

## Sowing Patriotism, But Reaping Nationalism? Consequences of Exposure to the American Flag

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*The American flag is a frequently displayed national symbol in the United States. Given its high visibility and importance, the present research examines the consequences of exposure to the flag on Americans' sense of national attachment. We hypothesized that the flag would increase patriotism, defined as love and commitment to one's country, and nationalism, defined as a sense of superiority over others. Two experimental studies supported the idea that the American flag increased nationalism, but not necessarily patriotism. The discussion focuses on the practices surrounding the American flag and its implications for the reproduction of American national identity.*

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*No one asks how many stars and stripes the average  
American is likely to encounter in the course of the day.  
Nor what is the effect of all this flagging.*

—Michael Billig (1995)

In the aftermath of the attacks on September 11, 2001, the United States experienced an outburst of patriotism. As is often the case in times of crisis or war, Americans' attachment to their country is most clearly visible in the frequent display of the American flag—the prime symbol of a highly patriotic nation (e.g., Dalton, 1988; Evans & Kelley, 2002; Rose, 1985; Skitka, 2005; Welch & Bryan,

1996). During times of peace, the flag is already a common sight in American daily life, but times of war dramatically increase the showing of the flag in windows, on cars and homes, or on clothing (e.g., ABC News/Washington Post September 11<sup>th</sup> Poll, 2002; Goldstein, 1995; Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989). In the United States, the act of displaying the flag is readily recognized as a statement affirming one's allegiance to America and the American people, even though there have been times in U.S. history when conversely the flag became a divisive symbol, e.g., between those supporting and those opposing the Vietnam war (e.g., Goldstein, 1995). Despite the role that the prominent display of the flag plays in American life, to date it is not clear how the frequent sight of the flag in one's environment affects the life and outlook of Americans. As in the quotation at the beginning of this paragraph, the effects of the American flags are largely unexamined. Therefore, it is unclear whether the flag really promotes the patriotism that research shows provides the motivation for its display (Skitka, 2005). In the present paper, we argue that the American flag is an important cultural vehicle that captures collective values and sentiments, and in turn is able to evoke the same in Americans (cf. Durkheim, 1912/2001). As such, the flag is of critical importance to the maintenance and reproduction of American identity as it connects Americans to their nation by reminding them what the United States stands for. In this research, we focus specifically on the different kinds of national attachment in Americans evoked by that exposure to the American flag.

### *The Importance of National Symbols*

National symbols are central to any nation state. They provide an outward representation for a collective, its history, and its achievements. Given the very idea that a nation has to be regarded as a social construction (e.g., Anderson, 1991; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1992), national symbols help reify the nation and the nation-state.

National symbols acquire their symbolic meaning through various means, including their metaphorical qualities, e.g., the 50 stars of the U.S. flag representing the 50 states. More importantly, however, national symbols achieve meaning through the ways in which they are embedded in various cultural practices (e.g., Marvin & Ingle, 1999). For instance, in the United States most elementary school children recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, through which an explicit link between the nation-state and the American flag as symbol for the nation is forged. Other salient uses of the American flag include its display inside and outside virtually all government buildings, as a prominent part of political events, its use in retail and both domestic and international sports events, as well as its display in religious institutions. Further, the flag figures prominently in the military, where the flag is not only revered, but also represents honor and sacrifice (e.g., Marvin & Ingle, 1999). As a result of their embeddedness in various cultural practices, symbols such as the American flag "are seen as summing up, expressing,

representing for the participants in an emotionally powerful and relatively undifferentiated way what the system means to them" (Ortner, 1973, p. 1339).

As one of most evocative American national symbols, the flag plays a critical role in focusing and channeling national attachment (e.g., Firth, 1973). Specifically, because the flag summarizes the nation and its history, it serves as a reminder of one's membership in this group. As such it brings to mind ideas and feelings that members of this nation have or ought to have. Consistent with this reminder function of national symbols, experiments have demonstrated that, when exposed to potent cultural symbols, individuals are likely to think and behave in ways consistent with the worldviews and values with which the cultural symbols are associated (e.g., Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). Thus, because the icon of the flag is associated with central cultural and political ideas, it should be able to reinforce the connection between the individuals and their nation.

A convergent account of the effects of national symbols can be made based on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and its offspring, self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). According to this framework, the salience of national symbols induces in a member of the nation a social-perceptual shift such that the individual perceives the social world from the vantage point of her national identity. Specifically, salience of one's national identity engages the process of *self-stereotyping*, with the consequence that individuals view their national identity and behave in ways that they consider normative or desirable for their national identity. In sum, national symbols likely bring out in nationals that for which they believe their nation stands.

### *What Does The American Flag Stand For?*

Given that the American flag is an iconic symbol, it is impossible to generate a complete catalogue of all meanings, as the latter can be idiosyncratic and highly variable over time (Goldstein, 1995). However, there is little doubt that liberty and freedom constitute dominant themes in American national identity, where American history is often viewed as a struggle to attain and defend freedom, or where the American military is viewed as guarantor of this freedom. Thus, it is not surprising that most Americans associate the American flag with freedom (e.g., Kemmelmeier & Winter, 2007a). With individual freedom being one of the most cherished values in American society (e.g., Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002), it can be expected that the flag evokes a great sense of commitment to the flag and the nation-state it represents. Other meanings associated with the flag include selfless sacrifice, solidarity, and devotion to one's country (e.g., Marvin & Ingle, 1999).

At the same time, it is unmistakable that Americans view their nation's status in the world as exceptional (e.g., Lipset, 1996). As the oldest democracy, the United States has long viewed itself as a beacon of freedom and considered its political system superior to other democratic and nondemocratic regimes.

Best-selling versions of U.S. history put an emphasis on the greatness of the United States and the accomplishments of Americans (e.g., Bradley & Powers, 2000; Brokaw, 1998; Johnson, 1998). Darker aspects of American history, such as the enslavement of Black Americans or the genocide of Native Americans, are virtually never viewed as relevant to the essence of what it means to be American—an identity that is inherently good (Hirshberg, 1993; see Zinn, 2005, for a critical history of the United States). For example, in a 2003 representative survey of 11 nations, 93% of all Americans sampled had favorable feelings toward America, 89% felt that it is a “force for good in the world,” and 92% agreed with the statement that America is a “beacon of hope and opportunity” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2003). To be sure, people in many other societies are also very proud of their nationality (see European Values Study Group and World Values Survey Association, 2005; Evans & Kelley, 2002); yet, we surmise that few populations attribute the same global significance and global beneficence to their own country as Americans do.

In addition, as the undisputedly most powerful nation in the post-Cold War era, the American self-image reflected in public discourse includes a sense of its own political, economic, technological, and military superiority. References to the United States as the “greatest country in the world” are not infrequent in official and semi-official political discourse, most notably by the U.S. President (e.g., “President Meets with Displaced Workers,” December 4, 2001; “Remarks by the President at 2002 Unity Luncheon,” October 17, 2002; “Remarks by the President at American Society of Newspaper Editors Annual Convention,” April, 5, 2001), the Vice President (“Remarks As Prepared For Delivery By Al Gore,” August, 17, 2000), or the Attorney General (“Prepared Remarks of Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales,” September 13, 2005). Of similar frequency are references to the superiority of specific aspects of American society, such as “the best health care system in the world” (e.g., “Maintaining a Quality Health Care System,” 2003; “America’s Health Care System,” n.d.), the “best political system” (e.g., Connecticut House of Representatives, 2002), or the “best military in the world” (e.g., White House Daily Briefing, September 21, 2001; Holiday Message from President & Laura Bush, 2001). These descriptions are matched by the fact that 89% of Americans think that the United States is the best country in which to live (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2003) and 81% of Americans agree with the statement that “generally, the United States is a better country than most other countries” (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2003).

Even if this brief characterization of the American self-image admittedly leaves out some complexities, there is much compelling evidence that the American self-image includes a sense of superiority over the remainder of the world. To the extent that American flag captures this aspect of the American self-image, one has to expect that exposure to the American flag increases one’s attachment to one’s nation, and this attachment should be based on a sense of nationalist superiority.

*Patriotism and Nationalism*

What kind of national attachment does the American flag bring out in Americans? Before any distinctions can be made, it is critical to consider that attachment to a group always occurs in the context of multiple groups, where the individual is a member of one group, but not others. The question then becomes whether identification with or attachment to one's own group then implies that the individual rejects or derogates the other groups. Advances in the literature on ingroup attachment and intergroup relations make clear that ingroup love and outgroup hatred have to be carefully separated (Brewer, 1999; Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). Whereas preference for one's ingroup is a rather general phenomenon in intergroup relations, ingroup biases do not necessarily imply derogation of outgroups (Feshbach, 1994; Struch & Schwartz, 1989). With regard to national attachment, the separate nature of pro-ingroup and anti-outgroup biases has led researchers to distinguish the concepts of *patriotism* and *nationalism* (Connor, 1978; Feshbach, 1987, 1994; Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Orwell, 1945/2000; Sidanius, Feshbach, Levin, & Pratto, 1997; Skitka, 2005). Patriotism refers to the noncompetitive love of and commitment to one's country. As such, patriotism is primarily focused on promoting the welfare of one's nation but is neutral with regard to the evaluation of others (e.g., Bar-Tal, 1993). Nationalism, on the other hand, is related to an ideology of superiority of the ingroup over outgroups and implies the exclusion or even domination of others (Blank & Schmidt, 2003; Feshbach, 1987, 1994; de Figueiredo & Elkins, 2003; Sidanius et al., 1997; Viroli, 1995). Consistent with these definitions, nationalism has been associated with higher levels of chauvinism, prejudice, militarism, hawkish attitudes, social dominance orientation, and lower levels of internationalism (e.g., Brewer, 1999; Federico, Golec, & Dial, 2005; de Figueiredo & Elkins, 2003; Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Sidanius et al., 1997). Patriotism, on the other hand, has been shown to be unrelated to any form of outgroup derogation or aggression (Blank & Schmidt, 2003; Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989). Building on Kosterman and Feshbach's (1989) observation that the two constructs are only modestly correlated, Mummendey, Klink, and Brown (2001) proposed that nationalism and patriotism are driven by different social-psychological processes, which may help account for their distinct qualities and consequences (see also Li & Brewer, 2004). Briefly, Mummendey et al. proposed that nationalism is the result of intergroup comparison, with one's own group being thought of as superior to others; patriotism, the authors argued, is based on viewing one's ingroup across time, and experiencing pride over its traditions and accomplishments.

*Does the American Flag Enhance Patriotism and/or Nationalism?*

In this paper, we argue that the American flag evokes in Americans thoughts and feelings that are consistent with the American self-image. Therefore, our first

hypothesis is that the flag evokes a sense of love and commitment to one's country—a hypothesis that jibes well with the intuition of many Americans that the flag increases patriotism. At the same time, we are somewhat skeptical that the flag will indeed have this effect because in previous research, we have not found much indication that the flag increases Americans' identification with their country (Kemmelmeyer & Winter, 2007a). Thus, it is possible that the effect of the flag in arousing patriotism is relatively weak.

In keeping with the American self-image of its own superiority, our second hypothesis is that the American flag serves as a reminder of this self-image and, thus, arouses a sense of nationalism in Americans. In other words, the flag should foster the view that the United States is superior to other countries and should play a dominant role in the world. Whereas such views are clearly distinct from a patriotic attachment that does not refer to one's own standing relative to other nations, we should not forget that patriotism and nationalism are likely to be correlated (e.g., Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989), because nationalists also love the country that they consider superior to others.<sup>1</sup> However, because nationalism and patriotism are analytically distinct, we will try to separate the effects of flag exposure on these two constructs as much as is possible.

### *The Present Series of Studies*

The present studies are part of a research program tapping the attitudinal and behavioral consequences of exposure to the American flag. Our two studies used an experimental approach, where American research participants were asked to complete a survey questionnaire either in the presence or absence of the American flag. Specifically, participants completed measures of patriotism and nationalism, and we expected to observe flag effects on one construct even when we controlled for its correlation with the other. Previously, Butz, Plant, and Doerr (2007, Study 2) observed that exposure to the flag decreased patriotism, but increased nationalism in Americans,  $d = -.23$  and  $d = +.27$ , respectively. Although both effects were not reliable in Butz et al.'s investigation they hint at the differential implications of flag exposure for these constructs.

### **Study 1**

In our first study, we examined whether exposure to the American flag would lead to an increase in participants' expressed nationalism and patriotism. Because nationalism clearly entails a rank-ordering of groups with one's own group at the top, we were also interested whether the flag would induce a general mode of hierarchical thinking about the social world. We reasoned that if the flag serves as

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the distinction between nationalism and patriotism has been criticized by Billig (1995), who argued that patriotism without inherent nationalist tendencies is not imaginable.

a reminder of America's own superiority in the world, Americans may also be more likely to embrace inequality between groups more generally. To explore this issue, participants also completed a measure of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), which taps the extent to which individuals condone or reject inequality between groups (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). SDO is a robust predictor of hostile attitudes toward outgroups, including militarism, cultural elitism, and various prejudices based on race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, class, and nationality (Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Further, past research has demonstrated that members of high-status groups are more likely to embrace and justify social inequality than are members of powerless groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Therefore, to the extent that the flag reminded Americans of their nation's status in the world, SDO should be elevated. Note that this prediction seems to contradict earlier findings by Butz et al. (2007), who found that exposure to the U.S. flag increased egalitarianism. Whereas the generality of these findings is not yet clear, we distinguished two subdimensions of SDO, one explicitly associated with group equality and the other explicitly associated with group dominance (Jost & Thompson, 2000). In light of Butz et al. it is unlikely that the flag undermines support for equality, yet it still may increase support for group dominance.

At the same time, we reasoned that the flag would not simply enhance narrow-mindedness and ethnocentrism that was not explicitly the result of its perceived relative status in the world. To examine this issue, we also included a measure of authoritarianism, a construct which is conceptually and empirically distinct from SDO (e.g., Altemeyer, 1998; Pratto et al., 1994; Whitley, 1999), but which has been linked to intergroup hostility and cognitive rigidity (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950).

The first experiment was conducted in fall of 1998 during a relatively peaceful time for Americans, three years after the Oklahoma City bombing and well before the attacks of September 11, 2001, but also during the time of the U.S. military deployment in Kosovo. Participants worked on questionnaire measures of patriotism, nationalism, social dominance orientation, and authoritarianism in a room that was either decorated with an American flag or not. Previous work on the effects of the American flag has shown that research participants do not perceive the presence of the American flag in social psychology experiments as unusual, nor does it induce greater socially desirable responding on scales tapping this tendency (Kemmelmeyer & Winter, 2007a).

## Method

### *Participants*

A total of 55 undergraduates at a large Midwestern university participated in this research in exchange for course credit (33 men, 22 women). The mean age was



19 years ( $SD = 1.07$ ; range 18 to 23 years). All participants were U.S. citizens, and the majority (71%) described themselves as white or European American.

### *Procedure*

Small groups of four to six participants were seated at tables facing the front of the laboratory and told that they would be completing a number of questionnaires. Based on random assignment to conditions, for half of the groups, the room was decorated with a large American flag ( $5' \times 3'$ ), which was affixed to the front wall. Although seeing such a large American flag in a psychology experiment may be considered unusual, none of the participants commented on its presence. (The experimenter was prepared to deny knowing anything about the room decoration, but he never had to act in this regard.) For the other half of the group, the front of the room was bare. Participants worked on a booklet that contained the questionnaire measures in the order listed below, interspersed between other questionnaires, e.g., a 100-item Big-Five Personality Inventory (Goldberg, 1992), and the 17-item Self-Consciousness Scale (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975).

*Patriotism and nationalism.* To tap patriotism, i.e., love and concern for one's country and its major symbols, we used a total of nine items: seven items from Pratto et al. (1994) and two items from Feshbach (1994;  $\alpha = .76$ ; see appendix). To measure nationalism, defined as the desire for the dominance of one's country over others, we used six items from Pratto et al. (1994;  $\alpha = .82$ ; see appendix).

*Social Dominance Orientation (SDO).* Participants completed a 16-item version of Pratto et al.'s (1994) Social Dominance Orientation scale. This scale assesses to what extent individuals favor or reject inequality between groups. In addition to computing a combined SDO score, we followed Jost and Thompson (2000), who isolated two related but analytically distinct constructs assessed within the SDO scale (see also Peña & Sidanius, 2002). That is, we first computed a score for group-based dominance (GBD), the tendency to favor group hierarchy, based on half of the items ( $\alpha = .85$ ; see appendix). Second, based on the remaining items we computed a score for opposition to equality (OEQ), the generalized tendency to reject social equality ( $\alpha = .86$ ; see appendix). Although in the present study none of the GBD items but all of the OEQ items were reverse coded, note that Jost and Thompson (2000) provided evidence that the coding of items is not solely responsible for the empirical separability of the two subconstructs. Participants expressed their agreement or disagreement with the items using a 7-point response scale.

*Authoritarianism.* We used a short version of Altemeyer's (1988) Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale (RWA) adapted from Haddock, Zanna, and Esses (1993;  $\alpha = .78$ ). The 10-item short version is highly correlated with the complete 30-item scale,  $r = .90$  (see also Kemmelmeier et al., 2003). Sample items include "The way things are going in this country, it's going to take a lot of 'strong medicine' to straighten out the troublemakers, criminals, and perverts" and "A lot of our rules



**Table 1.** Means and Correlation between Dependent Variables (Study 1)

	Mean		Correlations			
	<i>M</i>	( <i>SD</i> )	Nationalism	RWA	SDO-GBD	SDO-OEQ
Patriotism	4.19	(0.91)	.57***	.51***	.23	.02
Nationalism	3.42	(1.20)		.45**	.44**	.29*
RWA	-0.43	(1.33)			.22	.00
SDO-GBD	2.72	(1.16)				.59***
SDO-OEQ	2.62	(1.15)				

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ .

Note: A Box test showed that correlation matrix did not vary between the two experimental conditions,  $F(15, 10751) = 0.90$ ,  $p < .57$ .

regarding modesty and sexual behavior are just customs which are not necessarily any better or holier than those which other people follow” (reverse coded).

## Results

Because various authors in the social sciences have emphasized gender differences with regard to group attachment (e.g., Baumeister & Sommer, 1997; Billig, 1995; Gabriel & Gardner, 1999), we systematically explored the role of gender in the present data and report analyses, including gender, when this variable yielded significant results.

### *Correlational Analyses*

An inspection of the correlations between dependent variables summarized in Table 1 showed, first, that patriotism and nationalism were correlated, more strongly so than in previous research (e.g., Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Sidanius et al., 1997). Second, as expected based on Jost and Thompson’s (2000) work, the two subconstructs of SDO were related. Third, there was a significant relationship between nationalism and the two SDO constructs. The correlation with SDO-GBD was somewhat greater than that with SDO-OEQ, which is likely to be a reflection that both SDO group dominance and nationalism explicitly tap participants’ preference for one collective to dominate another collective. Fourth, although RWA and SDO are sometimes suspected to be redundant, this was clearly not the case (see Altemeyer, 1998; Pratto et al., 1994; Whitley, 1999, for similar findings). In sum, our dependent variables exhibited relationships consistent with the pertinent literature.

### *Effects of Exposure to the Flag*

Unless noted otherwise, we used a simple two-level (flag present vs. absent) one-way analysis of variance to examine the effects of flag exposure on the

**Table 2.** Dependent Variables as a Function of Exposure to the American Flag (Study 1)

	Flag absent		Flag present		<i>F</i>
	<i>M</i>	( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i>	( <i>SD</i> )	
Patriotism	4.02	(1.03)	4.34	(0.77)	2.68
Nationalism	3.04	(1.34)	3.76	(0.97)	4.88*
Authoritarianism	-0.73	(1.26)	-0.16	(1.36)	2.91
SDO-Group Dominance	2.28	(1.02)	3.12	(1.15)	5.04*
SDO-Opposition to Equality	2.37	(1.20)	2.86	(1.08)	1.05

\* $p < .05$ .

Note: All ratings were made on a 1–7 Likert type scale.

dependent variables. When participants were in the presence of the flag, patriotism was not significantly enhanced,  $F(1, 53) = 1.80, p < .19, d = .35$  (see Table 2). This finding is unexpected in light of the conventional wisdom that the flag is primarily a patriotic symbol. However, nationalism was significantly increased in the presence of the flag,  $F(1, 53) = 5.18, p < .03, d = .61$ . In other words, the flag did not reliably enhance love and concern for one's country, but heightened participants' desire for the United States to dominate other nations. (Including gender as predictor did not alter these findings, all  $F$ s  $< 1$ .)

Because of the close association between patriotism and nationalism, we examined the effects of the flag and gender on one while controlling for the effect of the other (cf. Skitka, 2005). For this purpose, we regressed patriotism scores on nationalism scores, and used the resulting residual as corrected patriotism score. Likewise, we regressed nationalism on patriotism to generate a corrected nationalism score. Analyses of the corrected patriotism score replicated the above null effect,  $F(1, 53) = 0.01, p < .94, d = .02$ . Yet, a corresponding analysis of the corrected nationalism score confirmed that the flag enhanced nationalism, even though the effect only approached statistical significance,  $F(1, 53) = 3.17, p = .081, d = .48$ .<sup>2</sup>

Because the analyses of SDO revealed gender effects, we report the results of a 2 (flag)  $\times$  2 (gender) ANOVA. First, we analyzed the SDO total score, and replicated previous research showing that men scored higher on this measure than women,  $F(1, 50) = 6.58, p < .02, d = .84$  (e.g., Sidanius, Pratto, & Brief, 1995). Whereas SDO was only slightly elevated when the flag was present ( $M = 2.32, SD = 0.99$  vs.  $M = 2.99, SD = 0.98$ ),  $F(1, 50) = 3.50, p < .07$ , a clearer picture emerged when we examined Jost and Thompson's (2000) two subconstructs. We found that in the presence of the flag participants expressed more favorable views of group-based dominance,  $F(1, 50) = 5.04, p < .03, d = .78$ , but generalized opposition to social equality was not affected,  $F(1, 50) = 1.05, p > .30, d = .42$ . (In both analyses of the subconstructs, gender was significant,  $F(1, 50) = 4.36, p < .05$  and

<sup>2</sup> Arguably, by partialing out patriotism from nationalism we may have removed an important component inherent in nationalism. Therefore it can be argued that our attempt to create a corrected nationalism score is not appropriate (e.g., Miller & Chapman, 2001).

$F(1, 50) = 5.63, p < .03$ , respectively.) Lastly, there was no reliable trend for the flag to increase levels of authoritarianism,  $F(1, 53) = 2.61, p < .12, d = .43$ .<sup>3</sup>

## Discussion

Study 1 confirmed our prediction that, consistent with the American self-image of its own superiority, the American flag fosters nationalist views in those exposed to it. However, somewhat surprisingly, there was no reliable evidence that exposure to the flag increased a sense of patriotism—which does not support the idea that the American flag arouses a noncompetitive love and commitment to the United States.

Along with the increase in nationalism, we also observed that those Americans exposed to the flag showed an increase in social dominance orientation. Yet, closer examination made clear that this effect did not occur for how Americans felt about group (in)equality in general, but was limited to the idea of group dominance. We propose that the flag not only prompted participants to think about their own country as superior to and dominant in the world, but also induced a mode of hierarchical thinking as evidence in elevated group-dominance scores. At the same time, the effect of flag exposure appeared to be rather specific in that levels of authoritarianism did not vary with the absence or presence of the flag, suggesting that the flag did not induce a general tendency toward closed-minded rejection of others or adherence to ingroup authority.

Critics of Study 1 may be concerned that any observed effects of flag exposure are merely because of the flag inducing a tendency toward socially desirable responding. We have not found much evidence for this in previous research (Kimmelmeier & Winter, 2007a) and argue that this hypothesis is unlikely to account for the present data. It is true that many Americans tend to view American dominance in the world as “desirable”; but so do they view patriotism, which was *not* enhanced.

## Study 2

The events of September 11, 2001, had a profound effect on the American psyche. More people displayed the American flag than before, presumably to express their patriotism. The main goal of Study 2 was to examine whether the central findings of our first study would generalize to these changed conditions. Thus, we replicated a modified version of Study 1 in winter of 2004. To assess nationalism, we used a single, and perhaps more direct, item to tap participants’

<sup>3</sup> As with gender, we examined possible effects of race-ethnicity. Because of the modest sample size, we were unable to compare members of specific racial-ethnic groups; thus, we combined all nonwhite participants into a group of participants of color and compared them with European American participants. When using a 2 (flag present vs. absent)  $\times$  2 (race-ethnicity) ANOVA no race effects emerged, and all findings reported above were confirmed.

sense of American superiority, as well as a shorter measure of patriotism. Because this experiment was run as part of an in-class demonstration, we used abbreviated measures of patriotism and nationalism and dropped the measures of social dominance orientation and authoritarianism.

## Method

### *Participants*

A total of 72 undergraduates at a Western public university participated in this as part of an in-class exercise on the power of cultural symbols (27 men, 45 women). The mean age was 21 years ( $SD = 6.17$ ; range 18 to 53 years). All participants were U.S. citizens. Race/ethnicity was not asked, but by visual estimation the overwhelming majority of students (around 90%) were white or European American.

### *Procedure*

Half of the students in the class received a one-page questionnaire that prominently displayed three  $2\frac{1}{8}' \times 1\frac{3}{8}'$  images of the American flag, whereas the other half received a questionnaire that was identical except that it did not include any images of the flag. The experiment was conducted at the very beginning of class as part of an in-class exercise. Students were not informed about its purpose, but they were simply told to take two minutes to complete the four items and provide some demographic information.

*Patriotism and nationalism.* To assess patriotism, we used three items, two of them identical to those used in Study 1: "I am proud to be American"; "I would consider myself a patriot"; and "I don't particularly care about being American" (reverse-coded;  $\alpha = .79$ ). To tap nationalism, we used a single item: "The United States is the best country in the world." Participants used a 7-point scale (1 *disagree*, 7 *agree*) to indicate their agreement with the items.

## Results

As expected, the three-item patriotism index ( $M = 5.55$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) and the single nationalism item ( $M = 4.54$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ) were correlated,  $r = .46$ . A 2 (flag present vs. absent)  $\times$  2 (gender) ANOVA was used to examine the effects of flag exposure on the dependent variables. When the flag was prominently displayed on their questionnaire, patriotism was slightly enhanced ( $M = 5.80$ ,  $SD = 0.83$  vs.  $M = 5.31$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ), but without reaching statistical significance,  $F(1, 68) = 2.71$ ,  $p > .10$ ,  $d = 0.44$ . Yet, in the presence of the flag our American participants were very much inclined to agree with the idea that the United States is the best country in the world ( $M = 5.36$ ,  $SD = 1.36$  vs.  $M = 4.44$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ),

$F(1, 68) = 6.41, p < .02, d = 0.56$ . These findings closely mirror those of Study 1. There was some unexpected indication that patriotism was higher in women than men ( $M = 5.77, SD = 0.97$  vs.  $M = 5.19, SD = 1.29$ ;  $F[1, 68] = 3.11, p < .09$ ), but no other effects were reliable.

As in Study 1, we explored whether these flag effects would stand when nationalism was controlled for patriotism, and vice versa, and thus generated corrected nationalism and corrected patriotism scores as described earlier. When entered into the same  $2 \times 2$  design, the effects of flag exposure on nationalism were still significant,  $F(1, 68) = 4.01, p < .05, d = .39$ , whereas there was no appreciable effect of flag exposure on patriotism,  $F(1, 68) = 0.28, p = .60, d = .21$ . This pattern does replicate the findings for the uncorrected scores as well as for Study 1. Further, replicating previous research, in Study 2 men were higher in nationalism and patriotism than women,  $F(1, 68) = 3.85, p = .054, d = .38$  and  $F(1, 68) = 6.14, p < .02, d = .64$ , respectively. (Analyses of the influence of race were not conducted because of the small number of nonwhite participants in the present sample.)

## Discussion

Participants in our second study were exposed to the flag in a different way than participants in Study 1. Yet, the pattern of results was the same: The flag gave rise to nationalism, but not patriotism, and the fact that these findings were obtained at a different university and after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, speaks to their robustness.

## General Discussion

The American flag is the primary national symbol in the United States (e.g., Dalton, 1988; Rose, 1985; Skitka, 2005; Welch & Bryan, 1996). However, the consequences of exposure to the American flag on Americans seem to diverge from these patriotic intentions. Across two studies we did not find any evidence that the American flag aroused a sense of patriotism; rather, only nationalist views were increased in the presence of the flag, which cast the United States as superior and dominant to the remainder of the world. In light of the common intuition of the flag as patriotic symbol this finding is surprising. However, we argue that this finding is a reflection of Americans' image of their own nation in the world. As the only remaining superpower, Americans routinely view their own country to be superior on a number of dimensions, including politics, economics, technology, and morality. Most prominently, this nationalist sentiment is reflected in the familiar self-description of the United States as "best country in the world" (see Introduction). In this sense, patriotic Americans who display the flag may indeed be sowing patriotism, but reaping nationalism.

The implications of the present findings are potentially troubling. Whereas patriotism is typically unrelated to the devaluation of or aggression toward out-groups, nationalism has been implicated in aggression, oppression, and warfare (Federico et al., 2005; Feshbach, 1987; Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989). Does this imply that when exposed to the flag in their environment Americans are more likely to aggress against other nations? The likely answer is at least in part a “yes.” Arguably, the American flag is sometimes (but certainly not exclusively) used to create unity amongst Americans, to “rally around the flag” to meet an enemy. That is, the flag is often used in a context in which the United States is defending itself against an aggressor—as was the case following the attacks of September 11, 2001, or in any other of the numerous military conflicts in which the United States has been involved. Because Americans expect the United States to prevail by demonstrating its superiority vis-à-vis its adversaries, it may be unsurprising that this sentiment is also associated with the flag. However, once linked to national superiority (as we have demonstrated), the flag itself may become a symbol that, at least in the minds of some, facilitates aggression toward perceived enemies of the nation. Indeed, Ferguson and Hassin (2007) recently demonstrated that among Americans who regularly watch the news there is an automatic association between the flag and aggression.

At a more general level, the present research demonstrates the power of a national symbol in reproducing a specific national identity. The American flag is deeply embedded in a rich cultural and political life, in which it represents a proud and powerful nation—as well as how this nation sees itself in the world. This self-view casts the United States not only as favorable and righteous (cf. Hirshberg, 1993), but also as superior over other countries—ideas which have become associated with the flag. Americans encounter the flag in virtually all domains of their everyday lives: in front of government buildings and automobile dealerships; in supermarkets, churches, and schools; and as bumper stickers, clothing ornaments, and advertising (e.g., Arnold, Kozinets, & Handelman, 2001; Goldstein, 1995). With every encounter, they are reminded continuously of their nation and national identity. The result is arguably that Americans’ national identity is chronically salient—and with it some nationalist ideas. In other words, we argue that the cultural practice of flagging is an important aspect of the maintenance and reproduction of the American national identity.

At the same time we do not and cannot claim that the United States of America is unique in the level of ingroup attachment by its population. Indeed, at least with regard to patriotism various other societies show comparably high (e.g., Ireland, Australia) or even higher levels (e.g., Venezuela, Iran; see European Values Study Group and World Values Survey Association, 2005). Similarly, we do not argue that the national flag is a critical symbol in every nation-state. Rather, the logic of our approach suggests that the symbolic meaning of the flag depends on if and how it is embedded and displayed in specific cultural practices and national events and rituals. In other nation states, nationality is not necessarily celebrated

the same way as it is in the United States, nor does the national flag assume as central a role. Although no quantitative data are available on this issue, it appears that in the United States the flag is much more revered and much more present than in other societies—taking on even quasi religious significance (e.g., Durkheim, 1912/2001; Goldstein, 1995; Marvin & Ingle, 1999; Welch & Bryan, 1996). Not only is the flag associated the focus of national rituals, such as the “Pledge of Allegiance *to the Flag*,” but in many circles it is also customary to display the flag in front of one’s home, especially on holidays such as Memorial Day and Veterans Day. In addition, there exists a national holiday devoted exclusively to the flag (“Flag Day”). Further corroborating the quasi-religious significance of the flag are the recurring controversies around the “desecration” of the flag, which makes explicit use of religious language (e.g., Goldstein, 1995; Marvin & Ingle, 1999). Renan (1990) referred to this phenomenon as the American “cult of the flag.” Whereas other societies may display their flag also quite frequently in formal and informal settings and are emotionally quite attached to this national symbol (e.g., Canada, France), in these nations the national flag is arguably not quite as evocative as it is in the United States. Indeed, when some Canadian colleagues of ours attempted to replicate some of our work in Canada, the Canadian flag did not induce any shifts in national identification or endorsement of central Canadian values (Noels, 1998). Therefore, we conclude that the central role of the American flag is specific to the American cultural and political context. At the same time, we see no reason why our analytical approach could not be applied to other cultural contexts and other national symbols, with specific meanings of the national identity being represented in specific national symbols.

Critics of the present research are justified in pointing out some limitations of our work. For instance, our work does not elucidate the effect of the American flag on members of American minority groups, who, at least on average, tend to be less attached to their national identity (e.g., Harlow & Dundes, 2004; Sidanius et al., 1997). Similarly, although in Study 1 and 2 the flag had similar effects on male and female students, it is unclear if this pattern holds for the general population. In fact, an emerging literature on the exposure to the U.S. flag suggests that for different people the flag may simultaneously activate very different associative networks, often simultaneously. Ferguson and Hassin (2007) linked the flag to aggression, but only for Americans who watch TV news. Kimmelmeier and Winter (2007b) observed that the flag triggers behavioral discrimination against nonmainstream Americans, yet Butz et al. (2007) observed greater egalitarianism and less intergroup hostility, but only in highly nationalist individuals. Lastly, Kimmelmeier and Winter (2007a) found the flag to reinforce cultural individualism, including dispositional biases in person perception. Thus, we readily concede that the generalizability of some aspects of our present findings is not yet clear. Further, we admit that the present examination of the flag as a symbol was perhaps simplistic because we were unable to take into account *how* the flag was displayed, whether it was used as a deliberate signal or just a decorative accessory in a situation in



which people focused their attention elsewhere (e.g., Billig, 1995; Firth, 1973). While we feel that these omissions do not diminish the present findings, there is ample room for future research to explore these lacunae.

In conclusion, the present work demonstrates that national symbols, and specifically the American flag, help shape the national attachment of Americans. Further, even though the flag is commonly considered a patriotic symbol, our data suggest that the flag is more likely to arouse nationalism than patriotism. Arguably, the American public may not care much for academic hair splitting and the scientific distinction between patriotism and nationalism. Indeed, Americans who consider their country to be the best in the world and support America's dominant position in the world are likely to consider themselves patriots, not nationalists. Because nationalism typically connotes extremism and aggression, Americans (as well as members of other nations) are likely to reserve this label to describe the national attachment of others. Even when there are no substantive differences in beliefs about their own identity, "their nationalism" is likely to become "our patriotism" (Billig, 1995). Therefore, it appears that self-described patriotism does not guard against a potentially more perilous nationalism lurking underneath.

## Appendix

### Study 1 Dependent Variables

#### *Patriotism* ( $\alpha = .76$ )

I am proud to be American.

Flag burning should be illegal.

In American public schools, every day should begin with the Pledge of Allegiance.  
I believe in mandatory military service by all citizens of the United States in the armed forces.

Other countries should be happy to have American intervention and influence.

The United States suffers when patriotism wanes.

Patriots are the ones who have made this country great.

In general, I'm glad to be American.

I would describe myself as a patriot.

#### *Nationalism* ( $\alpha = .82$ )

In view of America's moral and material superiority, it is only right that we should have the biggest say in deciding United Nations policy.

This country must continue to lead the "Free World."

We should do anything necessary to increase the power of our country, even if it means war.

Sometimes it is necessary for our country to make war on other countries for their own good.

The important thing for the U.S. foreign aid program is to see to it that the U.S. gains a political advantage.

Generally, the more influence America has on other nations, the better off they are.

*SDO-Group Based Dominance ( $\alpha = .85$ ).*

Some groups of people are simply not the equals of others.

In getting what you want, it is sometimes necessary to use force against other groups.

It is OK if some groups have more of a chance in life than others.

To get ahead in life, it is sometimes necessary to step on other groups.

If certain groups stayed in their place, we would have fewer problems.

It is probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom.

Inferior groups should stay in their place.

Sometimes other groups must be kept in their place.

*SDO-Opposition to Equality ( $\alpha = .86$ )*

It would be good if groups could be equal.

Group equality should be our ideal.

All groups should be given an equal chance in life.

We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups.

Increased social equality.

We would have fewer problems if we treated people more equally.

We should strive to make incomes as equal as possible.

No one group should dominate in society.

*Note:* All items were reverse-coded (see text).

*Right-wing Authoritarianism ( $\alpha = .78$ )*

The way things are going in this country, it's going to take a lot of "strong medicine" to straighten out the troublemakers, criminals, and perverts.

People should pay less attention to the Bible and the other old traditional forms of religious guidance and instead develop their own personal standards of what is moral and immoral.

It would be best for everyone if the proper authorities censored magazines and movies to keep trashy material away from the youth.

There is nothing wrong with premarital sexual intercourse.

Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn.

Once our government leaders and the authorities condemn the dangerous elements in our society, it will be the duty of every patriotic citizen to help stomp out the rot that is poisoning our country from within.

In these troubled times laws have to be enforced without mercy, especially when dealing with the agitators and revolutionaries who are stirring things up. Atheists and others who have rebelled against the established religions are no doubt every bit as good and virtuous as those who attend church regularly. The self-righteous “forces of law and order” threaten freedom in our country a lot more than most of the groups they claim are “radical” and “godless.” A lot of our rules regarding modesty and sexual behavior are just customs which are not necessarily any better or holier than those which other people follow.

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