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Patriotism In Black And White

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Recommended Citation

Richard M. Valelly , '75. (2003). "Patriotism In Black And White". *American Prospect*. Volume 14, Issue 1. 37-40.

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Books in Review

 prospect.org/features/books-review-d10

By Richard Valelly

December 20, 2002



Jefferson's Pillow: The Founding Fathers and the Dilemma of Black Patriotism

By Roger Wilkins. Beacon Press, 176 pages, \$14.00

Patriot Fires: Forging a New American Nationalism in the Civil War North

By Melinda Lawson. University Press of Kansas, 272 pages, \$29.95

The New White Nationalism in America: Its Challenge to Integration

By Carol M. Swain. Cambridge University Press, 416 pages, \$30.00

Since September 11, patriotism has been on permanent exhibit in the United States. But what exactly is our patriotism about? The dominant public form celebrates America's ideals of liberty, equality and the pursuit of happiness and holds those ideals open to all who want to embrace them. Alongside that civic, universalist tradition, however, there has always been a more exclusive kind of racial nationalism that defines true Americans as white or as belonging only to certain ethnic and religious groups.

When surges of patriotism have swept the country, the overwhelming majority of Americans have fully identified with the nation. But those bursts have carried a mixed, at times threatening, message for many others. In a bitter irony, African-American men who proudly wore the uniform in Europe or the Pacific found their homeland unwelcoming, even hostile, upon their return in 1945. German Americans during World War I, Japanese Americans during World War II and Arab Americans lately have all found their membership in America abruptly withdrawn or placed on probation. That side of our history has left a legacy of ambivalence about patriotic symbols and sentiments for groups denied full acceptance and

for others of us who worry about what some of our fellow citizens may be saying when they start flying flags in front of their houses, putting flag decals on their cars and loudly proclaiming their Americanism.

These three books take up the theme of patriotism and its relationship to race, going back to America's great formative moments at the nation's founding and the Civil War. In *Jefferson's Pillow*, historian Roger Wilkins has written a book that is part memoir, part intellectual history, exploring the roots of his own passion for America and the possibilities of crafting a multicultural patriotic identity. Patriotism, he argues, does not come in one hue or strand but in many, and the challenge of black Americans, as of others, is to define a patriotism that fits their experience. The book takes its title from Thomas Jefferson's statement that his earliest memory was of being carried on a pillow by a slave -- a metaphor for Wilkins of the founders' intimate dependence on blacks.

Wilkins asks, in effect, what do you do if you are African American yet you strongly suspect that the Declaration of Independence did not include black Americans when it announced its self-evident truth of natural equality? Maybe Chief Justice Roger Taney was correct when he wrote in the Dred Scott case, "It is too clear for dispute, that the enslaved African race were not intended to be included, and formed no part of the people who framed and adopted this declaration"

Letting Taney have the last word would be a great mistake, Wilkins argues, insisting that his own forebears and other enslaved people were very much on the minds of Jefferson, James Madison and George Washington. To be sure, many whites unconsciously bleach the founders' social world, just as Taney did, but that world was profoundly biracial. The founders fully recognized that fact, even if they used euphemisms such as "persons held to service" when referring to slaves in the Constitution. W.E.B. DuBois once remarked that when he read Shakespeare at night, Shakespeare did not move away from him. When Wilkins reads Madison or George Mason, they do not move away. They talk back and engage him in a conversation across the centuries as they reveal the complex social world surrounding the American Enlightenment. Wilkins shows them living with, and often admitting to, a vast contradiction between their position in the racial hierarchy and the emancipatory practices and ideas that they espoused in creating the republic.

Rather than reject the founders in anger, Wilkins respects and embraces their intellectual and political creativity. This stance is, of course, a far cry from black nationalist separatism -- the idea that African Americans ought to establish a socially homogenous sovereign state either by relocation to Africa or by internal exile within black enclaves -- advocated in various forms by Martin Delany, Henry MacNeal Turner, Marcus Garvey and, most recently, Louis Farrakhan. Wilkins' solution to "the dilemma of black patriotism" is, instead, a variation on Frederick Douglass' decision to break with William Lloyd Garrison over the status and meaning of the Constitution. Instead of accepting Garrison's view that the Constitution was conceived in hell, Douglass saw it as a foundation for progress. Wilkins, similarly, takes the "whites only" tag off the Declaration of Independence and insists it, too, can be a foundation

for a more perfect union. Blending political liberalism, deep attachment to our country and an understanding of multicultural intricacies, Wilkins wants all of us to feast at the table of American Enlightenment thought.

Patriot Fires, Melinda Lawson's lively study of the Civil War, reminds us that patriotism is not only personally cultivated but also strategically induced. The war that liberated blacks from slavery also gave rise to a far more potent nationalism than previously existed in America, partly because of the "home front" strategies for mobilizing loyalty.

Patriotism didn't just develop during the Civil War; it had its entrepreneurs. For example, Jay Cooke, the Civil War financier, combined appeals to patriotism and self-interest in marketing war bonds. The Sanitary Commission, formed to relieve disease and suffering among the soldiers in the field, organized dozens of local "fairs" that were temporary museums about the American past. Abolitionist orators toured the North arguing for emancipation and African-American citizenship. The Union Leagues were built to inculcate patriotic loyalty among men inducted in secret rituals, while the more Brahmin versions -- the Union League society clubs of Boston, New York and Philadelphia -- promoted the mobilization of black troops and bound eastern elites to the national cause. The Republican Party recast itself as the champion of national unity, the Union Party.

Lawson could have said more, however, about the war's impact on black as well as white patriotism. Northern armies' thrusts into the South led many blacks to flee into occupied territory and to sign up for black regiments. In 1862, as the Union teetered on the verge of compromise with the Confederacy, abolitionists and northern black political organizations helped to recruit large numbers of blacks into the Union army. In all, nearly 200,000 black men saw military service, a number larger than Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and about 21 percent of the total black male population between ages 18 and 45. Nearly three-fourths of all free black men living in free states served in the army.

After the war, black leaders believed, with considerable justification, that black soldiering had decisively tipped the military balance toward the North. The black veterans mustered out of 154 regiments saw themselves as having filled a breach in the ranks, as did many of the approximately 474,000 blacks who took part in some kind of federally sponsored wartime free labor. As Frederick Douglass said in April 1872, "When the very earth was crumbling under the cause of the Union and the armies of the nation were meeting disaster after disaster; when the recruiting sergeant was beating his drum through every hamlet in the land ... then it was that the North was brought up to the point where it unchained the black man and put the musket in his hands. Then they called; then we came; and we helped to save the country."

This great display of black attachment to the nation was a factor in the new understanding of the Constitution that emerged from the Civil War, expressed nowhere more clearly than in the Reconstruction-era amendments abolishing slavery, establishing national civil rights and giving black men the right to vote. Instead of being read as a protection for states and

slaveholders, the Constitution came to be understood as a nationalizing and inclusive charter. Black patriotism, in other words, helped to realize these possibilities that Wilkins tells us were there at the founding of the country.

Of the three volumes under review here, Carol Swain's *The New White Nationalism in America* is the gloomiest. It is also the biggest and boldest, reflecting a prodigious amount of research, including original surveys, focus groups and interviews. Swain adds to the book's punch by writing about her own life story as a single, black mother who went to graduate school in political science and has risen to the peak of her profession. Her first book, a study of the representation of black-majority congressional districts, won the top prize of the American Political Science Association. Formerly at Princeton, she now teaches at Vanderbilt University.

Race war -- what Swain calls a "large-scale racial conflict unprecedented in our nation's history" -- is the specter haunting this new book. Her studies, she argues, show that such race-based policies as affirmative action are poorly understood and enjoy little support, even among blacks, and that there is growing support among whites, particularly the young, for a white nationalist reaction. Swain thinks that low formal membership figures for the white nationalist organizations are misleading because the Internet invisibly multiplies white nationalist influence. "Today such groups have highly developed networks and forums that allow them to take their one-sided messages to millions of Americans in contexts that lack countervailing voices," she writes.

The great danger of the white nationalists, according to Swain, can be judged from their murderous fantasies of "ethnic cleansing," American-style. Indeed, some adherents have already acted on these fantasies, Swain says, citing the case of 21-year-old Benjamin Smith, a white college student who came into contact with the World Church of the Creator, a hate group, while a student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. From July 2-4, 1999, Smith went on a rampage, shooting at Jews, blacks and Asians and killing two people before taking his own life.

For Swain, Smith's rampage is an alarm bell. "If we dismiss Smith's attraction to the racist right by attributing it to the susceptibility of a warped mind, we are failing to recognize the danger of the white nationalist movement to our society," she writes. "Although Smith was a confused young man, there are many others out there like him who are ripe for exploitation." Continuing with this "ticking time-bomb" theme, Swain later states, "The growing competition for college admissions and the increasing uncertainty surrounding the process create an atmosphere of anxiety and anger in a milieu where a sense of unfairness is all too common among vocal youth" The book's conclusion calls for eliminating affirmative action.

The New White Nationalism in America has some genuine merits. In its depiction of the white nationalist movement, the book is riveting and original. On the basis of her survey evidence, Swain also shows how impressively sensible, thoughtful and interesting ordinary Americans of all backgrounds are in their thinking about race relations and remedies for racial

discrimination. She has tart and incisive comments on political correctness and campus speech codes, and she is forthright in her advocacy of a "faith-based approach to some of America's racial problems" and her hope that a religious awakening will generate social harmony and mutual tolerance.

But much of Swain's analysis is speculative and unpersuasive. She does not adequately support her view that white nationalism is poised for growth. And by conjuring up a frightening vision of white nationalist violence in response to affirmative action, she slips into what Albert O. Hirschmann calls the "rhetoric of reaction." She is saying that well-intentioned policies have perhaps made a slight improvement in one area but gravely endangered something more valuable: civil peace, to say nothing of political fellow feeling. But if the prospect of a white Mau Mau rampage is ultimately tenuous, the entire argument begins to crumble.

Patriotism may turn ugly and violent among a few. We know what Timothy McVeigh did after he got back from the Gulf War and traveled to Waco, Texas, to contemplate the smoldering ruins of the Branch Davidian complex. But can it really be that millions of us are harboring fantasies of race war? Is the flag decal on that SUV over there a symbol of white nationalism - or of a generous Americanism?

Swain's surveys and focus groups are helpful here. The Americans who come through her descriptions are thoughtful and sensible even as they disagree. We're a work in progress, varied and complicated, just as Wilkins suggests. But even in a book such as Swain's, full of alarms about violent racism, the central tendency seems to consist of sober people willing to assess and follow public debate on the merits. Our patriotism is not pure, but neither is it rancid. Come to think of it, instead of worrying about someone else's flag decals, I may put one on my own car and consider it a sign of patriotism rightly understood.