbled together in an effort to protect us from an accidental triggering of flashbacks from 9/11.

Although cries of censorship caused the network some embarrassment, the critics had missed the point. The list had less to do with censorship than with the corporate media caught in the role of babysitter to an infantilized public. The New York Times, in an almost apologetic effort to soothe its readers' worried minds after serving them up so much unsettling

news, ran a series of ads that simultaneously paid homage to the Guggenheim Museum's stunningly prescient man of the moment, Norman Rockwell and, implicitly, themselves. On the back page of the "A Nation Challenged" section over several weeks the Times wore its flag on its sleeve by "re-creating" Mr. Rockwell's neighborhood in full color, full page splendor. Slight but important alterations confirmed for us (in case we weren't already aware of it) Rockwell's current relevance. The cute, attentive students in their folksy classroom who once studied readin', writin' and rithmatic' were now focused on a map of Afghanistan. The world-weary dad checking in on his sleeping son now holds a folded copy of "our newspaper of record" in his hand, which, if you look close enough, you'll see the Twin Towers burning under the headline "America Attacked". Continuing with the family theme, another hybrid Rockwell features an Old Salt and his Lil' Sailor son, with their eager (what else?) puppy, looking on forlornly from across the Hudson at the recently altered contemporary skyline of Lower Manhattan. Such unabashed schmaltz on the part of a media company with the power to not only report news but to shape it might make any sane person nervous rather than reassured, but sanity was not what the major media seemed interested in appealing to in this time of crisis.



The automobile industry, visibly anxious that too much post-attack apprehension would be bad for their bottom line, took the aggressive approach early on. Perhaps recognizing that storming through the backcountry terrorizing nothing but untouched wilderness in your SUV would pale in comparison to storming into Kabul with guns blazing, they ratcheted up their slogans. Echoing the President's less than eloquent calls to arms, they were not shy in identifying with Bush's sudden surge in popularity as the Commander in Chief of the world's lone superpower was about to show his wrath. Buick's September/October, 2001 "Keep America Rolling" campaign "*A Sense of Security the Whole Country Can Share In. Safety. Security. Peace of mind. Never have these qualities been more precious to us or our families. Qualities this important can never be taken for granted. They must be pursued and protected.*" Range Rover's SUV ad in the Sunday New York Times Magazine issue devoted to September 11 took it a step further, featuring their product on a dark, cloud filled horizon and boldly proclaiming "*All SUVs Promise Freedom. Few Have Actually fought for it.*" Range Rover goes on to boast that their vehicles were used in action as recently as the Gulf War, having been "*commandeered by coalition forces and to no one's surprise, performed dauntlessly.*"

## The End of Glitter



*Bear and Fawn* 2001  
Thomas Sherrod

Although others in the media business felt just as protective towards a consumer based economy as gossip columnists and politicians, their approach was gradually altered to reflect what they saw as our new reality. PR firms and advertising executives understood that the best route for continued access to the public's wallets was, as always, through the advanced techniques of pop psychology. Recognizing that the first step was to consult the chapter on "trauma", they took careful notes and shared their findings with one another on various industry websites. The consensus suggested that the goals remain the same; to track and manipulate public sentiment into a "belief" in brands that rivals their loyalty to family, God, and country. What has changed, of course, is that current events, which were once as relevant to most consumers as community board meetings, suddenly, because of the public's profound sense of vulnerability, had a relevance that was impossible to ignore. The take-no-prisoners style of advertising, where the "mark" is humiliated by their lack of identification with the ad's brand, suffering only disappointment and misfortune until they relent and consume the car/toothpaste/ insurance that their neighbor/boss/classmate has so cleverly done, would clearly have to be trashed as all the such-and-such.com ads had been, disappearing from regular rotation at the end of the boom.

Facing a new frontier, the message was from the ad agency grey.com was, "*The feel-good spirit is what we need to seek in our advertising.*" but realizing that a traumatized public is also a sensitized public, they made sure to add, "But we must be very deft at execution to avoid being unreal or melodramatic or saccharine. Insincerity will be even easier to spot." Forever realists, advertisers seemed tuned in to the fact that this new crisis may have thinned the ranks of the wide-eyed and the gullible that had helped them so effortlessly achieve their bottom line. Questioning all the mainstays of the techniques that had performed so well during a boom that lasted so long, the experts now cast a cold eye on what barely a year ago had been part of their regular diet:

*"Narcissism and cynicism are attitudes of the last century. Glitter will soon be gone. The frivolous and fashion-driven will be looked at with a critical eye. People won't want to hear about the rich leather seats and burl wood dashboards of car interiors. Being safe, being in a cocoon, will matter more.' Images of conspicuous consumption are becoming tasteless. Provide comfort. Psychoanalysts speak of people's need for self-soothing" - a skill many lose after childhood. Certain products and brands can act as psychic props that help people relax and feel safe. Hot tea, candles, knitting, and comfort foods can fill this need."*

As the critical shopping season of Christmas approached some good news was in store for the nations retailers. The Taliban were being routed in one Afghan city after another, contradicting the Commander in Chief's (inflated) assessment that the war would be measured "in years, not days". This statement, although sending chills down the spine of those who understand that prolonged U.S. involvement in international conflict is beneficial only to certain sectors of the economy, was meant to extend the patriotic fervor yielded from this conflict into as many areas of the globe as the administration deemed necessary. But that would be later. Right now, the focus was on haircuts and beard shavings in Kabul. On dancing in the streets in the newly liberated capitol. And for those whose business is to "shape hearts and minds" not for war, but for commerce, it was time to roll up their sleeves and determine how to sell ourselves to this newly conquered world.

## **Guerilla Marketing**

While advertisers may have felt heartened that the success of the U.S. military campaign may have taken some of the doom and gloom out of the annual rite of consumption leading up to December 25, some of the forward thinking among their ranks, perhaps taking inspiration from the administrations sprinkling in food drops with their bombs, understood that even war ravaged countries can someday depend on U.S markets to "mainstream" their economy. In mid-December in a forum called "How would you sell America to the Muslim world?" on the website adage.com, Jim Ferguson, President-chief creative officer of WPP Group's Y&R Advertising, New York offered some unique plans for Afghanistan's future. *"I would hire a guerrilla marketing unit. They could have fashion shows over there. They could have movies, dances. They can teach them our decadent way of living, how the infidels live over here and why it's so much fun. We could recreate the Monkey Bar over there and invite them in. You have to infiltrate their lives, and I don't think making commercials is going to do it. You set up events. You show them movies: Boogie Nights, I'd show them that. When I worked on the [current] president's campaign, we kept in mind what was brand Bush. So a lot of it is like selling soap. There's no doubt about it. The first thing is to get people to like you. You always buy something from someone you like."*

Market theory can only be truly tested in the “free” market, and the one sure-fire way to create a free-market in another country is to seek our government’s help. While government intervention in market forces may appear suspiciously like socialism to the unenlightened, not the free-wheeling capitalism that remains the envy of the world, Rance Crain, in an article called, “How U.S. Businesses Can Help Market Freedom”, assures us that, “U.S. companies and the U.S. government have the same goals in developing countries -- to make them feel better about us by showing we have their interests, as well as ours, in mind. You can make a good argument that our government should subsidize the brand-building and even nation-building activities of companies that market products tailored to the needs of developing countries.”

### America’s Brightest Hour

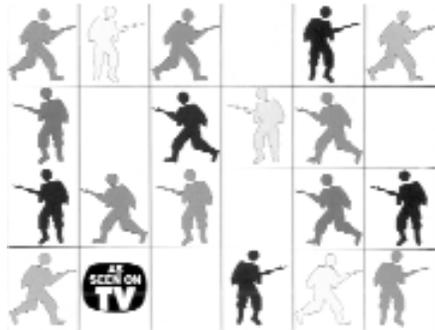
*"We firmly believe that with the support of the US military, Armageddon will be the biggest film of 1998, while illustrating the expertise, leadership and heroism of the US military,"*

Disney executive Philip Nemy to the Pentagon

As the smoke clears from the latest conflict, the excitement with which the marketing crowd eyes fresh possibilities in the Muslim world is matched only by the buzz over new targets that’s been emanating from military and political circles. Recognizing that the perpetual aggressor role can make even a semi-literate President appear brilliant, his handlers and the journalists who echo their every word are now aiming their cross hairs at Saddam, or the Philippines, or North Korea, or perhaps even a return trip to Somalia. This last country, having tarnished the U.S. military’s reputation after a planned warlord kidnapping caused an unacceptable number of American casualties, returned to the spotlight with a new look, courtesy of the long-standing liaison between Hollywood and the Pentagon.



Taliban Barbie 2002  
Christy Rupp



When reading reviews of “Black Hawk Down”, the movie assigned the role of reshaping the Somalian debacle, it becomes clear that the patriotic bandwagon can barely sustain another enthusiast jumping aboard. One gushing review worth citing was written by David Denby in the New Yorker. After chastising the producer Jerry Bruckheimer and director Ridley Scott for some dogs they’ve produced in the past, Denby was pleased that they’ve now renounced their sins and, with this film, “knocked boldly on the door of virtue”. After anointing the filmmakers, he goes on to pontificate about Osama bin Laden’s use of this sad chapter in U.S. military history as a sign of weakness in America, and how this weakness “may have been a factor in bin Laden’s calculations of how American’s would respond to an attack on their own soil... The point of the movie - though it is never stated explicitly - is that it is an exceptionally noble failure of which the country should be proud.” The Pentagon could not have put it better themselves. The beauty of their kinship with Hollywood is that they don’t have to. According to an August, 2001 article in the Guardian, London by Duncan Campbell:

*“Hollywood film-makers have frequently changed plot lines, altered history and amended scripts at the request of the Pentagon, according to recently released military documents. Producers and directors have often agreed to changes in order to gain access to expensive military hardware or to be able to film on military property. On many occasions films have been changed so that the US armed forces are shown in a more heroic fashion. Film companies agree to the changes because doing so saves them millions in production costs. If filmmakers do not agree to alterations, assistance is withheld. The film companies are often shown in the documents to be more than anxious to help.”*

When, in an interview about Black Hawk Down, Jerry Bruckheimer boasted that Somalia would become “*not America’s darkest hour, but America’s brightest hour*”, he was openly flaunting the propagandistic mission of his film. This kind of synergy, while not new, is perhaps operating more and more purposefully as the U.S. seeks to become an exporter of perpetual warfare. With the increase alone in the new military budget dwarfing many countries total expenditures on defense, the need for more Black Hawk Down’s to “correct” perceptions of misguided military actions is as urgent as the recruitment of new troops. Not surprisingly, recruitment is one of the roles that these movies fulfill. John Down writes in the online journal, Open Democracy: “For the Navy as well as at the box office, the film (Top Gun) enjoyed phenomenal

success. Recruitment figures went up 500%. 'So now there are all these poor kids stuck on aircraft carriers in the Indian Ocean who hate me,' jokes Tony Scott, Top Gun's British Director."

Given that the selling of the conflict in Afghanistan will be considerably enhanced by Jerry Bruckheimer's 13 week reality television series "Profile's From the Frontline", a "candid" look into the U.S. soldiers experience in that country that will rival Somalia in its potential for propaganda, the Navy will have no shortage of "poor kids" who are wondering why their reality is so unlike Pentagon sanctioned entertainment.

### The Old New World Order

Apart from the occasional musings from one of the directors of this film genre, it's unusual to find any reference at all to those in the audience for whom the consumption of "brand patriotism" had regrettable consequences. As the country prepares itself for fresh conquests under the guise of spreading new opportunities for democracy abroad, many in the media entertainment business recognize the significance of the conquest for hearts and minds at home. With the public's confidence in the future temporarily shattered after September's attacks, a new faith has arisen to thwart any doubt that could compromise America's purpose. As the novelty of American flags overwhelming the landscape has subsided, the iconography of patriotism has settled into the nooks and crannies of the country's unconscious, functioning like worry beads that are massaged without thought, a comforting ritual collectively engaged in.

The new patriotism, having at the very first provided a rallying point for explosive emotions like defiance or revenge, also addresses something subtler, an urge to belong to something bigger than one's own concerns. Perhaps exhausted by the constant emphasis on overnight success that was so pervasive in the media not too long ago, the impulse to identify with something other than the stock market's latest numbers is a sincere urge that has been eagerly pounced upon by everyone from cutting edge fashion designers to airline industry giants trying to put a positive spin on post-September 11 air travel.



*Suburbanistan* 2002 David Opdyke

While the New Economy celebrated the individual's entrepreneurial spirit as a means to instant success, corporate owned franchises were quietly undercutting the livelihoods of small businesses unfortunate enough to be in their path. As franchise culture transformed the landscape throughout the last decade, the ensuing loss of connection to one's surroundings and the alienation that resulted was glossed over by the stock market frenzy. With the focus on individual gains rather than communal losses, those who recognized the economic and psychic damages that mega-franchises like Wal-Mart could inflict on their communities were invisible compared to many more who had an eye on their soaring stocks and the profits they might see when they cashed out. As the consequences of large scale profiteering during the height of new economy excesses come to light, the "we're all in this together" sentiment of our patriotic moment has perhaps faced its greatest challenge to date. Enduring an attack that many still find inexplicable and that our government was powerless to protect us from, the specter of past successes proving to be a mirage provides little relief from the unseen threats that the War on Terror is designed to confront. With the ruins of high-risk capital looking as bleak as the post-war landscape in Afghanistan, our government and their friends in the media industry seem to be telling those who might lose faith in our economy to take heart; there's always the next war to look forward to.

Peter Scott  
September, 2002

Dear Diary:

It was restaurant wine week and everyone at our table at Smith & Wollensky on the East Side was enjoying a respite from the sadness of recent days. Midway through lunch, a nearby group began a course of "Happy Birthday". Our tablemate, a part-time opera singer, joined in. There was a general ovation for his rendition, and someone at our table suggested that while he was standing, he sing "God Bless America". He obliged. At first the crowd grew silent, and then one by one, our fellow wine lovers joined in. When he finished, a "U.S.A." chant rang out, tears flowed and hugs and business cards were exchanged.

New York Times, Metropolitan Diary

September 2001