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PATRIOT GAMES² **The (not so very) strange case of David Gibbs**

American national identity has been significantly influenced by the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 and their repercussions. In times of crises, when the very survival of a nation may be threatened, it is only natural for the nation in question to react by closing its ranks and manifesting an increased patriotism quotient. Often enough, the said patriotism boils down to mere token gestures, the purpose of which is twofold: to manifest one's belonging to the given nation and contribute to the spirit of national unity. This paper analyzes such manifestations of patriotism drawing parallels with events and manifestations of national unity in the author's own country.

Key words: national identity, patriotism, patriot games, campus jihad

No account of American national identity at the beginning of the third millennium can afford to disregard the impact of 9/11 on what it feels like to be an American these days or, indeed, the global reverberations of the Al-Qaida strikes carried out that day. Immediate reactions to the event included predictions that this would prove to be a Pearl Harbor-type of moment, giving rise to the spirit of solidarity and patriotism well remembered from the days of World War Two. The editor of *Vanity Fair* even went so far as to declare that irony was now dead (When 2010: 296).

This is where the present author draws the line. I do not propose to relinquish irony, feeling that it can help shed more light even on the grimmest of phenomena, but when I do make recourse to it on occasion, it will not be merely for the sake of being facetious. The very title of this paper, incidentally, is a mildly facetious reference to the eponymous movie, starring Harrison Ford, which, in the words of the *New York Times* reviewer Janet Maslin, pits "the sanctity of the American family" and "the remarkable ability of the C.I.A. to influence international events with the help of highest-tech surveillance gimmickry" against "the forces of anarchy and evil" in the guise of Irish terrorists, presumably – "in the absence of Cold War villains" (Maslin 1992). In the context of this paper, however, the phrase "patriot games" will refer to

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ostentatious displays of patriotism, especially characteristic of times of crises. Indeed, at moments when the very core of a nation may be at stake, it is only too natural for the nation in question to react by closing its ranks and exhibiting an increased degree of patriotism. Its manifestations have proved rather diverse, and while many can be viewed as perfectly understandable under the circumstances, some might give cause for concern or appear somewhat baffling.

Whether it was really necessary to devise such a complicated-sounding designation for a law as the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act merely for the purpose of having the opportunity to refer to it by the acronym PATRIOT ACT has been a matter of some debate. Closely related to this, Professor Gary Weaver of American University, Washington D.C., even sees the word “homeland”, used to designate the newly established federal security agency as very “non-American” in the context of the power and authority of the federal government. He points out that, while the British do have a “*Home Office*” and a “*Home Secretary*”, it is the family and local community that have traditionally provided safety and security for the American people in the United States. The National Guard, for example, is a military force controlled by the state, not the federal government (cf. Weaver 2007). While this may sound un-American to some ears, it is at least not as ludicrous as suspending the use of the term “French fries” and insisting that it be changed to “freedom fries” after the French Government proved less than enthusiastic to give its support to the war in Iraq, surely a somewhat misguided show of patriotism.

Be that as it may, we should bear in mind that, often enough, such manifestations of patriotism boil down to mere token gestures, the purpose of which is at least twofold: to manifest/confirm one’s belonging to the given nation and, in doing so, contribute to the much-needed spirit of national unity. There are times, though, when this can take on decidedly sinister-looking forms, and it is one such case that is of interest to us in this context.

According to the Democracy Now news program, as broadcast in September 2004 (Anon. 2004), a series of ads were run in student newspapers across the country charging that universities were dominated by liberal or left-wing professors. Some of the ads, paid for by well-funded groups like Students for Academic Freedom and the Independent Women’s Forum, encouraged students to report any so-called anti-American statements made by professors, which is apparently what happened to David Gibbs, an Associate Professor of History and Sociology at the University of Arizona, allegedly reported to the FBI for being “an anti-American communist who hates America” (Anon. 2004).

Before we ask ourselves whether this is an indication of McCarthyism rearing its head after a hiatus of several decades and whether the next likely step will be the reinstatement of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, or some equally ominous development, it is reassuring to know that, at least

in his own words, Professor Gibbs was “not particularly losing sleep over the prospect of an 18-year-old calling the FBI about my politics” (Anon. 2004).

What actually happened was that, following Professor Gibbs’s spring course entitled “What is Politics?”, a student wrote the following on an anonymous evaluation form: “I believe that the university should check into David Gibbs. He is an anti-American communist who hates America and is trying to brainwash young people into thinking America sucks. He needs to go and live in a Third World country to appreciate what he has here. Have him investigated by the FBI. FBI has been contacted” (Anon. 2004).

The academic course in question focuses on propaganda and deception, and within its framework Professor Gibbs tends to (in his own words again) “emphasize incidents of the government lying and things like that” (Anon. 2004). As we know only too well, there is no government on this earth that, at one time or another, has not been creative with the truth, so to speak, but it is not difficult to imagine what sort of an effect this approach may have had on the more patriotically-minded of his students at a moment when heightened patriotism and calls to patriotic duty were virtually the order of the day. But in any case, on the evidence of the above, there is no way of verifying whether the FBI actually was contacted. The Bureau, for all we know, has maintained a dignified silence, and the anonymous author of the evaluation form quoted above has been less than forthcoming when it came to substantiating his or her views in public. Indeed, this incident would amount to no more than an amusing footnote were it not for the fact that it was indicative of a broader national trend, namely, as Gibbs pointed out in the same interview, “conservative activist groups with lots of money and connections to the Republican Party trying to encourage and even to some extent orchestrate students and local conservative groups like those at the University of Arizona to go and basically harass faculty if they don’t like their politics” (Anon. 2004).

During the semester when Professor Gibbs taught this much-maligned course, the Independent Women’s Forum, a conservative activist group, placed an advertisement into a local student newspaper which basically argued that there was a kind of left-wing domination of the universities, which students should oppose. The way Gibbs read it, there was a strong implication that they should monitor their professors and report on them. The ad, published in the *University of Arizona Wildcat* – and student papers across the country, as it turned out, was a full-page affair that went: “Top ten things your professors do to skew you. They push their political views, liberal opinions dominate, they don’t present both sides of the debate, conservative viewpoints practically non-existent. Classrooms are for learning, not brainwashing. They force you to check your intellectual honesty at the door. They make you uncomfortable if you disagree. Grading should be based on facts not opinion. Education? More like indoctrination” (Anon. 2004).

Somewhat disturbingly, during the summer of that year, another student on a weblog said he had taken Gibbs’s class, expressed his disapproval of Gibbs’s politics and suggested that students should stay away from his class, or

better still – should drop by and try to disrupt it. Apparently there were other instances of that, which had not happened to Gibbs before.

On the one hand, this was a reflection of a trend that the independent analyst Bill Berkowitz described as a veritable “campus jihad”, including placing “WANTED” posters with a headshot of Professor Abel Alves, of Ball State University at Muncie, Indiana, and death threats and hate mail addressed to a political science Professor (female, unnamed) at Metropolitan State College of Denver, Colorado, in the wake of a debate conducted in that state over an Academic Bill of Rights (cf. Berkowitz 2004).

While this aspect of the issue offers occasionally fascinating insight into the motives and methods of campaigners arguing in favor of “restor[ing] sanity to [American] colleges and universities” (Berkowitz 2004) and keeping an eye of liberal and left-wing lecturers, as evidenced by the Berkowitz article quoted above, what seems to be of greater interest in this context is the mindset of their followers who are quite prepared to send death threats to their professors or report them to the FBI at the very least.

Demands for grading based on facts, not opinion, may indeed sound perfectly reasonable to students. What such reasoning fails to take into account is that, once you possess facts, the question remains what to do with them, how to organize them, structure them, in the final analysis – how to interpret them. That is what Professor Gibbs has been trying to teach his students – with varying degrees of success, it would appear: to strive for an unbiased (as much as humanly possible, of course) interpretation of facts at our disposal. This is precisely what he did, in an exemplary academic fashion, in his latest book (Gibbs 2004), dealing with the 1999 NATO bombing campaign against Yugoslavia (called the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia at the time, comprising Serbia and Montenegro). The fact that his findings in this book challenge the widely held (not to mention – official) view that Western interventions on the territory of the former Yugoslavia alleviated the humanitarian emergency and greatly improved the human rights situation would, no doubt, incur the wrath of a number of those who harbor intensely patriotic feelings about the U.S. Leaving aside the point that being critical of one’s own government does not necessarily make one any less patriotic than those who give it their unquestioning support, it is worth pointing out that in times of crisis, such as the one precipitated by 9/11 – or the NATO bombing campaign, for that matter – when the very survival of a nation appears to hang in the balance, most people need something simple and reassuring, not sophisticated academic analyses that seem to raise more questions than they answer.

It is at such moments in history that decidedly unsophisticated manifestations of patriotism gain in importance. It is all the more important to show one’s allegiance to the patriotic majority because at such times one becomes very acutely aware of the fact that safety is to be found in numbers. Hence the need to prove one’s high patriotism quotient by putting a “WANTED”-type poster of a suspiciously liberal-minded professor on the campus notice board, giving one’s peers the opportunity to see that one has made the right choice.

And if it can be done from the position of safety afforded by an anonymous evaluation form – while making one’s point loud and clear and sending a “We’re watching you” type of message – so much the better.

For the sake of variety, let me provide another example from the other side of the Atlantic: one of the more amusing forms of manifesting patriotism in Serbia during the NATO bombing campaign was what might provisionally be called “target practice”. At the height of the campaign, large groups of Belgraders would gather in a public place – the most media-newsworthy ones were the city’s bridges – and pose for the cameras prominently displaying posters featuring the image of a target on their chests (some even had T-shirts specially printed for the occasion), often accompanied by the caption “SHOOT ME, I’M A TARGET” or words to that effect. Many well-known public figures participated in this game of patriotic showmanship, but typically enough, the moment TV crews packed up their cameras and left the scene, the self-proclaimed “TARGETS” would follow suit, well before the arrival of NATO bombers.

To any discerning observer, such ostentatious displays of patriotism could hardly be a dependable, let alone authentic representation of the national spirit and identity of any nation, American and Serbian alike. As history has shown time and time again, such judgments should not be made in the heat of the moment, when passions run high. A more sober approach is required, precisely of the sort applied by Professor Gibbs in his essayistic work and in his teaching practice. And such an approach to this issue would reveal that what happened to Professor David Gibbs was nothing out of the ordinary.

During times of threat, people tend to think differently and to perceive the world around them differently from the way they normally do when they are secure and unthreatened. As Gary Weaver points out, nothing creates a better sense of “we” than to have a good “they” out in the world, especially when “they” seem to be threatening us. In the majority of countries of this world, unanimity and national resolve would be expected of its populace during a major crisis threatening the nation (Weaver 2007).

On balance, there are reasons to believe that the treatment some members of the academia in the U.S. suffered in the wake of 9/11 was due to a temporary period of stress and fear that Americans went through before, to quote Professor Weaver again, returning to the normalcy of the past, including the traditional American virtues of tolerance for various viewpoints, democratic debate and respect and protection of individual rights and liberties.³

3 As pointed out by Weaver, in the wake of 9/11, there were, by and large, no racist overreactions towards Arabs or Muslims comparable to those that occurred during World War II, when over 120,000 Japanese Americans were transported to internment camps in California. While incidents did occur when Americans who were perceived as Arab or Muslim were harassed, attacked or even arrested and accused of being terrorists, and some Islamic mosques and schools did get vandalized, these incidents were relatively few in number. Moreover, immediately after the attacks of 9/11, President Bush made a point of visiting the Islamic Center in Washington and addressing the nation to assure Americans that this was not a war against Islam or Arabs (Weaver 2007).

And if personal experience is anything to go by, let me conclude by pointing out that, while attending the Multinational Institute of American Studies at New York University in the summer of 2008, I was in a position to observe, during a number of panel discussions on various issues in the context of contemporary U.S., that a single panelist (out of around forty who participated in these discussions) declared himself to be in favor of U.S. military engagement in Iraq. Even though it might be argued that the sample under observation was somewhat narrow, consisting mostly of members of the academia, this did appear to be indicative of a healthily critical attitude towards the Government and a far cry from the patriotic games that were almost *de rigeur* a mere four years before.

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ПАТРИОТСКЕ ИГРЕ
(Не особито) необични случај Дејвида Гибса

Резиме

На почетку трећег миленијума наше ере, у који су Сједињене Америчке Државе ушле као наизглед недодирљива светска суперсила, америчком националном идентитету нанет је тежак ударац терористичким нападима извршеним 11. септембра 2001. године. У тренуцима великих криза, када може бити угрожен и сам опстанак неке нације, сасвим је природно да та нација збије редове и манифестује патриотизам у веома наглашеном виду. Такве манифестације патриотизма често се свде на пуке гестове чија је сврха у најмању руку двострука: њима се исказује/потврђује припадност сопственој нацији, чиме се доприноси консолидовању духа националног јединства. Понекад, међутим, овакво пренаглашено исказивање патриотизма, које се у овом раду дефинише као „патриотске игре“, може деловати уистину злокобно: према извештају америчког ТВ канала *Democracy Now*, емитованом септембра 2004. године, низом огласа које су објавиле финансијски добростојеће патриотски настројене организације као што су „Студенти за академску слободу“ и „Независни женски форум“, студенти су подстицани да надлежним органима пријављују било какве исказе својих професора који се могу окарактерисати као *антиамерички*. Тако нешто је, како изгледа, задесило Дејвида Гибса, професора историје и социологије на Универзитету Аризоне, који је наводно пријављен Федералном истражном бироу као „антиамерички настројени комуниста који мрзи Америку“. У овом раду анализира се феномен оваквог својеврсног „универзитетског цихада“ повлачењем паралела са догађањима и видовима манифестовања патриотизма у кризним периодима у ауторовој сопственој земљи за време бомбардовања од стране снага НАТО-а 1999. године.

Кључне речи: национални идентитет, патриотизам, патриотске игре, универзитетски цихад

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