The Partly Cloudy Patriot

Sarah Vowell

Sarah Vowell was born in 1969 in Muskogee, Oklahoma. She received a BA from Montana State University in 1993 and an MA in art history from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1996. She has published several books about U.S. history and culture, including Assassination Vacation (2005), about a road trip to presidential assassination sites; The Wordy Shipmates (2008), about the New England Puritans; and Unfamiliar Fishes (2011), about the history of Hawaii. A performer as well as a writer, she was the voice of Violet Parr in the Pixar animated film The Incredibles (2004). She has been noted by the New York Times for her “funny querulous voice and shrewd comic delivery” and by Newsweek as “a cranky stylist with talent to burn.” Both assessments are validated by the selection included here, the title essay from The Partly Cloudy Patriot (2002).

In the summer of 2000, I went to see the Mel Gibson blockbuster The Patriot. I enjoyed that movie. Watching a story line like that is always a relief. Of course the British must be expelled, just as the Confederates must surrender, Hitler must be crushed, and yee-haw when the Red Sea swallows those slave-mongering Egyptians. There were editorials about The Patriot, the kind that always accompany any historical film, written by professors who insist things nobody cares about, like Salieri wasn’t that bad a sort or the fact that Roman gladiators maybe didn’t have Australian accents. A little anachronism is part of the fun, and I don’t mind if in real life General Cornwallis never lost a battle in the South as he does rather gloriously in the film. Isn’t art supposed to improve on life?

Personally, I think there was more than enough historical accuracy in The Patriot to keep the spoilsports happy. Because I’m part spoilsport on my father’s side, and I felt nagged with quandaries every few minutes during the nearly three-hour film. American history is a quagmire, and the more one knows, the quaggier the mire gets. If you’re paying attention during The Patriot and you know your history and you have a stake in that history, not to mention a conscience, the movie is not an entirely cartoonish march to glory. For example, Mel Gibson’s character, Benjamin Martin, is conflicted. He doesn’t want to fight the British because he still feels bad about chopping up some Cherokee into little pieces during the French and Indian War. Since I’m a part-Cherokee person myself, Gibson lost a little of the sympathy I’d stored up for him because he’d been underrated in Conspiracy Theory. And did I mention his character lives in South Carolina? So by the end of the movie, you look at the youngest Mel junior bundled in his mother’s arms and think, Mel just risked his life so that that kid’s kids can rape their slaves and vote to be the first state to secede from the Union.

The Patriot did confirm that I owe George Washington an apology. I always liked George fine, though I dismissed him as a mere soldier. I prefer the pen to the sword, so I’ve always been more of a Jeffersonhead. The words of the Declaration of Independence are so right and true that it seems like its poetry alone would have knocked King George III in the head. Like, he would have read this beloved passage, “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights—that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness,” and thought the notion so just, and yet still so wonderfully whimsical, that he would have dethroned himself on the spot. But no, it took a grueling, six-year-long war to make independence a fact.
I rarely remember this. In my ninety-five-cent copy of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the two documents are separated by only a blank half page. I forget that there are eleven years between them, eleven years of war and the whole Articles of Confederation debacle. In my head, the two documents are like the A side and B side of the greatest single ever released that was recorded in one great drunken night, but no, there’s a lot of bleeding life between them. Dead boys and dead Indians and Valley Forge.

Anyway, The Patriot. The best part of seeing it was standing in line for tickets. I remember how jarring it was to hear my fellow moviegoers say that word. “Two for The Patriot please.” “One for The Patriot at 5:30.” For years, I called it the P word, because it tended to make nice people flinch. For the better part of the 1990s, it seemed like the only Americans who publicly described themselves as patriots were scary militia types hiding out in the backwoods of Michigan and Montana, dean ing their guns. One of the few Americans still celebrating Patriot’s Day—a nearly forgotten holiday on April 19 commemorating the Revolutionary War’s first shots at Lexington and Concord—did so in 1995 by murdering 168 people in the federal building in Oklahoma City. In fact, the same week I saw The Patriot, I was out with some friends for dinner. When I asked a fellow named Andy why he had chosen a cupcake with a little American flag stuck in the frosting, I expected him to say that he was in a patriotic mood, but he didn’t. He said that he was “feeling jingoistic.”

Well, that was a long time ago. As I write this, it’s December 2001 in New York City. The only words one hears more often than variations on patriot are “in the wake of,” “in the aftermath of,” and “since the events of September 11.” We also use the word we more. Patriotism as a word and deed has made a comeback. At Halloween, costume shops did a brisk business in Uncle Sam and Betsy Ross getups. Teen pop bombshell Britney Spears took a breather during her live telecast from Vegas’s MGM Grand to sit on a piano bench with her belly ring glinting in the spotlight and talk about “how proud I am of our nation right now.” Chinese textile factories are working overtime to fill the consumer demand for American flags.

Immediately after the attack, seeing the flag all over the place was moving, endearing. So when the newspaper I subscribe to published a full-page, full-color flag to clip out and hang in the window, how come I couldn’t? It took me a while to figure out why I guiltily slid the flag into the recycling bin instead of taping it up. The meaning had changed; or let’s say it changed back. In the first day or two the flags were plastered everywhere, seeing them was heartening because they indicated that we’re all in this sorrow together. The flags were purely emotional. Once we went to war, once the president announced that we were going to retaliate against the “evildoers,” then the flag again represented what it usually represents, the government. I think that’s when the flags started making me nervous.
The true American patriot is by definition skeptical of the government. Skepticism of the government was actually one of the platforms the current figurehead of the government ran on. How many times in the campaign did President Bush proclaim of his opponent, the then vice president, “He trusts the federal government and I trust the people”? This deep suspicion of Washington is one of the most American emotions an American can have. So by the beginning of October, the ubiquity of the flag came to feel like peer pressure to always stand behind policies one might not necessarily agree with. And, like any normal citizen, I prefer to make up my mind about the issues of the day on a case by case basis at 3:00 a.m. when I wake up from my Nightline-inspired nightmares.

One Independence Day, when I was in college, I was living in a house with other students on a street that happened to be one of the main roads leading to the football stadium where the town’s official Fourth of July fireworks festivities would be held. I looked out the window and noticed a little American flag stabbed into my yard. Then I walked outside and saw that all the yards in front of all the houses on the street had little flags waving above the grass. The flags, according to a tag, were underwritten by a local real estate agency and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. I marched into the house, yanked out the phone book, found the real estate office in the yellow pages, and phoned them up immediately, demanding that they come and take their [redacted] flag off my lawn, screaming into the phone, “The whole point of that [redacted] flag is that people don’t stick flags in my yard without asking me!” I felt like Jimmy Stewart in Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, but with profanity. A few minutes later, an elderly gentleman in a VFW cap, who probably lost his best friend liberating France or something, pulled up in a big car, grabbed the flag, and rolled his eyes as I stared at him through the window. Then I felt dramatic and dumb. Still, sometimes I think the true American flag has always been that one with the snake hissing “Don’t Tread on Me.”

The week of the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, I watched TV news all day and slept with the radio on. I found myself flipping channels hoping to see the FBI handcuff a terrorist on camera. What did happen, a lot, was that citizens or politicians or journalists would mention that they wonder what it will be like for Americans now to live with the constant threat of random, sudden death. I know a little bit about what that’s like. I did grow up during the Cold War. Maybe it says something about my level of cheer that I found this notion comforting, to remember that all those years I was sure the world might blow up at any second, I somehow managed to graduate from high school and do my laundry and see Smokey Robinson live.

Things were bad in New York. I stopped being able to tell whether my eyes were teary all the time from grief or from the dirty, smoky wind. Just when it seemed as if the dust had started to settle, then came the anthrax. I was on the phone with a friend who works in Rockefeller Center, and he had to hang up to
be evacuated because a contaminated envelope had infected a person in the building; an hour later, another friend in another building was sitting at his desk eating his lunch and men in sealed plastic disease-control space suits walked through his office, taking samples. Once delivering the mail became life-threatening, pedestrians trudging past the main post office on Eighth Avenue bowed their heads a little as they read the credo chiseled on the façade, “Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.”

During another war, across the river, in Newark, a writer turned soldier named Thomas Paine sat down by a campfire in September 1776 and wrote, “These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.” In September and October, I liked to read that before I pulled the rubber band off the newspaper to find out what was being done to my country and what my country was doing back. I like the black and white of Paine’s words. I know I’m no sunshine patriot. I wasn’t shrinking, though, honestly; the most important service we mere mortal citizens were called upon to perform was to spend money, so I dutifully paid for Korean dinners and a new living room lamp. But still I longed for the morning when I could open up the paper and the only people in it who would irk me would be dead suicide bombers and retreating totalitarians on the other side of the world. Because that would be the morning I pulled that flag out of the recycling bin and taped it up in the window. And while I could shake my fists for sure at the terrorists on page one, buried domestic items could still make my stomach hurt — school prayer partisans taking advantage of the grief of children to circumvent the separation of church and state; the White House press secretary condemning a late-night talk show host for making a questionable remark about the U.S. military: “The reminder is to all Americans, that they need to watch what they say, watch what they do, and that this is not a time for remarks like that.” Those are the sorts of never-ending qualms that have turned me into the partly cloudy patriot I long not to be.

When Paine wrote his pamphlet, which came to be called The American Crisis, winter was coming, Washington’s armies were in retreat, the Revolution was floundering. His words inspired soldiers and civilians alike to buck up and endure the war so that someday “not a place upon earth might be so happy as America.”

Thing is, it worked. The British got kicked out. The trees got cleared. Time passed, laws passed and, five student loans later, I made a nice little life for myself.
I can feel it with every passing year, how I’m that much farther away from the sacrifices of the cast-off Indians and Okie farmers I descend from. As recently as fifty years ago my grandmother was picking cotton with bleeding fingers. I think about her all the time while I’m getting overpaid to sit at a computer, eat Chinese takeout, and think things up in my pajamas. The half century separating my fingers, which are moisturized with cucumber lotion and type eighty words per minute, and her bloody digits is an ordinary Land of Opportunity parable, and don’t think I don’t appreciate it. I’m keenly aware of all the ways my life is easier and lighter, how lucky I am to have the time and energy to contemplate the truly important things—Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*, the baked Alaska at Sardi’s, the Dean Martin Christmas record, my growing collection of souvenir snow globes. After all, what is happiness without cheap thrills? Reminds me of that passage in Philip Roth’s novel *American Pastoral* when the middle-aged, prosperous grandson of immigrants marvels that his own daughter loathes the country enough to try to blow it up:

Hate America? Why, he lived in America the way he lived inside his own skin. All the pleasures of his younger years were American pleasures, all that success and happiness had been American, and he need no longer keep his mouth shut about it just to defuse her ignorant hatred. The loneliness he would feel if he had to live in another country. Yes, everything that gave meaning to his accomplishments had been American. Everything he loved was here.

A few weeks after the United States started bombing Afghanistan and the Taliban were in retreat, I turned on the TV news and watched grinning Afghans in the streets of Kabul, allowed to play music for the first time in years. I pull a brain muscle when I try to fathom the rationale for outlawing all music all the time—not certain genres of music, not music with offensive lyrics played by the corrupters of youth, but any form of organized sound. Under Taliban rule, my whole life as an educated (well, at a state school), working woman with CD storage problems would have been null and void. I don’t know what’s more ridiculous, that people like that would deny a person like me the ability to earn a living using skills and knowledge I learned in school, or that they would deny me my unalienable right to chop garlic in time with the B-52’s “Rock Lobster” as I cook dinner.

A few years back, a war correspondent friend of mine gave a speech about Bosnia to an international relations department at a famous midwestern university. I went with him. After he finished, a group of hangers-on, all men except for me, stuck around to debate the finer points of the former Yugoslavia. The conversation was very detailed, including references to specific mayors of specific Croatian villages. It was like record collector geek talk, only about Bosnia. They were the record collectors of Bosnia. So they went on denouncing the various idiotic nationalist causes of various splinter groups, blaming nationalism itself for the genocidal war. And of course a racist nationalism is to blame. But the more they
ranted, the more uncomfortable I became. They, many of them immigrants themselves, considered patriotic allegiance to be a sin, a divisive, villainous drive leading to exclusion, hate, and murder. I, therefore silent, spoke up. This is what I said. I said that I had recently flown over Memphis, Tennessee. I said that the idea of Memphis, Tennessee, not to mention looking down at it, made me go all soft. Because I looked down at Memphis, Tennessee, and thought of all my heroes who had walked its streets. I thought of Sun Records, of the producer Sam Phillips. Sam Phillips, who once described the sort of person he recorded as “a person who had dreamed, and dreamed, and dreamed.” A person like Elvis Presley, his funny bass player Bill Black, his guitarist Scotty Moore (we have the same birthday he and I), Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins. Hello, I’m Johnny Cash. I told the Bosnian record collectors that when I thought of the records of these Memphis men, when I looked out the window at the Mississippi mud and felt their names moistening my tongue what I felt, what I was proud to feel, was patriotic. I noticed one man staring at me. He said he was born in some something-istan I hadn’t heard of. Now that my globe is permanently turned to that part of the world, I realize he was talking about Tajikistan, the country bordering Afghanistan. The man from Tajikistan looked me in the eye and delivered the following warning.

“Those,” he said, of my accolades for Elvis and friends, “are the seeds of war.”

I laughed and told him not to step on my blue suede shoes, but I got the feeling he wasn’t joking.

Before September 11, the national events that have made the deepest impressions on me are, in chronological order: the 1976 Bicentennial, the Iran hostage crisis, Iran-Contra, the Los Angeles riots, the impeachment trial of President Clinton, and the 2000 presidential election. From those events, I learned the following: that the Declaration of Independence is full of truth and beauty: that some people in other parts of the world hate us because we’re Americans; what a shredder is; that the rage for justice is so fierce people will set fire to their own neighborhoods when they don’t get it; that Republicans hate Bill Clinton; and that the ideal of one man, one vote doesn’t always come true. (In the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights’s report Voting Irregularities in Florida During the 2000 Presidential Election, the testimony of Dr. Frederick Shotz of Broward County especially sticks out. A handicapped voter in a wheelchair, Dr. Shotz “had to use his upper body to lift himself up to get up the steps in order for him to access his polling place. Once he was inside the polling place, he was not given a wheelchair accessible polling booth. Once again, he had to use his arms to lift himself up to see the ballot and, while balancing on his arms, simultaneously attempt to cast his ballot.”)

Looking over my list, I can’t help but notice that only one of my formative experiences, the Bicentennial, came with balloons and cake. Being a little kid that year, visiting the Freedom Train with its dramatically lit facsimile of the Declaration, learning that I lived in the greatest, most fair and wise and lovely place on earth, made a big impression on me. I think it’s one of the reasons I’m so fond of
President Lincoln. Because he stared down the crap. More than anyone in the history of the country, he faced up to our most troubling contradiction—that a nation born in freedom would permit the enslavement of human beings—and never once stopped believing in the Declaration of Independence’s ideals, never stopped trying to make them come true.

On a Sunday in November, I walked up to the New York Public Library to see the Emancipation Proclamation. On loan from the National Archives, the document was in town for three days. They put it in a glass case in a small, dark room. Being alone with old pieces of paper and one guard in an alcove at the library was nice and quiet. I stared at Abraham Lincoln’s signature for a long time. I stood there, thinking what one is supposed to think: This is the paper he held in his hands and there is the ink that came from his pen, and when the ink dried the slaves were freed. Except look at the date, January 1, 1863. The words wouldn’t come true for a couple of years, which, I’m guessing, is a long time when another person owns your body. But I love how Lincoln dated the document, noting that it was signed “in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the Independence of the United States of America the eighty-seventh.” Four score and seven years before, is the wonderfully arrogant implication, something as miraculous as the virgin birth happened on this earth, and the calendar should reflect that.

The Emancipation Proclamation is a perfect American artifact to me—a good deed that made a lot of other Americans mad enough to kill. I think that’s why the Civil War is my favorite American metaphor. I’m so much more comfortable when we’re bickering with each other than when we have to link arms and fight a common enemy. But right after September 11, the TV was full of unity. Congressmen, political enemies from both houses of Congress, from both sides of the aisle, stood together on the Capitol steps and sang “God Bless America.” At the memorial service at the National Cathedral, President and Mrs. Carter chatted like old friends with President and Mrs. Ford. Rudolph Giuliani, the mayor of New York, kissed his former opponent Senator Hillary Clinton on the cheek as the New York congressional delegation toured the World Trade Center disaster area.

In September, people across the country and all over the world—including, bless them, the Canadians, and they are born sick of us—were singing the American national anthem. And when I heard their voices I couldn’t help but remember the last time I had sung that song. I was one of hundreds of people standing in the mud on the Washington Mall on January 20 at the inauguration of George Bush. Either you beamed through the ceremony with smiles of joy, or you wept through it all with tears of rage. I admit, I was one of the people there who needed a hankie when it was over. At the end of the ceremony, it was time to sing the national anthem. Some of the dissenters refused to join in. Such was their anger at the country at that moment they couldn’t find it in their hearts to sing.
But I was standing there next to my friend Jack, and Jack and I put our hands over our hearts and sang that song loud. Because we love our country too. Because we wouldn’t have been standing there, wouldn’t have driven down to Washington just to burst into tears if we didn’t care so very, very much about how this country is run.

When the anthem ended—land of the free, home of the brave—Jack and I walked to the other end of the Mall to the Lincoln Memorial to read Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, the speech Lincoln gave at the end of the Civil War about how “we must bind up the nation’s wounds.” It seems so quaint to me now, after September, after CNN started doing hourly live remotes from St. Vincent’s, my neighborhood hospital, that I would conceive of a wound as being peeved about who got to be president.

My ideal picture of citizenship will always be an argument, not a sing-along. I did not get it out of a civics textbook either. I got it from my parents. My mom and dad disagree with me about almost everything. I do not share their religion or their political affiliation. I get on their nerves sometimes. But, and this is the most important thing they taught me, so what? We love each other. My parents and I have been through so much and known each other for so long, share so many in-jokes and memories, our differences of opinion on everything from gun control to Robin Williams movies hardly matter at all. Plus, our disagreements make us appreciate the things we have in common all the more. When I call Republican Senator Orrin Hatch’s office to say that I admire something he said about stem cell research, I am my parents’ daughter. Because they have always enjoyed playing up things we do have in common, like Dolly Parton or ibuprofen. Maybe sometimes, in quiet moments of reflection, my mom would prefer that I not burn eternally in the flames of hell when I die, but otherwise she wants me to follow my own heart.

I will say that, in September, atheism was a lonely creed. Not because atheists have no god to turn to, but because everyone else forgot about us. At a televised interfaith memorial service at Yankee Stadium on September 23, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Sikh, and Hindu clerics spoke to their fellow worshipers. Placido Domingo sang “Ave Maria” for the mayor. I waited in vain for someone like me to stand up and say that the only thing those of us who don’t believe in god have to believe in is other people and that New York City is the best place there ever was for a godless person to practice her moral code. I think it has something to do with the crowded sidewalks and subways. Walking to and from the hardware store requires the push and pull of selfishness and selflessness, taking turns between getting out of someone’s way and them getting out of yours, waiting for a dog to move, helping a stroller up steps, protecting the eyes from runaway umbrellas. Walking in New York is a battle of the wills, a balance of aggression and kindness. I’m not saying it’s always easy. The occasional “Watch where you’re going, can, I admit, put a crimp in one’s day. But I believe all that choreography has made me a better person. The other day, in the subway at 5:30, I was
crammed into my sweaty, crabby fellow citizens, and I kept whispering under my breath “we the people, we the people,” over and over again, reminding myself we’re all in this together and they had as much right — exactly as much right — as I to be in the muggy underground on their way to wherever they were on their way to.

Once, headed uptown on the 9 train, I noticed a sign posted by the Metropolitan Transit Authority advising subway riders who might become ill in the train. The sign asked that the suddenly infirm inform another passenger or get out at the next stop and approach the stationmaster. Do not, repeat, do not pull the emergency brake, the sign said, as this will only delay aid. Which was all very logical, but for the following proclamation at the bottom of the sign, something along the lines of “If you are sick, you will not be left alone.” This strikes me as not only kind, not only comforting, but the very epitome of civilization, good government, i.e., the crux of the societal impulse. Banding together, pooling our taxes, not just making trains, not just making trains that move underground, not just making trains that move underground with surprising efficiency at a fair price — but posting on said trains a notification of such surprising compassion and thoughtfulness, I found myself scanning the faces of my fellow passengers, hoping for fainting, obvious fevers, at the very least a sneeze so that I might offer a tissue.