

Robert W. Jensen
Associate Professor
School of Journalism
University of Texas at Austin
Austin, TX 78712
office: (512) 471-1990
fax: (512) 471-7979
rjensen@uts.cc.utexas.edu
<http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/~rjensen/home.htm>

DAN RATHER AND THE PROBLEM WITH PATRIOTISM: Steps toward the Redemption of American Journalism and Democracy

Though it was unintentional, since Sept. 11, 2001, Dan Rather has single-handedly provided enough evidence to destroy one of American journalists' central claims about their special place in a democratic society while at the same time helping us see why patriotism is morally unacceptable.

Rather's struggles with the conflicts between his role as a journalist and his desire to be patriotic demonstrated why contemporary U.S. journalism falls well short of its claim to be politically neutral. For this service, journalists should be grateful to Rather, for if we can bury that peculiar ideology of contemporary commercial journalism it might be possible to rebuild a media system that better serves a democratic society and its citizens.

At the same time, Rather's declarations about citizenship during wartime have demonstrated why the problem with patriotism is not how to define it properly, but how to eliminate it. For this service, citizens should be grateful, for if we can leave behind that morally and intellectually bankrupt ideology it might be possible to dismantle the American empire to make way for a meaningful American democracy.

WHY DAN RATHER?

Rather, anchor of the CBS Evening News and the dean of American television journalism, spoke more openly after 9/11 than any other mainstream commercial journalist, appearing on numerous talk shows to discuss his reaction to the tragedy and media coverage. The flashpoint was his appearance less than a week after 9/11 on David Letterman's talk show, for which he was both criticized and lauded for his declaration of loyalty to the president.

But much more important than that initial reaction have been comments Rather has continued to make since 9/11 as he has tried -- and failed -- to reconcile the contradictions in his conception of what it means to be a journalist and a U.S. citizen. In that failure -- which is not his alone but the whole profession's -- we can see how intellectually incoherent and politically debilitating are the current ideologies of journalism and patriotism.

The basic claim journalists make about their role in society is simple: In a democracy predicated on the notion that the people -- not leaders -- are sovereign, the people need information independent of the centers of power, especially the government. The larger and more complex the society, the more difficult it is for individuals to gather for themselves that information. Enter the journalists, who offer themselves as independent watchdogs on power who don't take sides in partisan struggles. In the contemporary United States, journalists claim to be neutral sources of information.

Since 9/11, it has been painfully clear that the mainstream commercial news media have not been, on the whole, that much-needed critical, independent voice and are far from neutral politically. Just as important, the current posture of journalism shows that such simplistic claims to political neutrality tend to undermine the ability to be critical and independent; nowhere is that more evident than in discussions of patriotism.

Dan Rather helps make this plain as day.

Some have written him off as an aging crank who not only can sound goofy on the air (his sometimes strained colloquialisms have been dubbed "Rather Blather") but, more importantly, doesn't represent the views of most journalists. I see it just the opposite; Rather is a fairly typical journalist, just unusually blunt and honest in public. That's precisely why he so often embarrasses the profession; he isn't good at self-censorship.

Using Rather's comments as a starting point, I will lay out a case against the typical journalistic claim to the importance of political neutrality and the typical American claim to the nobility of patriotism, arguing that both are incoherent and destructive to democracy.

PATRIOTIC JOURNALISM

This argument rests on the simple assertion that patriotism is not politically neutral, which is both obvious and steadfastly ignored. In fact, in the United States invocations of patriotism are routinely coupled with declarations of bipartisanship, evidence that one has gotten "beyond politics." Yet patriotism is inherently political, not only in the way it is used by politicians -- often cynically -- to justify particular policies regarding war but in the fundamental way it defines citizenship in relation to a nation-state. More on that later, after an examination of Rather's post-9/11 performance.

Rather's first foray into the issue came on the Letterman show on Sept. 17, 2001, when he said: "George Bush is the president. He makes the decisions, and, you know, it's just one American, wherever he wants me to line up, just tell me where, and he'll make the call."¹

Such a direct declaration of subordination to the authority of a political leader made many -- especially many journalists -- nervous, and though Rather never retracted the remark he tried to refine his ideas in subsequent discussions. As he consistently reasserted his

patriotism without apology, he struggled to articulate it in a fashion consistent with a conception of journalists-as-neutral-observers. For example, Rather -- the same man who offered to line up wherever the president ordered -- would not wear a flag pin on the air, as some other journalists did. In a September 22, 2001, interview on "CNN Tonight" with Howard Kurtz (the *Washington Post*'s media critic who also appears on the cable news channel), Rather explained: "It doesn't feel right to me. I have the flag burned in my heart, and I have ever since infancy. And I just don't feel the need to do it. It just doesn't feel right to me."²

Shortly after 9/11, the American flag became a symbol of "American standing tough" which quickly became fused with "America going to war." So, Rather was correct in recognizing that journalistic neutrality, as it is conventionally understood, would be compromised by wearing a flag. But in that same interview, Rather was asked by Kurtz if he thought journalists, out of a fear of a public backlash, might be reluctant to criticize the administration. Rather's answer exhibited his inability to move past a sense of patriotism as subordination to authority:

"I want to fulfill my role as a decent human member of the community and a decent and patriotic American. And therefore, I am willing to give the government, the president and the military the benefit of any doubt here in the beginning. I'm going to fulfill my role as a journalist, and that is ask the questions, when necessary ask the tough questions. But I have no excuse for, particularly when there is a national crisis such as this, as saying -- you know, the president says do your job, whatever you are and whomever you are, Mr. and Mrs. America. I'm going to do my job as a journalist, but at the same time I will give them the benefit of the doubt, whenever possible in this kind of crisis, emergency situation. Not because I am concerned about any backlash. I'm not. But because I want to be a patriotic American without apology."

Rather's contradictions are striking. He won't wear a flag pin, but he'll claim to be patriotic without apology. He will ask tough questions, but if those tough questions elicit responses from officials that seem questionable, he will give officials the benefit of the doubt. Rather's answer to Kurtz came just 11 days after the terrorist attacks, when one could plausibly believe the shock of the event led people to speak in ways they might otherwise not. But Rather offered the same assessment on June 4, 2002, on the "Larry King Live" show on CNN, when King asked if there was "a thin line between patriot and reporter." Rather replied:

"No. I don't think it's a thin line at all. I've never had any difficulty with that line. What's sometimes a thin line, and where I do have some difficulty, is what's appropriate and what's the appropriate time? That's what I've just tried to outline in the wake of September 11. And then when the war first started, early in October, you know, when there's doubt to be given, we should give the military those doubts."

On October 9, 2001, Rather managed to contradict himself in the same interview, with former NBC and CBS reporter Marvin Kalb. After declaring "I don't think you can be too patriotic; when in doubt, I would much prefer to err on the side of too much

patriotism as opposed to too little,” Rather went on to define a patriotic journalist as a “skeptical and independent journalist, not cynical.” For Rather, that means “the measure of a journalist’s patriotism is does he have the wisdom, does he have the savvy and does he or she have the guts to ask the tough questions, even though it might be deemed to be quote unpatriotic.” Later in that interview he stated, “As a journalist, I never want to place a single American fighting man or woman’s life in danger. And I’m fully prepared to give the government military spokesman the benefit of every reasonable doubt on that score.”³ Kalb either didn’t see Rather’s contradictions or didn’t think they warranted comment.

It is not clear on what principle Rather would refuse to interrogate political leaders early in a crisis or war. On the surface, it would seem just the opposite rule should apply; in the wake of an attack like 9/11, it’s likely politicians would move quickly to take advantage of public shock and grief, making journalistic intervention and tough questioning all the more important early, when people are most emotional and most vulnerable to manipulation. Likewise, given the history of military officials shielding themselves from scrutiny and covering up mistakes with claims that releasing information would endanger men and women in the field, Rather would have to explain how one can ask “the tough questions” while giving military officials the benefit of the doubt.

While many journalists were nervous about Rather’s pronouncements, the performance of the commercial mainstream news media after 9/11 suggests he was merely articulating what others believed and were doing; journalistic scrutiny of administration claims for months after 9/11 was timid at best, and claims by American officials that were intensely scrutinized in the foreign press and alternative media were accepted at face value in the U.S. commercial mainstream news media.

Curiously, shortly before that appearance on the June 2002 King show, Rather had given an interview to the BBC in which he ruminated on the dangers of excessive patriotism. On “BBC Newsnight” on May 5, 2002, Rather said:

“I worry that patriotism run amok will trample the very values that the country seeks to defend. In a constitutional republic based on the principles of democracy such as ours, you simply cannot sustain warfare without the people at large understanding why we fight, how we fight, and have a sense of accountability to the very top.”

This “surge of patriotism,” Rather said, leads to a journalist saying, “I know the right questions, but you know what, this is not exactly the right time to ask them.” But, he continued, “It’s unpatriotic not to stand up, look [officials] in the eye, and ask the questions they don’t want to hear.”⁴ Though Rather had said in the earlier interview with Kurtz that he didn’t fear a backlash from a hyperpatriotic public, to the BBC reporter he compared the problems that American journalists faced regarding patriotism with the price the practice of “necklacing”:

“It is an obscene comparison. You know I am not sure I like it. But you know there was a time in South Africa that people would put flaming tires around peoples’ necks if they

dissented. And in some ways the fear is that you will be necklaced here, you will have a flaming tire of lack of patriotism put around your neck. Now it is that fear that keeps journalists from asking the toughest of the tough questions... And again, I am humbled to say, I do not except myself from this criticism.”⁵

Rather’s flip-flopping -- between (1) declarations that he would defer to authority, followed by (2) promises he would ask the tough questions, except (3) when it wasn’t the right time to ask tough questions, followed by (4) an acknowledgement that he and his colleagues weren’t asking the tough questions even when they should -- was not an aberration from, but an honest account of, the position of most American journalists.

Whatever his confusion about the role of journalists, Rather seems clear about the role of citizens in wartime: The majority will either support administration policy or, when war does come, will quickly get in line. On November 2, 2001, on CNN’s “Larry King Weekend,” Rather said: “[T]he whole country is right in saying, look, whatever arguments one may or may not have had with George Bush the younger before September 11, he is our commander-in-chief, he’s the man now. And we need unity, we need steadiness. I’m not preaching about it. We all know this.”

Do we all agree with this call for unity? The existence of an antiwar movement that began organizing immediately after 9/11 suggests otherwise. And, why in a democracy we should value such unity? Unity toward what goal? Given that in a democracy people are supposed to determine the goals, and that invariably there will be many differences of opinion about the proper goals, what can unity mean other than the obedience and acceptance of authority? On “Larry King Live” on November 4, 2002, Rather made that explicit:

“And, you know, I’m of the belief that you can have only one commander-in-chief at a time, only one president at a time. President Bush is our president. Whatever he decides vis-a-vis war or peace in Iraq is what we will do as a country. And I for one will swing in behind him as a citizen ... and support whatever his decision is.”

In that interview, Rather’s conception of the role of the news media in governance came into sharper focus. When arguing that the U.S. military can be too restrictive in the information it releases and access it provides journalists, Rather’s rationale for greater openness was that in a “constitutional republic based on the principles of democracies such as our own there that there must be -- it is imperative there be a higher degree of communicable trust between the leadership and the led.”

This is, in a nutshell, Dan Rather’s political theory: As a citizen, he will swing in behind a president’s decision to go to war; as a journalist, he will provide the information to create trust between politicians and citizens. The obvious problem is that this inverts the relationship of citizen to elected officials in a democracy. Citizens in a democracy are not supposed to be “the led.” In a meaningful democratic system, citizens should not be limited to a role only in the selection of leaders (an incredibly thin conception of democracy) or in the selection of policies from a set of limited choices presented to them

by leaders (still a very thin conception). In a democratic system with a rich sense of participation, citizens would have an active, meaningful role in the determination of which issues are most important at any moment and in the formation of policy options to address those issues. And journalists would be their ally in that task.

THE PROBLEM WITH PATRIOTISM

Whatever the differences of opinion -- about how much journalists should talk in public about patriotism, or whether they should wear flag pins on their lapels, or how aggressive questioning of officials should be -- I know of no mainstream commercial journalist in the United States who publicly renounced patriotism after 9/11. Despite the flak he took for various comments, Dan Rather was probably accurate when he told the Texas Daily Newspaper Association in March 2002: "There's a lot of talk today about being patriotic. And we all want to be patriotic."⁶ The only potential disagreements have been about what constitutes patriotic behavior for journalists.

Bill Kovach, chairman of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, was one of the strongest spokespersons for a tough, critical journalism after 9/11. He did not trumpet patriotism, but implicitly endorsed the concept in his defense of journalists:

"A journalist is never more true to democracy -- is never more engaged as a citizen, is never more patriotic -- than when aggressively doing the job of independently verifying the news of the day; questioning the actions of those in authority; disclosing information the public needs but others wish secret for self-interested purposes."⁷

An editor at one of the top U.S. journalism reviews also implicitly endorsed patriotism in arguing that journalists serve their country best when asking "tough, even unpopular questions when our government wages war." He distinguished "patriotism, love of one's country" from "nationalism -- the exalting of one's nation and its culture and interests above all others. If patriotism is a kind of affection, nationalism is its dark side."⁸

There is only one problem with all these formulations: Patriotism cannot be distinguished from nationalism; patriotism in general is morally indefensible; and patriotism in today's empire, the United States, is particularly dangerous to the continued health of the planet. I argue that everyone -- citizens and journalists alike -- should abandon patriotism and strive to become more fully developed human beings with allegiances not to a nation but to humanity. At first glance, in a country where patriotism is almost universally taken to be an unquestioned virtue, this may seem outrageous. But there is a simple path to what I consider to be this logical, moral conclusion.

If we use the common definition of patriotism -- love of, and loyalty to, one's country -- the first question that arises is, What is meant by country? Nation-states, after all, are not naturally occurring objects. In discussions with various community groups and classes since 9/11, I have asked people to explain which aspects of a nation-state -- specifically in the context of patriotism in the United States -- they believe should spark patriotic

feelings. Toward whom or what should one feel love and loyalty? The answers offered include the land itself, the people of a nation, its culture, the leadership, national policies, the nation's institutions, and the democratic ideals of the nation. To varying degrees, all seem like plausible answers, yet all fail to provide an acceptable answer to that basic question.

Land: Many people associate patriotism with a love of the land on which they were born, raised, or currently live. Certainly people's sense of place and connection to a landscape is easy to understand; most of us have felt that. I was born and raised on the prairie, and I feel most comfortable, most at home, on the prairie. But what has that to do with love or loyalty to a nation-state? Does affection for a certain landscape map onto political boundaries? If I love the desert, should I have a greater affection for the desert on the U.S. side of the border, and a lesser affection when I cross into Mexico? Should I love the prairie in my home state of North Dakota, but abandon that affection when I hit the Canadian border? In discussing connections to the land we can sensibly talk about watersheds and local ecosystems, but not national boundaries. And ties to a specific piece of land (i.e., the farm one grew up on) have nothing to do with a nation-state.

People: It's also common to talk about patriotism in terms of love and affection for one's countrymen and women. This can proceed on two levels, either as an assertion of differential value of people's lives or as an expression of affection for people. The former -- claiming that the lives of people within one's nation-state are more valuable than lives of people outside it -- is immoral by the standards of virtually all major moral philosophies and religions, which typically are based on the belief that all human life is equally valuable. It may be true that especially in times of war, people act as if they value the lives of fellow citizens more, but for most people that cannot be a principle on which patriotism can rest.

Certainly everyone has special affection for specific people in their lives, and it's likely that -- by virtue of proximity -- for most of us the majority of people for whom we have that affection are citizens of the same nation. But does that mean our sense of connection to them stems from living in the same nation-state? Given the individual variation in humans, why assume that someone living in our nation-state should automatically spark a feeling of connection greater than someone elsewhere? I was born in the United States near the Canadian border, and I have more in common with Canadians from the prairie provinces than I do with, for example, the people of Texas, where I now live. Am I supposed to, by virtue of my U.S. citizenship, naturally feel something stronger for Texans than Manitobans? If so, why?

Culture: The same arguments about land and people applies to cultures. Culture -- that complex mix of customs, art, stories, faith, traditions -- does not map exactly onto the often artificial boundaries of nation-states. More importantly, if one rejects the dominant culture of the nation-state in which one lives, why should one have affection for it or loyalty to it?

Leaders: In a democracy it is clear that patriotism can't be defined as loyalty to existing political leaders. Such patriotism would be the antithesis of democracy; to be a citizen is to retain the right to make judgments about leader, not simply accept their authority. Even if one accepts the right of leaders to make decisions within a legal structure and agrees to follow the resulting laws, that does not mean one is loyal to that leadership.

Policies: The same argument about leaders applies to specific policies adopted by leaders. In a democracy, one may agree to follow legally binding rules, but that does not mean one supports them. Of course, no one claims that it is unpatriotic to object to existing policy about taxes or transportation planning. War tends to be the only policy over which people make demands that everyone support -- or at least mute dissent about -- a national policy. But why should war be different? When so much human life is at stake, is it not even more important for all opinions to be fully aired?

Governmental structures: If patriotism is not loyalty to particular leader or policies, many contend, at least it can mean loyalty to our governmental structures. But that is no less an abandonment of democracy, for inherent in a real democracy is the idea that no single set of institutions can be assumed to be, for all times and places, the ultimate expression of democracy. In a nation founded on the principle that the people are sovereign and retain the right to reject institutions that do not serve their interests, patriotism defined as loyalty to the existing structures is hard to defend.

Democratic ideals: When challenged on these other questionable definitions of patriotism, most people eventually land on the seemingly safe assertion that patriotism in the United States is an expression of commitment to a set of basic democratic ideals, which typically include liberty, justice, and equality. But problems arise here as well. First, what makes these values distinctly American? Are not various people around the world committed to these values and working to make them real in a variety of ways? Given that these values were not invented in the United States and are not distinct to the United States today, how can one claim them as the basis for patriotism? If these values predate the formation of the United States and are present around the world, are they not human ideals rather than American?

The next move many make is to claim that while these values are not the sole property of Americans, it is in the United States that they have been realized to their fullest extent. This is merely the hubris of the powerful. On some criteria, such as legal protection for freedom of speech, the United States certainly ranks at or near the top. But the commercial media system, which dominates in the United States, also systematically shuts out radical views and narrows the political spectrum, impoverishing real democratic dialogue. It is folly to think any nation could claim to be the primary repository of any single democratic value, let alone the ideal of democracy.

Claims that the United States is the ultimate fulfillment of the values of justice also must come to terms with history and the American record of brutality, both at home and abroad. One might want to ask indigenous people and black Americans, victims of the America holocausts of genocide and slavery, about the commitment to freedom and

justice for all, in the past and today. We also would have some explaining to do to the people of Guatemala and Iran, Nicaragua and South Vietnam, East Timor and Laos, Iraq and Panama. We would have to explain to the victims of U.S. aggression -- direct and indirect -- why it is that our political culture, the highest expression of the ideals of freedom and democracy, has routinely gone around the world overthrowing democratically elected governments, supporting brutal dictators, funding and training proxy terrorist armies, and unleashing brutal attacks on civilians when we go to war. If we want to make the claim that we are the fulfillment of history and the ultimate expression of the principles of freedom and justice, our first stop might be Hiroshima.

After working through this argument in class, one student, in exasperation, told me I was missing the point by trying to reduce patriotism to an easily articulated idea or ideas. "It's about all these things together," she said. But it's not clear how individual explanations that fall short can collectively make a reasonable argument. If each attempt to articulate patriotism fails on empirical, logical, or moral grounds, how do they add up to a virtue?

Any attempt to articulate an appropriate object of patriotic love and loyalty falls apart quickly. When I make this argument, I am often told that I simply don't understand, that patriotism is as much about feeling as about logic or evidence. Certainly love is a feeling that often defies exact description; when we say we love someone, we aren't expected to produce a treatise on the reasons. My point is not to suggest the emotion of love should be rendered bloodless but to point out that patriotism is incoherent because there is no object for the love that can be defended, morally or politically. We can love people, places, and ideas, but it makes no sense to declare one's love or loyalty to a nation-state that claims to be democratic.

BEYOND PATRIOTISM

My claim is that there is no way to rescue patriotism or distinguish it from nationalism, which most everyone rejects as crude and jingoistic. Any use of the concept of patriotism is bound to be chauvinistic at some level. At its worst, patriotism can lead easily to support for barbaric policies, especially in war. At its best, it is self-indulgent and arrogant in its assumptions about the uniqueness of U.S. culture and willfully ignorant about the history and contemporary policy of this country. Emma Goldman was correct, I believe, when she identified the essentials of patriotism as "conceit, arrogance, and egotism" and went on to assert that:

"Patriotism assumes that our globe is divided into little spots, each one surrounded by an iron gate. Those who have had the fortune of being born on some particular spot, consider themselves better, nobler, grander, more intelligent than the living beings inhabiting any other spot. It is, therefore, the duty of everyone living on that chosen spot to fight, kill, and die in the attempt to impose his superiority upon all the others."⁹

This is not a blanket denunciation of the United States, our political institutions, or our culture. People often tell me, "You start with the assumption that everything about the

United States is bad.” But I do not assume that; it would be as absurd a position as the assumption that everything about the United States is good. No reasonable person would make either statement. Nor do I “blame America first,” as some often assert about radical analysis. Instead, I take seriously the moral obligation to be accountable for one’s own behavior and, in a democracy, to be responsible collectively for the behavior of the nation in which I am a citizen.

To do that, we must move beyond patriotism. We can retain all our affections for land, people, culture and a sense of place without labeling it as patriotism and artificially attaching it to national boundaries. We can take into account the human need to feel solidarity and connection with others (what Randolph Bourne described as the ability “to enjoy the companionship of others, to be able to cooperate with them, and to feel a slight malaise at solitude)¹⁰ without attaching those feelings to a nation-state. We can realize that communication and transportation technologies have made possible a new level of mobility around the world, which leaves us with a clear choice: Either the world can continue to be based on domination by powerful nation-states (in complex relationship with multinational corporations) and the elites who dictate policy in them, or we can seek a new interdependence and connection with people around the world through popular movements that cross national boundaries based on shared values and a common humanity. To achieve the latter, people’s moral reasoning must be able to constrain the destructive capacity of elite power. As Goldman suggested, patriotism retards our moral development. These are not abstract arguments about rhetoric; the stakes are painfully real and the people in subordinated nation-states have, and will continue, to pay the price of patriotism in the dominant states with their bodies.

As the Bush administration makes good on its post-9/11 promise of an unlimited war against endless enemies, the question of patriotism is particularly important in the United States. The greater the destructive power of a nation, the greater the potential danger of patriotism. Despite many Americans’ belief that we are the first benevolent empire, this applies to the United States as clearly as to any country. On this count we would do well to ponder the observations of one of the top Nazis, Hermann Goering. In G.M. Gilbert’s book on his experiences as the Nuremberg prison psychologist, he recounts this conversation with Goering:

“Why of course the people don’t want war,” Goering shrugged. “Why would some poor slob on a farm want to risk his life in a war when the best that he can get out of it is to come back to his farm in one piece. Naturally, the common people don’t want war; neither in Russia nor in England nor in America, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or a fascist dictatorship or a Parliament or a Communist dictatorship.”

“There is one difference,” I pointed out. “In a democracy the people have some say in the matter through their elected representatives, and in the United States only Congress can declare war.”

“Oh, that is all well and good, but, voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them that they are being

attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country.”¹¹

IF NOT PATRIOTISM?

If our political lives should not be organized around patriotism and nation-states, then what? The simple answer is both the local and the global; politics must, over time, be devolved down to levels where ordinary people can have a meaningful role in governing their own lives, while at the same time we maintain a sense of connection to the entire human family, and understand that the scope of high-technology and the legacy of imperialism leave us bound to each other across the globe in new ways. This is a call for an internationalism that understands we live mostly at the local level but can do that ethically only when we take into account how local actions affect others outside our view.

My goal here is not a detailed sketch of how such a system would work; any such attempt would be unrealistic. The first step is to envision something beyond what exists, a point from which people could go forward with experiments in new forms of social, political, and economic organization. Successes and failures in those experiments would guide subsequent steps, and any attempt to provide a comprehensive plan at this stage cannot be taken seriously. It also is important is to realize that the work of articulating alternative political visions and engaging in political action to advance them has been going on for centuries. There is no reason today to think that national identification is the only force that could hold together societies; for example, political radicals of the 19th and early 20th centuries argued for recognizing other common interests. As Goldman put it:

“Thinking men and women the world over are beginning to realize that patriotism is too narrow and limited a conception to meet the necessities of our time. The centralization of power has brought into being an international feeling of solidarity among the oppressed nations of the world; a solidarity which represents a greater harmony of interests between the workingman of America and his brothers abroad than between the American miner and his exploiting compatriot; a solidarity which fears not foreign invasion, because it is bringing all the workers to the point when they will say to their masters, ‘Go and do your own killing. We have done it long enough for you.’ This solidarity is awakening the consciousness of even the soldiers, they, too, being flesh of the flesh of the great human family.”¹²

We can, of course, go even further back in human history to find articulations of alternatives. As Leo Tolstoy reminded us in his critique of patriotism published in 1900, a rejection of loyalty to governments is part of the animating spirit of Christianity; “some 2,000 years ago ... the person of the highest wisdom, began to recognize the higher idea of a brotherhood of man.” Tolstoy argued that this “higher idea, the brotherly union of the peoples, which has long since come to life, and from all sides is calling you to itself” could lead people to “understand that they are not the sons of some fatherland or other, nor of Governments, but are sons of God.”¹³

In more secular form, this sentiment is summed up often-quoted statement of the great American labor leader and Socialist Eugene Debs, who said in 1915: “I have no country to fight for; my country is the earth, and I am a citizen of the world.”¹⁴

CAN JOURNALISTS BE NEUTRAL, AND DOES IT MATTER?

Whatever one’s assessment of the intellectual and moral status of patriotism, one thing should be readily evident: A declaration of patriotism is a declaration of a partisan political position. For purposes of this portion of my argument, it matters not how any particular journalist conceptualizes patriotism or what might be the best way for journalists to make good on their patriotism. Just as rejecting patriotism as a framework is political, so is accepting it. How then can journalists both openly proclaim a political position and continue to make the claim they are politically neutral?

Of course individual journalists hold political positions on many subjects; no journalist claims to be politically inert. The conventional argument is not that journalists are devoid of opinions, but that professional practices of fairness, balance, and objectivity help ensure that the news is gathered and presented in a way that is not inordinately influenced by those opinions. As part of that, journalists typically avoid making public pronouncements about their political beliefs and affiliations. This is where patriotism is different; journalists typically agree that patriotism is a good thing and struggle in public with what it means for their work. On this matter, they are openly political yet see no conflict between this and an obviously contradictory claim to neutrality.

The most plausible explanation is that these journalists take patriotism to be the kind of political judgment that is so universally accepted that to publicly accept it is uncontroversial. For example, it’s likely true that all American journalists believe slavery is wrong, and if asked in public no journalist would hesitate to state that belief. The statement would be a moral and political judgment about the rights and obligations of people, but no one would see it as compromising an accompanying claim to neutrality because to argue for slavery would place one well outside current social norms. It would be seen as an indication of pathology, personal and political.

But unless the argument against patriotism is evidence of such pathology -- making me, Debs, Goldman, Tolstoy, and many others, both today and in the past, pathological -- patriotism can’t be in that category of a moral or political truism. The only way to pretend that declarations of patriotism are not political and open to critique is to erase the many arguments against patriotism. Indeed, a review of contemporary American mainstream commercial journalism would suggest that is exactly what happens.

Does any of this matter? Does it affect the news that U.S. readers and viewers get, especially on matters of war and peace? Yes, for this patriotism systematically clouds the vision of American reporters, and not just since 9/11. The most thorough account of this is contained in *Manufacturing Consent*, in which Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky

extensively review the systematic slanting of the news of foreign affairs toward the official viewpoint of the dominant culture's political elites.¹⁵ But, if one doesn't trust such radical sources, let's return to Dan Rather.

In 1996 Rather gave a talk on journalism ethics at the University of Texas, where I teach. More interesting than the lecture was his response to one question. A student asked Rather about the failures of the news media in covering the 1991 Gulf War -- boosterish coverage of the military, failure to examine the Bush administration claims (many of which turned out to be lies), a gee-whiz approach to the high-tech weapons. The student laid out a clear and compelling case for journalistic malfeasance, and Rather acknowledged that he couldn't argue with most of what the young man said.

But, Rather shrugged, in time of war, "journalism tends to follow the flag."¹⁶

Rather was right, and I suppose we can admire him for being honest. But he seemed to miss the point of the question: Yes, journalists *do* tend to follow the flag, but *should* they? Rather's acceptance of the student's analysis indicated he understood how a democratic system suffers when journalists too readily accept the pronouncements of the powerful during a war, how people can't really make intelligent decisions about policy options without independent information. But his reaction also indicated that he believed the "follow the flag" instinct was inevitable, perhaps a law of journalistic nature.

But, of course, there are no laws of nature for journalists. Instead, there are institutional realities, professional routines, and ideologies that shape behavior, as Herman and Chomsky lay out in their propaganda model. The importance of these influences on the news are obscured by the professional ideology of political neutrality, which keeps both journalists and citizens from understanding the relationship between power and the news media. Any claim to such neutrality is illusory; there is no neutral ground on which to stand anywhere in the world. One need not be overtly partisan or propagandistic to be political. The politics of journalists' choices about which stories to cover, from which angle, using which sources, cannot be eliminated by a claim to have established neutral professional practices. The question is not whether one is neutral, but whether one is independent in a meaningful way from powerful forces.

Mainstream commercial journalists are quick to answer, "Yes, of course we are independent." In fact, government officials rarely attempt to impose legal restraints on journalists, and editors and reporters work relatively free of direct governmental control. (Of course journalists are not independent of the corporations that employ them, but the focus here is on independence from government.) All governments routinely attempt to control the information journalists receive from officials, especially during wartime, but the U.S. government does relatively little, in terms of direct repression, to impede journalists from their work. (One exception to that is in the war theater itself, which is a complex issue I won't take up here.)

What do journalists do with that freedom from most legal control? For the most part during war, not much. The slavish dependence on official sources and the ideology of

patriotism keeps the vast majority of American journalists trapped in a fantasy world in which U.S. war aims are always just and anything bad that happens is the product of either an honest mistake or the rogue action of a “bad apple” in an otherwise decent system. The result is painful to come to terms with: Times of war -- when a democracy most desperately needs a critical, independent journalism working outside the ideological constraints of the culture -- are precisely when the U.S. commercial mainstream news media fails most profoundly. A final anecdote to illustrate:

During the question period following a 1999 speech at the National Press Club, Dan Rather discussed the decision of U.S. military planners in the attack on Yugoslavia to target that nation’s power grid. Sam Husseini, communications director of the Institute for Public Accuracy,¹⁷ pointed out the apparent contradiction between Rather’s use of the pronoun “we” in describing U.S. military action while claiming to be a neutral journalist. Rather acknowledged it was a difficult issue, but he made no bones about where he came down on the question: “I’m an American, and I’m an American reporter. And yes, when there’s combat involving Americans -- criticize me if you must, damn me if you must, but -- I’m always pulling for us to win.”¹⁸

Unstated in Rather’s response, of course, is the assumption that Americans in combat fight on the right side. But what if U.S. leaders sent Americans into battle for a cause that was not just? What if leaders pursued a war that was, in fact, decidedly unjust? What if the United States fought a war not for freedom and justice but instead to extend and deepen its own control over crucial strategic regions of the world? Let’s say, just for the sake of argument, this war took place in a region of the world that held the majority of the easily accessible oil reserves, in an era in which the world’s industrial economy ran on oil, and therefore control over the flow of oil and oil profits meant real power. What if American troops were sent into combat for the objective of such control? What if, because of the way U.S. military planners fight wars, one could be reasonably certain that large numbers of civilians would die? Just for the sake of argument, if that were to happen, would it be acceptable for anyone -- journalist or ordinary citizen -- to be “pulling for us to win”? Should journalists be open to the possibility that the leadership of their country might be capable of such a war plan? And if journalists were not open to such a possibility, would we call them neutral? Would we trust them to provide us with the information we need to make decisions as citizens in a democracy?

As I have argued throughout this essay, Dan Rather’s public comments are important not for the way in which they occasionally are idiosyncratic, but for the way in which they are completely conventional. When Rather talked about “pulling for us to win,” the most disheartening moment was not the comment itself, which was hardly surprising given Rather’s history and public comments. More troubling was that at the National Press Club -- in a room full of some of the most experienced and influential working journalists in the nation’s capital -- the audience broke out in applause.

Author Bio

Robert Jensen joined the UT faculty in 1992 after completing his Ph.D. on media law and ethics in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota. He teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in media law, ethics, and politics. Prior to his academic career, he worked as a professional journalist for a decade.

In his research, Jensen draws on a variety of critical theories. Much of his work has focused on pornography and the radical feminist critique of sexuality. In more recent work, he has addressed questions of race through a critique of white privilege and institutionalized racism.

Jensen is author of *Writing Dissent: Taking Radical Ideas from the Margins to the Mainstream* (Peter Lang, 2002); co-author with Gail Dines and Ann Russo of *Pornography: The Production and Consumption of Inequality* (Routledge, 1998); and co-editor with David S. Allen of *Freeing the First Amendment: Critical Perspectives on Freedom of Expression* (New York University Press, 1995). His pamphlet "Citizens of the Empire" has been published in Spain as *Ciudadanos del Imperio* (Editorial Popular, 2003).

In addition to teaching and research, Jensen writes for popular media, both alternative and mainstream. His opinion and analytic pieces on such subjects as foreign policy, politics, and race have appeared in papers around the country. He also is involved in a number of activist groups working against U.S. military and economic domination of the rest of the world.

¹ L. Brent Bozell, "Media coverage at its best," *Washington Times*, September 25, 2001, p. A-18.

² All quotes from television broadcasts are, unless otherwise indicated, taken from transcripts retrieved from the Dow Jones Interactive database.

³ "A conversation with Dan Rather," October 9, 2001, "The Kalb Report: Journalism at the Crossroads," CD-ROM. <http://www.gwu.edu/~kalb/>.

⁴ Quotes transcribed from http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/audiovideo/programmes/newsnight/newsid_1991000/1991885.stm.

⁵ "Dan Rather says U.S. patriotism leads some journalists to self-censorship," Associated Press report, May 16, 2002.

⁶ Mike Tolson, "Remain objective despite war, Rather tells Texas journalists," *Houston Chronicle*, March 19, 2002, p. 19.

⁷ Bill Kovach, "Journalism and patriotism," talk to the annual meeting of the Organization of News Ombudsmen, April 30, 2002. <http://www.newsombudsmen.org/kovach.html>.

⁸ Russ Baker, "Want to be a patriot? Do your job," *Columbia Journalism Review*, May 2002, pp. 78-79.

⁹ Emma Goldman, "Patriotism: A Menace to Liberty," in *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1969), pp. 128-129.

¹⁰ Randolph Bourne, "War is the Health of the State," 1918. http://struggle.ws/hist_texts/warhealthstate1918.html.

¹¹ G. M. Gilbert, *Nuremberg Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1947), pp. 278-279.

¹² Goldman, "Patriotism," pp. 142-143.

¹³ Leo Tolstoy, "Patriotism and Government," online at http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bright/tolstoy/patriotismandgovt.html.

¹⁴ <http://bari.iww.org/iu120/local/Scribner12.html>.

¹⁵ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, rev. ed (New York: Pantheon, 2002).

¹⁶ Dan Rather, "Ethics in Journalism," lecture to College of Communication, University of Texas, November 26, 1996.

¹⁷ <http://www.accuracy.org>.

¹⁸ Dan Rather, speech to National Press Club, Washington, DC, June 25, 1999. Transcript at <http://www.fair.org/activism/husseini-rather.html>.