

Honorable Mention Winner of the 2008 William M. Jones Best Graduate Student Paper Award

Flag Display Post-9/11: A Discourse on American Nationalism

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The emotional reaction to the September 11, 2001, attacks (hereafter referred to as 9/11) was varied. The anger, fears, and panic of Americans were caused by hijackers who managed to gain control of four U.S. airplanes and crash them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The tragic events left over three thousand dead on that morning and sparked a crisis in the nation. Because the United States has experienced few incidents where attacks have occurred on its soil, 9/11 shocked the nation, and Americans reacted in myriad behaviors. In America post-9/11, more strangers conversed; citizens donated large sums of relief monies; more people signed up or changed career paths in order to be firefighters; some people arrogantly shot convenient store clerks because of an aggression and hatred towards anyone who appeared to be a “terrorist,” most often those who appeared of Arab descent (several of the clerks were actually Sikhs, not Muslims). Some wore buttons that stated “I am an American Sikh” with an American flag under the caption, and underneath the flag, “God Bless America” (Robin 47). Many quickly hung fifty stars and thirteen stripes in their windows and on their porches.

American flags were hung not only from windows and porches. They also appeared bound on automobile bumpers, tattooed on various body

parts, as a wallpaper screen on cell phones, on all types of attire, from boxers and socks to winter coats, collectibles, pins, and many more. As background for television broadcasts and government speeches, flags were ubiquitous. Flag purchases skyrocketed among retailers. As Samuel P. Huntington, citing the *New York Times*, notes, “Walmart reportedly sold 116,000 flags on September 11th and 250,000 the next day, compared with 6,400 and 10,000 on the same days a year earlier” (1–2). Numerous companies and factories pumped out vast amounts of American flags as Americans hurried to stores and the Internet to purchase “Old Glory.”

Most Americans watched the 9/11 events unfold on television. In the following days and weeks Americans tuned in to get the latest on the events and aftermath. The news channels provided the means to see and hear more details of the 9/11 attacks, a photograph depicting the raising of the American flag by three firefighters over the rubble hours after the attacks, and President George W. Bush’s speeches to the nation, Congress, and other government bodies in the world. Television provides images. Encoded in these images are ideologies. Thus, the television experience of 9/11 plunged the American mind into ideological narratives that could not be separated from the American flag: to be patriotic was to

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display the flag, and refusal to display the flag was unpatriotic. The ubiquitous influence of television helped construct the patriotic behavior of Americans. When someone says the word *patriotism*, most associate the ideology with the flag. Many people displayed the flag and believed others displayed the flag for patriotism, to be patriotic, and the love of the country.

Throughout American history, the flag has been deployed in crucial and contested moments to function symbolically as a unifying national force. In addition, many cultural mythologies were encoded onto the flag. The mythologies re-emerge post 9/11 and help construct the patriotic narrative Americans tell themselves about what happened the morning of September 11, 2001. This study offers explanations for the fixation on the flag and how it conflates the ideologies of patriotism and nationalism by deconstructing three post-9/11 cultural images: (1) an NBC “Special Report” following the fall of the Twin Towers, (2) Thomas E. Franklin’s Ground Zero Spirit, and (3) President George W. Bush’s September 20, 2001, speech to Congress. It is also relevant to note that these three images have different levels of fluidity in meaning for the flag: flexible in the NBC “Special Report”; semifluid in Ground Zero Spirit; and fixed in President Bush’s address. These three flag images appear at specific times and days to capitalize on the national sentiment of the American people and, correspondingly, Americans purchased and displayed flags feverishly. While sympathy and empathy for the victims of 9/11 and their families need to be acknowledged, the overreaction and desire for relentless flag display are unproductive and destructive, both for the United States and other nations. As this project will reveal, the flag instigates and fuels the most dangerous ideology our future will deal with—nationalism.

Framing Flags and their Function

Flags provide a means for two ideologies, and it is important to distinguish between them: pa-

triotism and nationalism. The two ideologies are often misused and become synonymous. Patriotism differs slightly in that it is a belief in the principles or ideals of the country or Nation-State. Patriots are proud of the ideals of their country and what their country does when they feel their country has been moral or ethical. When their country does something wrong, patriots acknowledge the wrongdoing and make attempts to correct the situation or make changes to avoid similar mistakes in the future. There is no idea of their superiority to other nations or a role to impose their principles on other nations. For Americans, *patriotism* often refers to redundantly expressed ideals—freedom or liberty, democracy, individualism, equality or egalitarianism, law, and the American dream.

Examples of extreme nationalisms occur throughout history. The German Nazis are the epitome of excessive nationalism—self-perception of superiority and extension of their beliefs to other nations. Another example is the Balkans region that has suffered massive ethnic cleansing and violence as a result of nationalism. Ernest Gellner defines *nationalism* as primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent. A nationalist sentiment is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the nationalism principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfillment. A nationalist movement is one actuated by a sentiment of this kind (1). Nationalism is the force attempted by a nation to establish a Nation-State. Once a Nation-State is established, nationalism also sustains it and serves as an ideology and sentiment that underscore the pursuit of national interests and superiority over other nations/Nation-States. Nationalists believe their country is always right and unquestioningly support the Nation-State’s institutions and leaders.

Flags are more than just symbols for patriotism or weapons for nationalism. A flag, as well as a name and anthem, is essential for any nation to exist among other nations. Its representative and symbolic functions construct cultural mythologies and narratives that in turn charge nationalist sentiment. As scholar Anthony D. Smith remarks,

It is necessary for a nation to possess a name; in a "world of nations" it could hardly function without one. Much the same can be said about the national flag and the national anthem, though these are more public symbols, and on display—even the "unwaved flag." Together, these three symbols signal the uniqueness and the setting apart of the nation, and all of them help to accord the nation respect, even awe, as in the American ceremony of saluting the flag. And they all particularize and popularize the nation, as the sole and irreplaceable possession of its members. (38)

The flag functions specifically for the nation, so that it may claim authenticity. People are assimilated into national ideologies by the deployment of this cultural artifact. It operates as being owned by those who salute it but simultaneously has no owner. This is more apparent in a society that has equality, freedom, and democracy as its fundamental principles because it constructs the paradigm that deep down everyone is the same and desires the same things. The flag unites people who are tied up in conflict and turmoil, provides the nation with its consciousness, and, even though its meanings are fluid, expresses and attempts to fix meaning onto itself. Regardless of the inequalities, racism, sexism, and others, a flag calls for unity and assimilation in the nation. Any resistance or dissent, whether from foreigner, immigrant or citizen, against the flag or its symbolism is often viewed as unaccepted or scorned.

Three Post-9/11 Cultural Images in Live Homogenous, Empty Real Time

For one to gain a better understanding of America's national consciousness regarding 9/11, Benedict Anderson's concept of "homogeneous, empty time" is highly appropriate. This "homogeneous, empty time" provided a means for people to think of others active in the community as they are, as well. The concept emerged with the novel, which provided its reader with a "God-position" or objective view of a social landscape. This is one of two parts to Anderson's "homogeneous, empty time": the ability to see multiple activities and people all at the same time. The other part is the conception of people embedded

in "societies," where they are sociological entities with a reality that their members can be connected without ever becoming acquainted (Anderson 25–26). This same scenario can be, and was, repeated in the novel and newspaper. The idea and imagining of the nation are created in the readers' consciousness, and they begin to identify themselves with a community. Readers begin to understand that others are active in the same way they are and have a commonality.

This concept of "homogeneous, empty time" is evident in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries for the imaginings of a nation with a different medium—television. Its invention in the first part of the twentieth century revolutionized conceptions of nations and the world. While live broadcast was not available until several decades after the advent of television, the medium is now able to provide minute-to-minute/minute-by-minute coverage of world events. JFK's assassination, the Chicago riots in 1968, Neil Armstrong's walk on the moon, and many other events in the following decades were shown on the television in live, real time. The ability to see live events unfold in real time provides a viewer with a greater intensity of "homogenous, empty time." This can appropriately be called live homogenous, empty real time. Most Americans watched the 9/11 events unfold and the coverage for the rest of the day via the television in live homogeneous, empty real time. As Victoria O'Donnell explains, "A survey conducted four days after 9/11 found that Americans watched an average of 8.1 hours of television coverage of the disaster" (xiii). Since television was, and is, the primary means for the nation to observe 9/11, live homogenous, empty real time provided a rapid dissemination of the cultural mythologies and patriotic narrative via the flag. The three cultural images analyzed here were presented in live homogenous, empty real time; hence the flag depicted an imagined nation that believes in the patriotic narrative. Live homogenous, empty real time provided the meaning and narrative of the flag to be quickly fixed for the American public. Thus, once the flag is fixed with the patriotic narrative, American nationalism emerges.

Nevertheless, some questions need to be addressed between live homogenous, empty real time and American viewers. What did Americans observe? What did Americans hear? Where does the flag appear during these times? What meanings were created with the flag? How does the patriotic narrative emerge and disseminate into the American consciousness via the flag? These questions require an investigation of the three images mentioned above: (1) an NBC “Special Report,” (2) Ground Zero Spirit, and (3) Bush’s September 20, 2001, speech to Congress. As mentioned above, it is important to note that the three images analyzed have different levels of fixity because they are images in different forms of media on different days. Ultimately, they are similar, but different: the images exist in live homogeneous, empty real time but are in different media forms.

I. *Flag as Image: 9/11/01 NBC “Special Report”*

In the afternoon of September 11, 2001, NBC aired a “Special Report.” The report begins with the image of an American flag, which is in a bracket and sits at about a 45-degree angle from a building. The viewer is positioned under the flag and looks up to it. The flag waves in the wind. Two commentators begin to remark:

Male voice: The numbers should be staggering as the day progresses.

Female voice: That’s right, aboard those airplanes alone, 266 people have lost their lives and that was confirmed by United and American Airlines and we are unclear as to how many more thousands of people who have been killed and injured as a result of what happened in New York city and outside Washington D.C. at the Pentagon. (“Attack on America”)

The American flag waves as the two voices continue to give a brief description of the number of people killed. This image of an actual American flag and commentary lasts twenty-five seconds, and as the female’s voice concludes, the image fades and a new image is presented.

The live, physical flag is replaced by a computer-animated waving flag as the background of the screen. Suspenseful “Breaking News” music begins and the NBC logo is at the top of the screen. In the middle of the screen, under the NBC logo, quick flashes of images of the burning

Twin Towers and the second plane crashing into the second building appear in sync with the fast-paced music. The red and white stripes of the computerized waving flag remain visible during this rapid imagery. After seven seconds, a voice says, “This is an NBC Special Report,” and the words *Attack on America* appear over the quick flashes of the images of the Twin Towers burning. As the quick flashes stop, the image of the Twin Towers collapsing earlier in the day appears behind “Attack on America.” The red and white stripes are still visible on the right side of the screen and part of the white stars and blue are visible on the left side of the screen as the computer-animated American flag waves while the words *Attack on America* remains. This image disappears, and the report turns to Tom Brokaw who begins describing the events from earlier in the day: “A terrorist act of war against this country, President Bush saying today that freedom has now been attacked by a faceless coward and freedom will be defended” (“Attack on America”). As he states these opening lines, a live shot of smoke and black clouds over Manhattan where the Twin Towers used to be is over his right shoulder. This is the last image of the American flag during the report.

Because of the flag’s unusual presence at the beginning of the “Special Report,” it moves to a symbolic level of representation, indicating the evocation of cultural mythologies. A myth is created and, as Roland Barthes states, “a myth is a type of speech . . . [it] is a system of communication, it is a message” (109). When the “Special Report” begins, the viewer’s perspective is from below a flag waving in the wind as two voices discuss the number of deaths from the incident. There is nothing innate in the flag that explains that Americans have died. There is nothing innate in the waving of the flag through the air that says Americans have been killed. An arbitrary connection between the flag and death is presented by what the reporters say. But as viewers observe the waving flag and hear the voices simultaneously, they begin to see what this cultural object signifies. The simultaneity of this flag image and the reporters’ statements give a message that a nation

was (partly) killed and injured. The flag signifies to the viewers that Americans have died (or rather were killed, which suggests innocence and victimhood), even though not everyone on those airplanes, in the buildings or in the surrounding areas are American citizens. The reports also state the number of deaths and injuries is only expected to increase and be “staggering.” This word choice encourages viewers to feel devastated and shocked. If more Americans are sure to be found dead, others injured and others in chaos, then these events must be catastrophic.

The attack on the WTC towers was horrible. Innocent people were killed, and families lost loved ones. But reports such as NBC’s do not provide calm, constructive, and critical reporting. There is a high emotional charge with the suspenseful music, rapid imagery and hyperbolic word choice connotation that undermines any calm or logical assessment of the violence. A myth begins to become encoded on the flag because of this emotional moment of imagery and statements: The United States as untouchable. The flag communicates to the viewer that America and Americans are untouchable. This myth is projected into the American consciousness because the consternation thrusts the American viewer into questions, and they seek simple answers: How can this attack happen to us? Don’t these types of horrible attacks happen elsewhere and not here in the United States? Aren’t we the best? Are we not the unbeatable nation? Why would anyone want to do this to us? There is no indication that the United States has played a role and been a motor for the terrorist’s attacks.¹ As cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek remarked on October 7, 2001,

One thing is certain: the United States, which, until now, perceived itself as an island exempted from this kind of violence, witnessing such violence only through the safe medium of the television screen, is now directly involved. (281)

Before 9/11, the American nation believed it was untouchable from such violent attacks. In the American consciousness, primarily via television, brutal and horrible events were always presented outside the United States. While murders, rapes,

and other harsh realities occur everyday in the United States, for many Americans, the violence, brutality and horror was always there, not here. Riots, genocide, civil wars, diseases, extreme hunger, and other social, political, and economic instabilities are depicted as part of the Third World. September 11 is the moment when Americans have to step out of their “bubble” and enter into “reality.” This “burst of the bubble” and America’s move into “reality” propose the myth of America as untouchable, or at least until 9/11. In addition, this untouchable ideology and label imply greatness. Because America was untouchable, America was also great.

Americans have often thought themselves to be the best or greatest; and this is not a recent ideological phenomenon but has been repeated throughout U.S. history. Even de Tocqueville remarked how the early settlers internalized and influenced others with a specific temperament, “the civilization of New England has been like a beacon lit upon a hill” (31). This discourse of greatness is reinforced by the continuing self-perceptive imagination that Americans are the best culturally, economically, and politically; if the United States “achieved” such “accomplishments” (e.g., man on the moon, Olympic victories, luxury of lifestyle, material success, etc.), then Americans must have done something “right.” As Anatol Lieven states,

America enjoys more global power than any previous State. It dominates the world not only militarily, but also to a great extent culturally and economically, and derives immense national benefits from the current world system. Following the death of communism as an alternative version of modernization, American free market liberal democracy also enjoys ideological hegemony over the world. (1)

This particular American ideology intensified in the 1990s with the end of the Cold War. During the 1990s, the American nation developed a narrative that it was untouchable and great. These cultural mythologies are beliefs that are absorbed by the flag, and a narrative begins to form. The American flag becomes, and still is, a national and cultural artifact for this narrative.

It is also relevant to note that the first image in this NBC “Special Report” is an actual flag, and

the second is a computerized flag presented as animated. But in both images the flag's waving provides a texture that is in congruence with greatness. The waving flag parallels lyrics in "The Star-Spangled Banner" by Francis Scott Key, the culminating apex, "Gave Proof thro' the Night that our Flag was still there/O Say, does that Star-Spangled Banner yet wave/O'er the Land of the Free and Home of the Brave." The message is clear: America has been attacked. However, the flags communicate America is still strong and will triumph; they convey the notion of America's strength and heroic abilities. Outsiders can try to bring down the best nation, but they will fail because of America's bravery. And the characteristics of bravery, courage, and strength, along with a self-titled hero are depicted in the waving of the flag. The moving, live flag indicates that the country is still alive. The country has not died or succumbed to the attacks. The flag reminds Americans what this country is believed to be about; it continues to wave for Americans to provide hope in the midst of the chaotic events. The flag communicates to Americans to be brave and strong.

Since the NBC "Special Report" occurs in live homogeneous, empty real time, Americans can believe other Americans are watching and see the flags as well. American patriotism and nationalism began to be molded because, as Anderson describes, Americans imagined other Americans tuning in. Live homogenous, empty real time creates the idea that millions of other Americans are participating in the imagery. There is an imagining of unity into the national consciousness and sentiment. Americans believe other Americans saw the flags as well in the NBC report (and other reports); other Americans were shocked, scared, and angered. The flag enforces this national consciousness and sentiment and allows Americans to believe they need to stay strong and triumph over their attackers through their unity. They need to unify despite any inequalities, conflicts, or disagreements. This can be fulfilled by public display of the flag, and Americans can be confident that millions of other Americans in the nation are waving the "Red, White and Blue."

Overall, the NBC "Special Report" and similar reports at the time, set the stage for the patriotic narrative. The two cultural mythologies emerged from and evoked by the flag, America as untouchable and great, create a shaky foundation for the narrative about 9/11. The meanings are negotiable and not absolute. The flag and 9/11 begin to be inseparable, although not definitively. The texture of the flag, in correspondence with greatness, adds to this patriotic narrative for Americans: courage, bravery and strength. However, the waving flags do not provide a fixed meaning or coherent narrative about 9/11. The flag's meaning is too fluid and ambiguous in reports like NBC's. The myths are present, but there needs to be a national image of 9/11 that redeploys the flag as a symbol and calls Americans to unite and display the banner.

II. *Flag as Symbol: Thomas E. Franklin's "Ground Zero Spirit"*

One place where the "Red, White and Blue" was hoisted after 9/11 was at Ground Zero during the afternoon of September 11. Photographer Thomas E. Franklin, standing about 150 yards away, captured the now iconic image. This photograph depicts three firefighters raising the American flag. Two of the firefighters are pulling the strings for the flag to be raised to the top of the pole. A third firefighter looks up at the flag. All three firefighters are covered with soot and sweat; they appear exhausted, or at least have worked a long day. In the background is white and gray debris and rubble. The image appeared for the first time on the front page of the *Record* on September 12. Soon, news networks and other publications displayed the photograph. Franklin's photograph, officially titled by Bergen Record as "Ground Zero Spirit," has become emblematic of 9/11 and revered as a symbol of American heroism and patriotism.

The photograph has often been compared with the flag raising by six U.S. troops in 1945 at Iwo Jima. In February of 1945, U.S. troops battled Japanese troops on several islands off Japan. Within the first week of battle, six troops raised a flag on a mound. After thirty-five days, the United States won the battle of Iwo Jima, but not

before thousands of American and Japanese lives ended. The image of this flag raising on Iwo Jima functions as a symbol for the bravery of our troops and U.S. victory. The troops shed blood and tears for victory; troops died, devoted, and sacrificed for this country; and because of the decisions by troops to give themselves for and to this cause, America was victorious.

When Ground Zero Spirit is juxtaposed with the Iwo Jima photo, it resonates with some of the photo's myths—sacrifice, unity, and victory. The firefighters become the troops: through their devotion and sacrifice they are heroes. Past and present heroes have sacrificed themselves for the flag. It is a cherished national symbol to be raised, and our heroes raise it in Ground Zero Spirit. In Iwo Jima and Ground Zero Spirit, the troops and firefighters are united under the banner. The Iwo Jima image communicates their sacrifice and unity that led to victory. The firefighters now represent the sacrifice and unity in Ground Zero Spirit. However, the United States now has to enter into battle with their attackers in the twenty-first century, the terrorists. The victory will occur; but Americans have to be patriotic to achieve victory. Americans need to be like the troops or firefighters. However, millions of Americans are not enlisted in the military. Thus, Americans need to sacrifice, participate and unify through simple flag display. The flag is encoded with these mythologies and disseminates them into the national consciousness. The flag functions to assimilate Americans into unification. This reflects the flag's function at the end of the nineteenth century with the mass migrations. In addition to the sacrifice, unity, and victory mythologies emerging from the flag, the message of support is encoded onto the flag, activated by the belief that victory needs it: to be victorious requires support. American victory is accomplished by public flag display, which becomes a discourse of support. Thus, Americans display the flag post-9/11 to support the firefighters, the victims' families or the soldiers. Americans also display the flag to support the government, thus reflecting nationalism.

While there are numerous other mythologies as well that become encoded onto the flag in

Ground Zero Spirit, the unity, sacrifice, victory, and support mythologies are the most powerful. They become part of the patriot narrative and make clear a path to success, one with a clear linear progression. The past, present, and future message begins: America has been damaged. But Americans are rising, represented by the flag, both metaphorically and literally. Americans are still standing. Americans have hope. However, it is the future sense the image and myths speak the most powerfully. America will survive. America will triumph. America will rise. America will be successful. The flag will provide this. All Americans have to do is display, support, and unite with the Stars and Stripes, no questions asked. Ultimately, Ground Zero Spirit is an action photograph. This cultural image situates the flag as a symbolic representation to act or behave in a certain manner. Flag display is the behavior called upon to the American people. The juxtaposition of the flag raising by firefighters and the aftermath of the attacks communicate there has been an attack on the nation and its flag. Americans need to display the cherished banner and unite.

One can see the difference between the NBC "Special Report" and Ground Zero Spirit: a broadcast that is aired momentarily and a photograph that becomes a national symbol beyond the moment. Photographs attempt to capture images and fix meanings. Since the flag is the focus of the photograph, it is semifixed in Ground Zero Spirit. The flag is not completely fixed with the patriotic narrative because it does not explain the reasons 9/11 happened or the United States's mission. Thus, Ground Zero Spirit merely redeploys and adds additional mythologies from and onto the flag. The patriotic narrative is elaborated but is not coherent. Ground Zero Spirit provides a national symbol for Americans. While 9/11 is a sensitive subject to criticize, it allows space for dissent and, arguably, the flag has many meanings. An official announcement will eradicate any ambiguous meaning, construct a coherent narrative and suspend dispute.

III. *Flag as Rhetoric—George W. Bush's Speech to Congress on September 20, 2001*

On September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush made a speech to a Joint Session of Congress regarding the attacks (“Speech to Congress”). All major networks air this address. During this thirty-minute speech an enormous American flag drapes vertically behind President Bush. The flag behind President Bush is static, not waving like the NBC report or in motion like Ground Zero Spirit. This stationary vertical position of the flag signifies to viewers that this is serious. And in all seriousness, the person with the highest position in the nation gives a rhetoric that fixes meaning and ideology onto the flag. The visual rhetoric of the flag absorbs the textual rhetoric of the speech. The textual rhetoric officially (in Americans’ consciousness) arrests any dissent, and the flag silences all questioning.

In addition to the omnipresent flag draped behind Bush, the president makes a reference to the flag within the first two minutes, specifically mentioning the flag display of Americans in the wake of 9/11. In the first minute and a half there are two moments of applause equaling fifty seconds: a twenty-four second applause after the introduction of the president and, twenty-four seconds later, a twenty-six second applause for Bush welcoming Lisa Beamer for the night. Five seconds after the applause stops for Lisa Beamer, Bush states, “We’ve seen the unfurling of flags, the lighting of candles, the giving of blood, the saying of prayers in English, Hebrew and Arabic” (“Speech to Congress”). In this first minute and a half, Bush speaks for only forty-two seconds before introducing the theme of American flag display in the last week. The remainder of his speech fixes meaning onto the flag as viewers listen.

Applause within these first moments suggests praise for President Bush. Consequently, the flag, because of its appearance and position, is encoded with this praise as well. One experiences the notion of cultural hegemony with the flag and nation functioning as “common sense” (as Gramsci defined *common sense*: the “sense held in common”) onto the consciousness of Americans, who acknowledge the flag and have an utmost respect and loyalty to the banner. Of course, the timing of this speech needs to be considered: the nation was

still in shock and highly emotional from 9/11, and this speech was much anticipated, invigorating the flag with more sentiment and meaning. After these long applauses, the flag is mentioned as an object that Americans used in reaction to 9/11: “we’ve seen the unfurling of flags.” The pronoun *we* is used, and viewers can infer it is Americans, the American nation, and the American people to whom Bush refers. This reference also suggests that Americans are uniting, regardless of current conflicts and disputes in American society. Even those who did not display the flag understand that the flag is being deployed by millions of Americans.

When Bush mentions the “unfurling of flags,” he uses this statement in combination with “the lighting of candles, the giving of blood, the saying of prayers.” These other three behaviors are all associated with religion and echo Christian religious behavior: The Light of Christ, the sacrifice of Jesus and blood of Christ, and prayer, which is how one speaks to God. Bush’s mention of flag behavior by Americans paralleled with these religious rituals gives sacredness to the flag. Bush evokes the Messianic role and mission of the United States and Americans in the world. Bush’s reference subliminally reminds Americans of the belief that they are divinely chosen with a mission to spread Christian principles. September 11 is closer to a coherent narrative and the flag is in the process of fixation.

A symptomatic reading of Bush’s rhetoric reveals the implication that Americans are righteous and good, hence reinforcing a divinely chosen America. Since God is all virtuous, anything divine necessitates goodness, and often vice versa. Divinity and goodness are encoded on the flag. Furthermore, the righteous and good implications construct the ideology of evil. Good necessitates evil. Hence, anyone or anything outside the flag is evil. While Bush’s speech to Congress and the nation hesitated from using the word *evil* (the word is only uttered twice by Bush) on September 20, he does refer to evil when he comments on “Who attacked us?”:

A collection of loosely affiliated terrorist organizations known as al-Qaida . . . They are recruited from their

own nations and neighborhoods and brought to camps in places like Afghanistan, where they are trained in the tactics of terror. They are sent back to their homes or sent to hide in countries around the world to plot evil and destruction. ("Speech to Congress")

The American public is presented with al-Qaida as evil and America as good. The implication and evocation of good and evil create a binary narrative around 9/11: one of good and evil, in which the latter is always attacking the former and even though it is a hard and long battle, the former always prevails. The good versus evil narrative is continually reinforced by Bush when he states, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" ("Speech to Congress").

America's paradigm of binaries, such as Bush's utterances of good versus evil, light versus dark, progressive versus backwards or static, civilized versus barbarous, and us versus them, reinforce Orientalist ideology. Bush's speech echoes Western European ideology during colonization and imperialism in modernity. As scholar Edward Said remarks, "Orientalism is . . . the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (25–26). As the Occidental world views the Orient through a distorted lens, a discourse about the Occident's superiority is developed. This binary oppositional worldview for the Occident becomes justification for any actions taken and provides militant, political, economic, and cultural domination over the Orient. Anyone perceived as Other (non-European) becomes positioned as inferior. The attackers on 9/11 are labeled as the Other; the United States is labeled and positioned as civilized, progressive, strong, and good. The flag absorbs this narrative and creates an American consciousness about 9/11.

One of the Founding Fathers' ideals reemerges in Bush's rhetoric—freedom. In the address to Congress, Bush uses the word *freedom* thirteen times. Freedom and democracy are arguably the most esteemed principles of the United States. Americans prize these ideals as universal and self-evident. The large flag behind Bush comes to represent the actual spoken words as he makes use of phrases with freedom:

Tonight, we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom . . . enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country . . . This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom . . . we have found our mission and our moment. Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom, the great achievement of our time and the great hope of every time, now depends on us . . . Americans are asking, "why do they hate us?" They hate what they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government . . . They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other. ("Speech to Congress")

Again, one sees the Orientalist ideology in "civilization" and "progress," but the principles of freedom and democracy become inevitably encoded onto the flag in these statements as well. The emphasis on freedom also becomes fused with the other mythologies of America—freedom is good, sacred, universal, special, and superior. The announcement of freedom as the greatest for "every time" implies an eternal value. Furthermore it is Americans who have the responsibility to sustain freedom.

Also, in the passage above, the American people receive the explanation of why 9/11 happened. This is crucial because, after Bush's address, it structures flag display as a reaction to the reasons 9/11 transpired. In Bush's rhetoric, the details of the whole situation—the relationships between the United States and Middle East countries, the United States's relationship with some of the terrorists, the history of the United States in Afghanistan, the United States's policies in the Middle East, etc.—are ignored, and he enforces a simple clarification: the terrorists hate our freedoms (specifically freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom to disagree) and democracy. The flag is encoded with a cultural mythology: the reason 9/11 happened is because of our country's principles. Americans now have an elaborated narrative about 9/11: who are the terrorists (al-Qaida), where do they come from (all over the world, train in Afghanistan and reside in their countries) and why did they do it (they hate our freedoms and democracy). Thus, any future torture, civil casualties, or violence abroad and domestically in the "War on Terror" is justified in

the American's consciousness because it defends freedom and democracy. The ideology of patriotism is structured into the (patriotic) narrative; flag display becomes a symbolic representation of patriotism. Furthermore, Bush's rhetoric asks the American people to step forward to not only sustain and defend freedom, but support State actions to bring freedom to the world. This is implied in the statement "we have found *our mission* and *our moment* . . . the advance of human freedom, the great achievement of *our time* . . . now depends on *us*" ("Speech to Congress," my emphasis), Americans inherit the Puritanical divine role to sustain and bring our Founding Fathers' ideals to the world. Americans step into the Messianic role to bring forth freedom and democracy. The State does the necessary actions (whether peaceful or violent, liberating, or oppressive) to insure America's responsibility, role, and completion of the mission. Thus, flag display defends these principles and supports the military action of the State.

After 9/11, the meaning of the flag was semi-fluid and negotiable for nine days. The flag meant respect to those who lost their lives, recognition for the firefighters, support for the troops, staying strong, unity and the principles of the United States, among others. However, on September 20 the flag is fixed by the textual rhetoric of President Bush because language always attempts to fix meaning. The visual texture of the flag during Bush's speech—it no longer waves—arrests all fluid meaning and creates a totalizing narrative. The patriotic narrative is deployed to the American people: *Americans are a great and chosen people with ideals believed to be universal and eternal. The attackers of 9/11 were the embodiment of pure evil, and the reason they attacked us was because of our freedom and democracy. Thus, this violence is a direct attack on the whole nation, the nation's highest principle—freedom—and the nation's flag. Americans now have the divine role to protect and disseminate these ideals, freedom and democracy. Americans need to unite and disregard any inequalities and injustice in the U.S. if they want to succeed in destroying this evil. Americans will support by displaying the cherished sym-*

bol without questioning the State's beliefs and actions. This is believed to be patriotism.

Conclusion: Flag-Mania is a Discourse of Nationalism

The flag post 9/11 was a cultural artifact with a dual function: on the one hand, the flag absorbs mythologies of America, and on the other, it unleashes these mythologies and evokes myths that, in turn, construct and rapidly disseminate the patriotic narrative. Since the three images above occur in live homogenous, empty real time, Americans believe other Americans unify with this patriotic narrative. Simultaneously, the patriotic narrative insists on Americans to display the flag and perpetuates the narrative in the public sphere. After the flag is fixed, one cannot display the flag without it representing the patriotic narrative. One American recognizes the flag display of another, recognizing him or her as an American and as congruent with the patriotic narrative. People are assimilated with the patriotic narrative via their flag displays. They are also unified, which is important in a national crisis. However, while flag display post-9/11 may have united Americans, it also hindered any critique or dissent. Indeed, many people were labeled as unpatriotic if they critiqued the government, the war, or the United States in any way. After September 20, the flag functions to silence all dissent. Arguably, not displaying the flag was viewed as unpatriotic. The State achieved this unquestioning support by grafting the meaning of the attacks onto the meaning of the American flag for most Americans. Americans fly the flag for pride in not only freedom and democracy, but also to support the State's actions because Americans believe the State defends these principles. However, the events of 9/11 did not happen because of the United States's principles.² When the American State does not address the real causes for a national tragedy and utters powerfully charged nationalist sentiments, then the American public

blindly follows leadership, and those with the ability to exercise power and make decisions. Thus, the flag provides a means for the American nation to display for patriotism and the State to create nationalism.

When flag display becomes a practice that reflects unquestioning support for State decisions and actions, it becomes a discourse of nationalism, not patriotism. In addition to unquestioning support, the patriotic narrative echoes and circulates the mythology that America is great with a divine role. This mythology implies superiority to all other nations. Americans believe the United States is never “wrong” in its domestic and international affairs. This ideology is congruent with nationalism. Patriotism and nationalism become blurred ideologies; they become conflated. Patriots become nationalists. The State mobilized the flag and inserted it into the gap between patriotism and nationalism, thus allowing the State to generate consent for an agenda of U.S. global hegemony.³ However, this is not to regard the State as all powerful and doing as it pleases. The State simply exploited the overzealous flag behavior by the public. What needs further investigation is the psyche of Americans (and people in general). Thus, this raises many more complex questions of desire, identity, self, fetishism, and collective consciousness. Psychoanalysis to flag-mania needs to be applied.

National flags, songs, and emblems are highly effective in the construction of national mythologies and narratives. National cultural phenomena provide space for creating consent in functioning sentimentally and ideologically; the American flag post-9/11 exemplifies this power. While the events of 9/11 were horrible, real American patriotism post-9/11 does not consist of displaying the flag feverishly, ostentatiously, and thoughtlessly. American patriotism is a practice that recognizes the important ideals and flaws of this country but does not fall into a self-perception of greatness or a Messianic role. American patriotism does not consist of blindly following those who exercise power with solely American interests. Americans need to accept their own susceptibility to violence in the world and ac-

knowledge and correct their errors domestically and internationally. September 11 was an opportunity for Americans to step back and think: think about how they live their lives and the effects on the world think about what decisions and actions they made that fueled hatred and violence, think about how they represent themselves to the world, and think about what kind of world the twenty-first century should be. These are not simple contemplations, but, unfortunately, national mythologies, narratives, and artifacts often obstruct such critical reflections. The American flag functioned to undermine such contemplations post-9/11. Instead, Americans need to evaluate situations rationally in the larger political, economic, cultural, and historical context before thoughtlessly hurrying to express their sentiments through traditional ideologies and artifacts. This is real patriotism.

Notes

1. While this study can not elaborate more on the United States's role which may have contributed to the violence of the terrorists on 9/11, there are numerous sources that have delved into the topic. For further insight and additional information, one can start with: Aronowitz, Stanley and Heather Gautney, eds. *Implicating Empire: Globalization and Resistance in the 21st Century World Order*. New York: Basic Books, 2003. Zizek, Slavoj. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. London and New York: Verso, 2002.

2. One must look to the complex reasons 9/11 happened. Unfortunately, this study cannot delve into the complexities, but there is one reason 9/11 definitely did not happen; it did not happen because of our “freedom.” One of the main reasons planes were flown into the World Trade Center Towers was because of our policies in the Middle East. Osama Bin Laden has remarked several times that it is not because of freedom that America is targeted. The United States approach, treatment, and exploitation of lands, resources, and people in the Middle East launched a boomerang that came back violently on September 11, 2001. There are numerous sources that have investigated extensively on the causes for 9/11. For further insight and additional information, one can start with David Ray Griffen, Peter Dale Scott, et al. *9/11 and American Empire: Intellectuals Speak Out*, Noam Chomsky *9–11*, Zbigniew Brzezinski *The Grand Chessboard* Robert Fisk's interviews and reports on the Middle East and a collection edited by Joanne Meyerowitz *History and September 11th*.

3. While this study cannot elaborate more on the agenda of the American State, there are numerous sources that have investigated extensively. For further insight and additional information, one can start with: Aronowitz, Anthony. *Iraq: The Logic of Withdrawal*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007.

Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2005.

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