YANKEE DOODLE DONNA?: THE GENDERING OF PATRIOTISM IN FILMS FROM THE CIVIL WAR TO THE COLD WAR

SUSAN M. KOBEK
Communicated by: Dr. Jonathan Nashel
Department of History

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Hollywood has portrayed patriotism in films from the Civil War to the Cold War. It analyzes how one's patriotism, depending on one's gender, was to be displayed. It investigates the question of whether the ideals of patriotism change from generation to generation and, if so, how the manner in which men and women express this ideal becomes altered as the screen images take their audiences from the deep south of ante-bellum America to the docks of New Jersey in the 1950s. This transition is examined in the following films: *Gone with the Wind*, *The General*, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, *On the Waterfront*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *Dr. Strangelove*. Analysis of these films shows that views of what it means to be patriotic have changed over time and have differed for women and men.

The relationship between patriotism and gender in Hollywood films shows both to be social constructs of American culture. This means that both patriotism and gender are a reflection of the social values and morals that have been adopted by the majority of people in a society at a particular time in history. Evidence of this relationship becomes apparent when several movies dealing with the Civil War to the Cold War, a period of approximately one hundred years, are reviewed. These films deal mainly with the threats of war, whether it be at home, abroad, or in the minds of some American citizens.

This paper examines the ways in which patriotic issues are dealt with over the course of several decades and analyzes how one's patriotism, depending on one's gender, was to be displayed. Do the ideals of patriotism change from generation to generation and, if so, does the manner in which men and women express theses ideals become altered as the screen images take their audiences from the deep south of ante-bellum America to the docks of New Jersey in the 1950s? This transition is examined using the following films as a guide: *Gone with the Wind*, *The General*, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, *On the Waterfront*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *Dr. Strangelove*. As varied as these films are – from Civil War dramas to "B" science-fiction films – they all deal with the nature of patriotism and the proper gender roles for women and men.

As far back as the silent film era, the ideals of what it means to be a good American have found their way to the silver screen. As Elmer Davis, the Director of the Office of War Information once noted: "The easiest way to inject a propaganda idea into most people's minds is to let it go in through the medium of an entertainment picture when they do not realize that they are being propagandized" (Koppes & Black 157). The propaganda of patriotism simultaneously reinforces its definition and the relationship it has to gender at a particular point in history. In the darkness of the movie theater, men and women, boys and girls, are being entertained and socially influenced in between handfuls of buttered popcorn and Junior Mints.

In the 1927 film *The General*, Johnny Gray, the Southern train engineer, played by the talented and respected actor/director Buster Keaton, was turned down for military service because the Confederate Army needed him as a civilian engineer. This Civil War classic not only dealt with the buffoonery of war but also the issues of masculinity. Without the trappings of an official uniform, our hero was humiliated and rejected. There was a stigma of weakness attached to this humiliation.

Furthermore, getting the uniform meant getting the girl and therein lies the first example of a gender distinction in patriotism. Not only was Johnny rebuked by his male friends, but he was also ignored and overlooked by the women standing around the enlistment area. Women wanted the man in the uniform because men who signed up for the military were good Americans and being with a man in a uniform made a woman a good American because it showed her support for her country. This movie was an effort to depolarize people's feelings about the Civil War with an emphasis on the success of the average guy fighting the bully. What better way to unify the country after WWI than to demonstrate how even the underdog could get the girl and win the battle? This film was an attempt to recapture the nationalism that had been lost because of the nation's failure to emerge truly victorious from WWI, leaving the country divided, much like it had been after the Civil War.

The post-war Reconstruction effort had not come without a struggle (Tindall & Shi 698-701). President Lincoln had proclaimed an amnesty for all the rebel states to join the union without retribution; and, still, Reconstruction had taken almost ten years (from 1867 to 1877). The South had been devastated physically and, economically, the country had been divided. What made this film unusual, given the horrors of the war, was that *The General* made fun of both sides of the Civil War. Humor was used to lessen the tension that continued to exist between the white audiences of the North and South. This film sent the message that Americans were all brothers and sisters and should unite as a nation. This joining together was the sign of a good American in 1927, but the message of patriotism differed from women to men. Men would fight; mothers would give up their children; and women would date men in uniform.

This notion of unity continued to be evident in Hollywood's presentation of American history. In 1939, America had come through WWI and was in the midst of the Great Depression; it was then that Margaret Mitchell's film *Gone With the Wind* was released. The film was set during the Civil War, when all patriotic men took up the colors of either the North or South and fought for the honor of their land and their ladies. Clark Gable's Rhett Butler, like many men, joined the Rebel cause and rode off to war. Vivian Leigh's Scarlett O'Hara discarded the typical southern belle image, taking responsibility for the upkeep of the plantation. Exhibiting a fiery will, she refused to let the tragedy of the Civil War discourage her from successfully keeping her land for her family. The roles depicted by Rhett and Scarlett were common during the period in history when this film was released. Men had put on their uniforms and gone off to fight in Europe during World War I. Women had stayed the course, keeping the home fires burning, and accepting additional family responsibilities. In other words, gender roles were rigidly enforced.

Scarlett's character displayed the inner strength typically attributed to women and also the not-so-typical physical strength generally associated with males. In fact, in the movie Scarlett killed a Union soldier who was about to assault her and her home. While the meaning of patriotism for men and women remained unaltered in the minds of most Americans, Scarlett's silver-screen transformation would soon become a reality to the women of World War II who themselves would be transformed into "Rosie the Riveters."[1] Young women in 1941 would be asked to shed their gender-typical roles by adopting the working roles of the men who would be leaving for Europe and Asia. These women not only answered their country's call, but did so, much like Scarlett, with a zeal and sense of duty equal to any fighting soldier.

The release of *Yankee Doodle Dandy* and America's involvement in World War II brought a singing and dancing style of patriotism into the theaters in 1942. As the country became immersed in the activities of war, the economy began to show the strains of this costly action. No longer was America a country without job opportunities; it had become a society that could not meet the needs of production caused by the war. As the historians G.B. Tindall and D.E. Shi note, the "economic problem was no longer finding a job but finding workers for the booming shipyards, aircraft factories and gunpowder mills" (1180). As women answered the call and took over positions once held by men, they participated in a kind of working patriotism that they had not been asked to engage in until now.

George Cohan, the star of *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (played by James Cagney), became the ideal American patriot. Using the flag as a backdrop in one of its most famous dance scenes, a parade of patriotic symbols flashes past the audience. Shown are people of all races and ages, people in various jobs and the children of the future. As President Roosevelt told the star, "A man may give his life to his country in many different ways." Men and women were also being asked to give their lives to their country either by fighting, working in non-traditional positions, growing a Victory garden or accepting the rationing of food supplies. For example, women were building airplanes and bombs; families were growing their own food to deal with the shortages caused by the war; and certain foods were only distributed in small quantities (Tindall & Shi).

Many of the traditional roles usually assumed by women in times of war had been reinvented during World War II. Instead of simply staying home and caring for their families while their husbands were off fighting, women now moved into the workplace to directly assist with the war effort. There was a spirit of camaraderie and equality being shown to American women that was appreciated nationally. Unfortunately, it was a short-lived appreciation, for the war ended and most women were pushed back into their domestic roles (*The Life and Times*).

For example, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) demonstrated the clerical positions women held during the war years. Women

[1] Rosie the Riveter was the name given to women who were called to work in factories during WWII. See *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*.

worked in recruiting offices, signed young men up for service, and informed mothers that their sons were missing or dead. This film suggested that there was a dual role for women to play in the war effort. The first was to participate in the recruitment of young men (including their own sons) and the second was the actual sacrifice of their sons' lives for the good of the country, despite the pain this might bring. Fathers, on the other hand, were expected simply to feel proud of their sons and to remain stoic in the face of any loss, thus maintaining a properly masculine image.

The next movie analyzed, *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), addressed another aspect of patriotism for both men and women. This movie focused on the lives of three veterans of WWII and their struggle to integrate themselves back into society and into their personal lives. The film looked at the value placed on returning veterans. Fred Derry, played by Dana Andrews, served as an officer during the war. Once the manager of the local drug store, he returned to a soda jerk position and a wife who had been philandering while he was gone. Homer Parrish, played by Harold Russell, lost his hands in an explosion. He returned to a family that chose to maintain an awkward silence about their son's loss, leaving the audience to wonder whether his girlfriend would stay or leave him.

In both of these scenarios, the patriotic gesture for women was to be faithful to their men. When the other characters in the film found out about Fred's wife's infidelity, their reaction was clearly negative. This called attention to the issue of monogamy, which was associated with patriotism for women but not necessarily for men. Martin A. Jackson, an historian of film who has published on the relationship between film and its portrayals of American history, writes, "[t]he overseas sex life of the GI was a disturbing matter to many wives and mothers... [M]agazines were full of stories about the wild misconduct of sons... in foreign lands" (158). Thus, the issue of marriage was a delicate topic after the war. Patriotism was being defined in two different ways, creating a double standard.

Men who philandered on their wives or girlfriends were not considered unpatriotic, unlike women who participated in the same activities. For example, *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956) had Tom Rath (Gregory Peck) fathering a child during the war and keeping his extramarital activities a secret from his wife until the child was discovered. His wife, though hurt and distraught, stayed with her husband and even joined with him in an effort to provide for his illegitimate child. She exhibited her womanly duty by accepting the situation and honoring her marriage, even though her husband had chosen to ignore his vows to her. What is seen here is, again, the double standard for duty to one's country and one's marriage.

In contrast to this scenario, in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, Homer's girlfriend was expected to stay with him despite his disability; she was to honor the sacrifice he made for his country. She did stay with him and was viewed as fulfilling her duty to him, just as he fulfilled his duty to the country. Homer's mother was cautious and caring toward her son, while his father was business-like and detached from his son's situation. The gendering of patriotism also appeared in the sympathy and nurturing that was displayed by women toward veterans. Men, on the other hand, exhibited bouts of embarrassment and awkwardness, but kept their macho image by spewing opinions about what should have been done overseas, as if they knew better than those who had actually been there.

As America moved into the Cold War, a change within society was seen with regard to the definition of patriotism. Once united to fight the threat of communism abroad, the country became divided, turning neighbor against neighbor. With the creation of the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1938, commonly known as the McCarthy hearings, people began to look for the enemy within American society. This committee focused on Americans who were believed to be secretly associated with the Communist Party. By 1947, HUAC had become the primary policing agency for hunting down and labeling possible communist supporters. Patriotism had become equated with being anti-communist, thereby redefining the term and the methods needed to preserve the country from its enemies.

The power of this new definition can be seen in *On the Waterfront* (1954), which addressed patriotism from the docks of a New Jersey harbor at a time when corruption was very much alive within labor unions. Starring Marlon Brando as Terry Malloy, this film used the star power of its lead character to defend the actions of its director, Elia Kazan. It is likely that the famous line from this movie, "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do," was intended to justify Kazan's actions. He had implicated his peers by reporting them to the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Although the men in this movie were members of a union, there was no sense of camaraderie amongst the laborers. The mob bosses managed, through their strong-arm tactics, to turn these men against each other, breaking the sense of power generally held by a collective. The union became fractured, much like society was becoming fractured because of the fear and the stigma associated with communism. Just as the men turned against each other in this film in order to protect their jobs, American people turned against each other to avoid falling under the blanket of communist suspicion.

Patriotism was being defined in this film as protecting the country from the threat of communism. People met their patriotic duty by coming forward to express this fear. To stay silent was to fold under the pressure of the union bosses, or one's peers (as in Hollywood), which was considered harmful to society. From this perspective, silence allowed the "Red Menace" to fester in this culture. Coming forward and "ratting" on one's neighbor was considered to be doing the right thing, the patriotic thing. However, in doing so, a person also risked being called a "stoolie" and often was subjected to the hate and humiliation of his peers. This had, in fact, been the fate of Kazan, who had testified at the McCarthy hearings

and had been shunned by his associates.

In the film, Eva Marie Saint, Marlon Brando's girlfriend, told him that America must believe it can change the way things are being done. Brando stood up to the union bosses and was brutally beaten for his efforts to initiate change. *On the Waterfront* invoked a message of individual consciousness that was separate from the collective nature that patriotism had previously held for the United States. Men and women shared this definition of patriotism and both displayed the growing sense of individualism that occupied the country at this time.

Unfortunately, this theme of a gendering-neutral definition of patriotism did not continue in the film industry, as evidenced by two later films that dealt with the Cold War and the atomic bomb threat. In *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), an alien landed and delivered the message that the Earth would be destroyed unless people learned to live peacefully (instead of creating nuclear bombs). His civilization would destroy Earth because it posed a threat to the universe. *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) provided a comedic and satirical look at how government and military officials viewed the world. The movie detailed attempts to stop a nuclear holocaust from occurring once it was set in motion by an insane general.

Both of these movies reminded Americans that men ran the world and were clearly responsible for the fate and salvation of the planet. Deeply ensconced in these two films is the recognition that men, not women, dominate the world. This is demonstrated in both films by the lack of any female influences on the outcome of the situation. *The Day* used a woman to relay a vital message to the space robot, but she was depicted as weak and worrisome. As such, Helen Benson, portrayed by Patricia Neal, represented the stereotypical image of women in the fifties. Thirteen years later, *Dr. Strangelove* used the image of an oversexed General and his bikini-clad secretary to depict the role of women in matters of national security. Her character was so unaware of what was going on that she called him during the important meeting in the War Room to find out when he would return to her.

By 1963, with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, it would become clear that women, in various aspects of society, were gaining a new consciousness. Friedan engaged women in a new dialogue of feminism, challenging them to rethink their choices and to identify their needs from a political perspective, not from a traditional social one. *Dr. Strangelove* satirically approached this idea when the suggestion was made by Dr. Strangelove himself about how people would be chosen to live in the mines to rebuild the world. Women would be chosen for their youth and sexual characteristics. The ratio would be ten women to one man and their duty would be to repopulate the world. At a time when women were insisting on equal treatment and social change, this movie was satirically pointing out that the only true purpose of women's existence was having babies and fulfilling the needs of the male population. The implication was that any woman would be proud to do her civic duty and submit to the sexual needs of her country.

The male characters in this dark comedy were obsessed with power and demonstrated signs of paranoia with regard to security and personal relationships. With the use of an obvious phallic symbol, the audience was shown the relationship between the war heads and bombs that men control and their own sexual prowess. As Major "King" Kong (Slim Pickens) took a final ride on a huge bomb into oblivion, he met both his sexual desires and his need to destroy with one action.

Of interest here is that women's relationship to patriotism varies throughout all these movies. Earlier pictures gave the audience an opportunity to see women rise in defense of their country, as in Scarlett's transformation and the images of women working in factories in WW II. Overall, however, gender displays in these early presentations were rather traditional, with men fighting the wars and women nurturing the wounded or sacrificing their sons. There was always a sense of secondary citizenship for women, who must wait for their men, accepting them gladly no matter how much they were damaged or what moral values or vows they may have transgressed. Yet, it was during the Cold War period that women were blatantly reduced to non-existent characters, shown to be merely messengers or sexual objects who made little contribution to social issues.

Men consistently hold the role of dominance in these movies, usually physically asserting their will on others and expecting consideration and privilege from women and society in general. This suggests that patriotism finds its source in the conflicts and situations created by men. Through the orchestrations of war, and even the fear of a potential predator, the actions of men manage to create an environment that requires the need to exhibit patriotic gestures.

When the distribution of power within the context of patriotism is viewed, gendering clearly exists. Men hold the power and women do not. War is waged to defend women; it is not caused by them. As history shows, conflicts are acted upon and controlled by men with little or no influence by women. This is most obvious in *Dr. Strangelove*; there is not a single woman in the War Room. As the leaders of the country, men are able to enhance or dissipate patriotism by the sheer power they command. This is evidenced in *Yankee Doodle Dandy* when President Roosevelt tells Cohan how a man can give his life to his country in many ways, thus inspiring patriotism in a variety of forms. These movies were directed, written and produced by men; nontheless, they are a reflection of the roles of both men and women at a certain point in history. While innocent enough to the average moviegoer, one could argue that the images and positions of women are skewed by the dominance of the male perspective. The gendering of patriotism that exists in these films shows the viewer the major differences that our society prescribes for women and men and how patriotism is valued differently for each. It reinforces the social construction of gender and cements these ideas in the minds of the audience, all under the

guise of entertainment.

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SUSAN M. KOBEK graduated in May 2001 with a Bachelor's degree in General Studies. She has completed minors in Women's Studies and Sociology. This paper was written for H225, *American History Through Film*. Writing this paper provided her with the opportunity to combine her interest in Women's Studies with the requirements for the final course paper. This led her to examine the gendering of patriotism in American films.