



**Richard Sennett**

## A nation's narrative

*Both the virtues and dangers of patriotism depend on how the story is told*

Richard Sennett looks at patriotic and critical responses to the Vietnam war to shed light on current American patriotism.

Dr Johnson's declaration that patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel in a way cheapens one of the most explosive of human sentiments. The declaration supposes that a cunning president or prime minister could manipulate love of country to achieve his or her own selfish ends. Or again, that the masses are so ignorant, such blind believers, that all the scoundrel need do is wave the flag, speak of blood and soil, and the patriotic sheep will follow where he wills.

If only patriotism were so simple. Patriotic sentiment is a compound of many elements, and love of country is as complex and as hesitant as any other kind of love. It creates a narrative of collective life. It tells a story of what binds disparate people together, and both the virtues and dangers of patriotism depend on how the story is told. That is to say, it's not merely a representation of a nation or a particular culture, it's a representation that is achieved through narrative. The destructive elements of patriotism come in imagining that there's a dénouement, a cathartic climax to the story of the people or a culture – that is, a moment when a decisive act will finally fulfil their destiny. And the danger history shows us is that this narrative dénouement too often involves denying or destroying another people in order to experience catharsis.

The narratives of patriotism that are destructive, the kinds of dénouement that both aggress against others and seem to fulfil something in this narrative, hold up, in particular, a strong promise to human groups who are internally divided or disorientated by forces beyond their control. For them, patriotism is the last refuge of the confused.

The notion that somehow the ongoing, shared history of dissonance might be resolved by a cathartic destructive act seems to me a real danger in patriotic experience, and marks the modern social experience of patriotism today.

A great patriotic crisis of my own youth arose among people like myself who resisted the American war in Vietnam, in the 1960s and the 1970s. Then, as now, the US was not the well-oiled internal machine that foreigners often imagine. Then, the country was in the midst of a racial explosion, the boom after World War II had come to a temporary halt, and the white working classes were beginning to suffer. American affluence then, as now, was affluence for an elite.

When America decisively entered Vietnam, in the mid-1960s, our country did have a long-standing patriotic narrative: America appeared in the guise of a rescuer, saving foreigners from destroying each other. That patriotic narrative had shaped fighting in the two world wars, and justified the enormous costs of pursuing the Cold War. Vietnam looked to be just one more chapter in this established story. When soldiers such as the young Colin Powell entered Vietnam, they quickly saw that this story of rescue did not apply. The enemy turned out to be a resolute, committed people. The allies for whom the troops were fighting turned out to be a corrupt, locally unloved bureaucracy, and American strategy itself proved unable to deliver on the promise of rescue.

This patriotic narrative, frustrated by a foreign adventure, now swerved. It swerved against those at home who protested against the war. The American troops were drawn mostly from the ranks of poor blacks and poor Southern whites. Middle-class young men in universities largely avoided military service. The middle-class young, however, were the strongest anti-war voices. They were, in principle, the friends, the spokesmen for troops suffering abroad. But the practice of patriotism proved different.

We know from the researches of people such as Robert Jay Lifton and Robert Howard, among many others, that the troops felt themselves besieged on two fronts: locally on the ground by the Vietnamese and symbolically at home by these protesting friends. The Vietnamese were considered to be patriotic enemies, and the protestors protesting against the situation in which the troops were placed were accused of being unpatriotic. As a decisive victory on the ground receded, a consuming victory against enemies at home became ever more vivid as a desire. In 1968, Howard recounts, at the height of the anti-war protests, thousands of American troops wore the sign on their helmets: "America – Love it or Leave it."

The sense of betrayal from within stiffened a kind of resolve, a kind of "fantasy", as Lifton puts it. The government should do something decisive to shut up these enemies within, in order to validate the patriotic project. And in the States the public's desire that politicians do something decisive to quell internal disorder and protest brought into power the right-wing Richard Nixon. I recount this history in part because it illuminates the complex ingredients of patriotic sentiment. These American troops and the working classes at home were not scoundrels. They were deeply confused. Within the shell of war against an internal enemy, these people imagined another war occurring in their own society, waged against those traitors who were posing as friends. The consuming act in this internal struggle to validate the patriotic narrative would be to silence dissent.

I recall this past also because it may help you in understanding something of the dynamics of American society today. The language spoken in Washington now is still this classical language of rescue, of redemption, of good triumphing over evil, and as in the past the scenario for this narrative, the strategic scenario, is lacking in clarity or in purpose. But consider the domestic condition of the American superpower. Here is a country even more internally fragmented and disjointed than it was 40 years ago. Confused, of course, and much angered now by terrorist attacks on it. A country whose internal divisions of class have grown greater and whose racial divisions and ethnic conflicts have not healed. Unlike Britain – and it's something I'm struck by as a point of Anglo-European misunderstanding – the American left lacks the traditional role of a loyal opposition. And I've come to feel that some elements of the American left have learned too well the lesson that I sketched from

Vietnam. They've silenced themselves, fearing that opposition will prove them to be not good Americans. That's how this syndrome gets internalised.

Thinking in stories is, of course, a basic element in interpreting the everyday world as well as the world of art. And narratives in the everyday world do not, any more than narratives in art, invariably follow a single set of rules. As in fiction, shared histories in everyday life need not end in cathartic acts that are repressive or destructive. And no longer, I think, need patriotism follow a single course. If the strategic defects of current American strategy are as great as those of the Vietnam War – and I think they are – then the challenge to our people, that is to the American people, will lie in avoiding what happened in Vietnam, avoiding the search for a narrative catharsis, when we turn to one another to find a resolution, a solution, a defining moment.

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