

No idea whatsoever

The Patriot, directed by Roland Emmerich, written by Robert Rodat

By David Walsh
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How is the relative dearth of intelligent and artistically satisfying American films about either the Revolutionary War or the Civil War to be accounted for? It has been noted more than once in the past that a people carrying out a revolution may have insufficient energy left over to recreate it artistically. One has to consider as well the intellectual difficulty posed by such struggles for American artists, not normally sensitive to historical and ideological problems. Nor should one leave out of the reckoning the general vulgarity and shallowness of Hollywood studio executives.

In any event, *The Patriot*, directed by Roland Emmerich from a script by Robert Rodat, is not an addition to the limited number of successful films treating America's revolutions. It's a ridiculous work, which could only be taken seriously in a period like ours in which ideas and ideals are held in such generally low esteem.

In 1776 Benjamin Martin (Mel Gibson) is a South Carolina plantation owner—his fields are tended by free blacks—who opposes waging a war for independence from Britain. He went to war before and found it (and himself) savage. A widower, he also has seven children to think about. Only when a sadistic British officer murders one of his teenage boys does Martin join the revolutionary cause. He thereupon helps organize a fighting force that bedevils the British under Lord Cornwallis, providing Washington's Continental Army and the French military, who were coming to the aid of the newly independent colonies, much needed time.

It comes as no surprise that scenarist Robert Rodat also provided the script for Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*. One of the premises of that film, based on historical research of a limited type, was that soldiers in World War II were motivated principally by concern for themselves and those immediately around them. This conception has now been transported back in time. Martin fights only when the conflict becomes “personal,” only to protect or avenge his family.

Rodat says of this new film: “What we ultimately came to thematically is that you can't save your own life unless you are willing to put yourself on the line to save the families of all men—in this case, to fight in the American Revolution on the side of the patriots.”

On the face of it, this is an absurd argument. There is no necessary or logical connection between saving one's own skin or defending one's family and fighting for a revolutionary cause. On the contrary, the vast majority of those whose first concern is the short-term safety of themselves or their family members side with the status quo or attempt to remain out of the conflict altogether. Revolutions put people at risk and civil conflicts—and the American Revolutionary War was such at least in part—often break up families, setting brother against brother or parent against child.

Rodat's plot device, having 15-year-old Thomas Martin killed by a British officer, makes the older Martin's enlistment in the patriots' cause entirely arbitrary and accidental. Presumably if some demented officer in the South Carolina militia had shot his son—and it was apparently responsible for numerous atrocities—instead of the Nazi-like Colonel Tavington, Martin would have gone off and fought with the Redcoats.

In any event, the view that one ought to fight only or primarily for kin has something quite sinister about it. (“I'm a parent; I haven't the luxury of principle,” Martin declares.) Only the most narrow and selfish, even reactionary, struggles are conducted on that basis. The American Revolution, whatever its limitations, was a progressive and earthshaking episode in world history.

For some years now the general public has been subjected to a concerted campaign undertaken by certain historians, including so-called “lefts,” against the conception that human beings struggle, make sacrifices and sometimes give up their lives for *great ideas*. Various historical difficulties, as well as sociological changes, have contributed to this. There's no doubt that the prospect of throwing oneself into a life-and-death struggle is unimaginable to the modern-day American philistine, whose idea of hardship is having his Internet service provider go down for an hour.

A study of history, however, suggests that people—even Americans!—have made great sacrifices for such apparently abstract ideas as equality, justice and freedom. Indeed the sort of commitment that permits soldiers to endure the suffering and miseries of Valley Forge or Gettysburg has to be ideologically prepared and tempered. Studies of conflicts in which outnumbered or ill-equipped revolutionary armies have defeated physically superior forces always indicate that consciousness of purpose is one of the decisive factors, and, moreover, that the leading figures in the revolutionary camp are those with the broadest outlook.

The generation that led the American Revolution was steeped in the traditions of the Enlightenment. Of Samuel Adams, for example, one historian writes, “In the works of no other writer is the total body of Revolutionary thought so adequately revealed. He was deeply read in the political classics, and all the great names ... are spread largely through his pages to buttress his argument.”

As for Thomas Jefferson, the same historian notes that “All his life he was a student, and his devotion to books, running often to fifteen hours a day, recalls the heroic zeal of Puritan scholars.” It was Jefferson who drafted the Declaration of Independence in which the “strong influence of French humanitarianism is revealed in the passage on slavery that was stricken out on the floor of the Congress” and, even more significantly, in the substitution of “life, liberty and

the pursuit of happiness” as man's natural rights instead of the traditional English liberal doctrine of life, liberty and *property*.

The importance of ideas and ideology is evident in the impact that Tom Paine's *Common Sense* (published in early 1776) had on the colonial populace. “Paine's attack on the king-principle ... was the first clear, far-carrying appeal for republicanism addressed to American ears. How successful it was, how ruthlessly it stripped away the divinity that doth hedge a king, laying bare the stupidity of the king-cult, is suggested by the remarkable change in the American attitude toward monarchy that a few months brought about. After the appearance of *Common Sense*, middle and lower class Americans shed their colonial loyalties like a last year's garment, and thenceforth they regarded the pretensions of kings as little better than flummery” (V. L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*).

There's no need to idealize the American Revolution. The new republic brought into being contained enormous contradictions, not the least of which was the continued existence of slavery under a regime that had pledged itself to the idea of the innate equality of all men. Some of those contradictions would explode 80 years later. Nonetheless the repudiation of monarchy and the overthrow of British rule in the American colonies had world-historical significance. In 1786, three years before social revolution erupted in his own country, the French philosopher Condorcet wrote: “It is not enough that the rights of man be written in the books of the philosophers and inscribed in the hearts of virtuous men; the weak and ignorant must be able to read them in the example of a great nation. America has given us the example.”

No one is obliged to take the widest possible significance of the Revolution into account when creating a work of fiction. But it's difficult to see how a substantive work can be produced on the basis of *entirely ignoring* the meaning of the event in question. In what sense is *The Patriot* a film *about* or *of* the American Revolution? For all its historical specificity and concreteness, this story might as well take place “against the backdrop of” the Korean War or gang warfare in Chicago in the 1920s or Napoleon's invasion of Russia. In fact, it probably already has.

Aside from failing to illuminate the American Revolution, its epoch, the historical process or human psychology and behavior in general in any noticeable fashion, *The Patriot* consists of a series of manipulative clichés—mostly involving the interaction of teary-eyed parents and children—that will irritate or please the filmgoer depending on how he or she ordinarily responds to manipulative clichés.

The fantastical treatment (non-treatment) of slavery deserves special mention. The benign relations between the one black member of Martin's guerrilla band and the rest of the group are almost entirely unbelievable. It's unclear, on the basis of a viewing of this film, why the Civil War proved necessary at all. South Carolina—of all places!—was apparently a paradise for all.

The film simply gets muddled when it strays from explaining phenomena in the most linear and simple-minded fashion. There is the matter of its lead character's violence, for example, his “dark side.” The filmmakers, in typical fashion, want to have their cake and eat it too. They want to be on record as disapproving of aggression and bloodlust, but at the same time get whatever commercial mileage they can out of violence and mayhem. So they create a character who enthusiastically blasts his enemies with musket-fire and spills their brains on the ground with a tomahawk, and then frets about its consequences for his soul, often on the shoulder of his understanding sister-in-law, who smiles at him seraphically and *understands*.

As always, an extraordinary amount of acting and technical talent goes to waste in a poor film like this.

The obsession with family in the film strikes me as somewhat disturbing, almost disoriented. The countless scenes of Gibson's Martin alternately doting on, lecturing, reassuring or grieving over one or another of his children are finally a little hard to take. It can't be a healthy for anyone, one would think, when a child becomes the sole purpose and meaning of an individual's life. Better by far if the parent shares the purpose and meaning of his or her life, which must be something external to the family, with a child. As much as anything else, one feels, “family values” are injected into *The Patriot* as a substitute for the set of ideas the filmmakers haven't got.

Nature and art both abhor a vacuum. How conscious Rodat and Emmerich are of this is difficult to say, but there seems little question that their film, with its defense of family theme, its “Don't-Tread-on-Me” extreme individualist outlook, its reverence for the power of the musket and the right to bear arms, its hostility to ideas and reflection, would have considerable appeal to supporters of the Militia-type movements in the US.

The film is entitled *The Patriot*, yet there is hardly anything “patriotic” about Martin's behavior or action. As I suggested above, his attachment to the colonials' side comes about more or less accidentally. An active American patriot of the time would have had some conception of monarchy, tyranny and democracy; he or she would have identified with some series of concepts embodied in the new republic. Martin simply cares about his children. In the concluding battle sequence when he picks up the famous American flag of the time, with its thirteen stars in a circle, and starts chasing the retreating British, one feels like asking, “Why an American flag? Why not a banner with his children's faces on it?”

The manner in which the filmmakers feel obliged to make their appeal—family, not country—is revealing in its own way. It is an acknowledgment of the fact that patriotic sentiment has seriously declined in the general population over the last two decades. July 4 used to mean something, now it's simply welcome relief, the one day off in the summertime to masses of overworked and underpaid people.

In the past, when the benefits or imagined benefits of the Revolution and subsequent historical development in the US were more obvious to millions, evoking the traditions of 1776 had considerable power. But in a nation so sharply divided along economic lines politicians are less and less willing to remind anyone of elementary democratic principles, such as equality, and indeed are more and more hostile to the latter themselves.

In the long run, loyalty to family, to “blood,” although it has an emotional and quasi-mystical appeal, is a poor and insubstantial basis on which to motivate people. It suggests a society running out of arguments.

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