

The Perils of Pretended Patriotism in the Digital Age: How to Encourage Patriotism at The
University of Wisconsin-Madison

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In September of 1796, George Washington announced he would not run for a third term of office as the President of the United States. His farewell address warned of three prominent dangers: partisanship, regionalism, and foreign entanglements. He emphasized “The name of American, which belongs to you in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of patriotism more than any appellation derived from local discriminations.”¹ Sensing a deep loyalty for their home states, Washington reminded his fellow former colonists that if America were to succeed as a nation, there needed to be consensus around patriotism for the country as a whole. He included a warning with his request, that we must “guard against the impostures of pretended patriotism.” However, Washington could neither predict the impact the digital age would have on the dissemination of information nor its effect on the democratic process and our patriotic duties. It seems every day there is a “breaking story” pulling Americans apart, foreign interference in our elections, or something similarly divisive that feeds the fire between Red vs. Blue. In an age where it would seem technology like the internet would bring us together as patriots, we are instead living in extremely polemical times with people residing in their online, digital echo chamber enclaves. It is of my opinion, that the idea of patriotism per se cannot be taught by a structured course at UW-Madison. Instead, UW-Madison should construct a course that teaches students the tools to be critical, independent, thoughtful thinkers, and to be aware of cognitive biases that are propagated at high rates through digital mediums. This course would encourage students to fulfill their patriotic duty of protecting against the impostures of pretended patriotism perpetuated by the digital age and overreaching government.

Historically, the word *patriot* was derived from the Greek word *patrios* meaning “of one’s father”, but *patriot* entered the English language via the French word *patriote*, or “fellow countryman”. Today, the word *patriot* signifies a person who loves his or her country and is ready to boldly support and defend it². If we drill into the concept of love, it is clear this emotion cannot be taught through a structured college course. If UW-Madison were to try to teach students to love their country, it would be nothing short of a state sponsored indoctrination akin to what Uyghur Muslims are experiencing in re-education camps in Xinjiang, China³. Instead, the best UW-Madison can do is remain consistent with the values our founding fathers instilled into the creation of America: individual sovereignty, freedom of speech, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, the right to peaceably assemble, and the right to petition the government. I envision an on-campus environment that cultivates and supports a welcoming, inclusive climate and promotes free and independent thinking. The coursework would include critical thinking methods, writing papers and giving speeches on societal issues, lectures on the effects of media propaganda and narrative pushing, cognitive biases we are susceptible to, and much more. The skills students will gain from this course will help them recognize that the beauty of this country is the freedom to be critical of the

¹Washington, George. “Washington's Farewell Address 1796.” Avalon Project - Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy, 2008, avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp.

²“Patriot Word History.” Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/word-history-patriot.

³Kuo, Lily. “‘If You Enter a Camp, You Never Come out’: inside China's War on Islam.” The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 11 Jan. 2019, www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/11/if-you-enter-a-camp-you-never-come-out-inside-chinas-war-on-islam.

government, the media, and to guard against the impostures of pretended patriotism. It is through this process that students will come to realize that being a patriot is not a binary label; instead it is an inherent characteristic of citizens displaying their love for this country by exercising their constitutional rights, keeping governments, corporations, and media conglomerates in check, and making sure America remains the land of the free.

Part of what makes it difficult to guard against the impostures of pretended patriotism are the cognitive biases that subconsciously affect us as consumers. For example, arguments we come across that we normally dismiss as idiotic can suddenly seem perfectly logical if they lead to conclusions we approve of. Therefore, we end up judging an argument's strength not on how strongly it supports the conclusion, but by how strongly we support the conclusion; this is called Belief Bias. Another phenomenon that is accelerated by digital mediums is the Streetlight Effect. This describes our propensity to get our information from where it is easiest to look, such as the first page of Google search. Cumulatively, this can skew our understanding of subjects and make it easier for bad actors to build narratives through astroturfing⁴ and troll farms⁵. Furthermore, the Woozle Effect describes a situation where an article makes a claim without evidence and gets cited by another article, which is cited by another, and so on, until it appears to a consumer, who unbeknownst to them are under the Streetlight Effect, comes across the 3rd article and believes the claims are supported by true evidence. Beliefs are built on beliefs; thus, a wrong thought can snowball into a misguided world view and the creation of fake news. This cumulative error phenomenon is ever more present in the digital age of networks, making it harder for citizens to fulfill their patriotic duty of guarding against the impostures of pretended patriotism. A class at UW-Madison designed to educate students about these biases and subconscious effects would be an important step towards fostering the fundamental patriotic duty of American citizens.

A class of this nature is urgently needed for the future of the United States of America because if citizens are not aware of these biases or do not possess critical thinking abilities, we are susceptible to pretended patriotism in the form of contronymic⁶, draconian legislation, such as the Patriot Act (2001), Protect America Act (2007), and the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (1978). These pieces of legislation have led to the erosion of our civil liberties and 4th Amendment right to privacy; the extent of which was not known by the public until 2013, when Edward Snowden heroically released data on the mass surveillance programs the NSA and members of the Five Eyes⁷ were carrying out. The Patriot Act was quickly passed in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist act under the guise of national security; however, its passing led to mass surveillance programs like Stellar Wind⁸, and the indexing software behind it, XKeyscore⁹. Additionally, it allowed greater ability for the government to perform record

⁴Astroturfing is the practice of masking the sponsors of a message or organization to make it appear as though it originates from and is supported by grassroots participants.

⁵Troll farms are state-sponsored anonymous Internet political commentators and trolls linked to foreign nations

⁶A contronym is a word with two opposite meanings

⁷An intelligence alliance comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States

⁸Greenwald, Glenn, and Spencer Ackerman. "NSA Collected Americans' Email Records in Bulk for Two Years under Obama." The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 27 June 2013, www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/27/nsa-data-mining-authorized-obama.

⁹Lee, Micah, et al. "A Look at the Inner Workings of NSA's XKEYSCORE." The Intercept, 2 July 2015, www.theintercept.com/2015/07/02/look-under-hood-xkeyscore/

searches, private property searches, “trap and trace” searches, and more¹⁰. Following the Patriot Act, the Protect America Act was passed in 2007 and retroactively immunized all U.S. telecom companies who had been illegally handing over customer phone records to the government. This invasion of private information was uncovered when journalists from the *New York Times* published the telecom companies’ illegal cooperation with the U.S. Government¹¹. This leak allowed the telecom companies to effectively blackmail the government by saying: “we will no longer cooperate with you unless you pass a law that grants us impunity”. Finally, the FAA FISA Amendments Act of 2008 was passed to create loopholes in the law to continue the unlawful and unconstitutional surveillance activities the intelligence agencies were performing.

“When the government’s response to any scandal is *not* to make the activities of the person caught breaking the law comply with the law, but instead to make the activities of the person breaking the law, legal... that’s a problem, and that’s what happened here.” – *Edward Snowden on the FAA FISA Amendments Act*¹²

I want to end with the quote above and the revelations brought forward by Edward Snowden in 2013 because Snowden is the epitome of an American Patriot. Snowden is a hero who was willing to risk it all, to speak out against the pretended patriotism carried out by our overreaching government. He is the definition of a patriot who loves their country and the values that our founding fathers imparted in the U.S. Constitution. It is my opinion, UW-Madison should not teach patriotism, rather we should teach students the skills to become independent and critical thinkers, raise awareness to the subconscious biases that affect us in the digital age, and teach the history of our government’s pretended patriotism. By doing so, we would heed the warning George Washington left us in his cogent Farewell Address.

¹⁰“Surveillance Under the USA/PATRIOT Act.” *American Civil Liberties Union*, www.aclu.org/other/surveillance-under-usapatriot-act.

¹¹Risen, James, and Eric Lichtblau. “Bush Lets U.S. Spy on Callers Without Courts.” *The New York Times*, *The New York Times*, 16 Dec. 2005, www.nytimes.com/2005/12/16/politics/bush-lets-us-spy-on-callers-without-courts.html?_r=0.

¹²“Joe Rogan Experience #1368 – Edward Snowden”, 01:18:31