

Fox Sports, Super Bowl XLII, and the Affirmation of American Civil Religion

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February 3, 2008. Super Bowl Sunday, and I am surrounded by family and friends. We are all too happy to give in to this distinctly American ritual of excess. We have eaten entirely too much well before kickoff. Late in the seemingly endless pregame coverage, beers in hand, a friend points to the television, asking, "Are you watching this?" I turn my attention to the screen, struggling to hear over the enthusiastic conversation in the room. But I am struck immediately by the images: ink and quill moving across parchment paper, colonial architecture, bald eagles, and, of course, waving American flags. "Thank God I'm taping this," I thought.

Like many other readers of this journal, I have grown accustomed to the excessive displays of nationalism that are commonplace in commercial sport. Spectacular productions of the national anthem, military flyovers, and frequent calls to "support the troops" are nearly as much a part of mediated sports as the games themselves. Although this phenomenon is not entirely new—think Whitney Houston and Super Bowl XXV, for example—it has expanded with an intensity unique to American culture in the wake of 9/11. Super Bowl XLII may not be the grandest display—see the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City (Hogan, 2003)—nor the most pervasive—see the everyday rituals of baseball (Butterworth, 2005)—but it may have yielded the most concise iteration yet of sport culture's rhetorical endorsement of the "war on terror." Indeed, Fox television's "Declaration of Independence" is a troubling reminder of the delimited construction of citizenship in contemporary America.

I was taping Super Bowl XLII because I had assigned my communication and sport undergraduates to read Joseph Price's (1992) essay, "The Super Bowl as Religious Festival." Price argues that as one of the defining events in American culture, the Super Bowl demonstrates the "convergence of sports, politics and myth" (p. 13). So even if the transcendental qualities of the Super Bowl are debatable, it is reasonable to assert that the championship game of American professional football contributes to the affirmation of what Bellah (1969) famously calls a "civil religion." Bellah notes that civil religion is "genuinely American," and "it is concerned that America be a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as men can make it, and a light to all the nations" (p. 18).

At its best, then, civil religion unites Americans around a set of “sacred” heroes, documents, and ideals. It is, in short, the baseline of community. At its worst, however, it distorts the community, hailing its members in righteous conformity at the (all too often) violent expense of democratic diversity. In the words of Carolyn Marvin (2002),

U.S. civil religion does do things. It kills. It commands sacrifice. It transforms infants, non-believers, and converts from other national faiths into Americans. It even mobilizes churches, synagogues, and mosques. It offers patriotic instruction in efficacious spells and rituals that believers will put to work when crisis comes. (p. 32)

In 2008, the crisis in America is constituted by the aftermath of 9/11 and the subsequent “war on terror.” In the 7 years since September 11, 2001, the United States has increasingly become defined by militarism and war, most dramatically symbolized by the Bush administration’s rush to invade Iraq and the concomitant scandals associated with faulty intelligence, the abuse of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, policies that have curtailed civil liberties in the United States, and rhetorical justifications for the use of torture that violate the standards upheld by every other democratic nation around the world.

By the time that Super Bowl XLII arrived on February 3, sport had long become a common site for the production of American militarism and nationalism. Televised sport in the United States routinely invokes what Stempel (2006) calls “masculinist moral capital” and deploys patriotic themes as if they are inherently democratic simply *because* they are American. Fox’s presentation of the “Declaration” is representative of this practice. Bellah asserts that a document such as the Declaration is a cornerstone of American civil religion. Thus, it has been endowed throughout U.S. history as uniquely representative of the nation’s democratic heritage. In moments of ongoing crisis, therefore, the ritual invocation of the Declaration serves to renew Americans’ faith in civil religion. Regrettably, Fox’s production exploits patriotism and militarism in ways that justify the mission of the “war on terror” and undermine the democratic values for which the war purportedly is being waged.

Studio host Curt Menefee placed the Declaration in the context of the “war on terror” when he introduced the segment. Fox had presented a similar dramatization during the pregame coverage of Super Bowl XXXVI, the first to be played after 9/11. Six years later, Menefee boasted of the “tradition” for which the network was responsible. The production ran approximately 6.5 minutes and featured prominent current and former members of the National Football League as “readers” of the Declaration. It was heavy on patriotic symbolism, with multiple images of waving American flags and inspirational music providing the score. Meanwhile, dramatic readings of the Declaration itself were presented in the context of American ideals about democratic citizenship.

The segment opened with an image of the rising sun, while actors delivered some of the most revered quotations from figures of the American Revolution. The words of John Adams—"We are in the very midst of revolution"—Ben Franklin—"We must all hang together or most assuredly, we must all hang separately"—and Thomas Jefferson—"The tree of liberty is watered with the blood of patriots and tyrants both"—made clear that the cause of independence was necessary and *worthy of sacrifice*. The subsequent reading, then, was filtered through the trope of sacrifice, thus endowing the Declaration with argumentative power for a contemporary audience. As a communication scholar, I read this an enthymeme, a rhetorical strategy that takes for granted at least one premise. In this case, the hidden premise of the argument is "democratic renewal *requires* sacrifice." In the context of the "war on terror," a war that has been justified by the need to protect freedom and democracy, justifying continued sacrifice has become increasingly necessary.

Halfway through the second minute, the short film cut to an image of Independence Hall in Philadelphia against a panoramic view of a blue sky. As if gesturing to the heavens, the image was an implied reminder of American exceptionalism, the mythic belief that God himself has entrusted the United States with a mission to civilize and democratize the rest of the planet. Such a claim was affirmed by the opening lines of the Declaration itself, "When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people," read by Hall of Fame running back and social activist Jim Brown. Brown was followed by a series of easily recognizable faces, including Indianapolis Colts quarterback and coach Peyton Manning and Tony Dungy, former NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue, and former NFL player and U.S. senator Jack Kemp. In each case, the readers were framed by the patriotic images and landmarks behind them. Tagliabue, for example, spoke from the Jefferson Memorial; New England Patriots linebacker Tedy Bruschi, meanwhile, was inside Independence Hall.

Although additional shots of the U.S. Capitol building and the Washington Monument invoked the landmarks of American civil religion, Fox's production also developed a substantial military narrative. San Diego Chargers running back LaDainian Tomlinson, for example, read his passages on the deck of a naval carrier flanked by members of the U.S. Navy. The overt presence of military personnel, however, was not the most prominent use of militaristic ideology. Rather, two additional themes placed the Declaration squarely in the context of the "war on terror," thus legitimizing the need for additional sacrifice.

First, roughly halfway through the presentation, the camera cut to the image of an American flag. As the camera panned upward, it became clear that the flag was attached to a fence that surrounded the Ground Zero site in New York City. At this point, Michael Strahan, the defensive star of the New York Giants, appeared, surrounded by members of the New York City Fire Department and framed by the hollowed earth behind and below him. This segment was especially significant because those who lost their lives on 9/11 did not do so in the name of freedom and democracy. In no way should this claim be taken as an effort to minimize the depth of the tragedy. However, in the context of the Declaration, viewers were asked to regard the

World Trade Center victims as central figures in the renewal of democracy's promise. Thus, their sacrifice was articulated with those of the firefighters (and police and other rescue workers) as well as the members of the armed forces who now wage a "war on terror" on behalf of those lost on 9/11.

When the production returned to Strahan moments later, the religious overtones returned with him. As he spoke—"appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world"—the camera panned left across the New York City skyline, thus suturing the heavens above with Ground Zero below. Much as the opening moments, then, this sequence invoked a benevolent God looking down on the nation and affirmed the righteousness of Americans who are doing God's work of democratizing the world.

If the images of the World Trade Center provided only an implicit endorsement of the "war on terror" and the sacrifice required to justify it, then the second theme surely made such an argument explicit. No sporting narrative of the past 6 years better symbolizes the contradictions of the Bush administration's wartime policies than the death of Pat Tillman. Despite the considerable evidence that suggests the details of Tillman's death were intentionally distorted and the revelations that Tillman himself questioned the war's purpose, his death remains a condensed symbol of American heroism and sacrifice. Fox television exploited this mythology by including Tillman's widow, Marie, as one of its Declaration readers.

Marie Tillman appeared beside the statue that memorializes her husband, the former Arizona Cardinals player killed by "friendly fire" in Afghanistan in 2004. She was introduced after another image of a blue sky reminded viewers that a higher power is invested in this narrative. Over her words, "it is the right of the people to alter or abolish [the government]," the camera panned down to reveal the statue. Yet it was her second appearance that sanctioned the sacrifice of her fallen husband. With a low-angle camera shot that accentuated Tillman's mythic stature, she read from the last sentence of the Declaration, "We mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes. . . ." The final words then came from Tomlinson, who provided, ". . . and our sacred honor." In this way, Tillman's well-publicized decision to leave behind a multi-million-dollar professional football career so that he could serve the cause of freedom was rearticulated by memorializing him for making the "ultimate sacrifice." In these moments, Tillman served as a metonym for all of the over 4,000 Americans who have died in the "war on terror," echoing the common refrain, "You shall not have died in vain."

The reading of the Declaration itself closed with a cut to the grave site of Thomas Jefferson. With that, the production returned to the actor portrayals of Adams, Jefferson, and John Hancock to illustrate the pride instilled by forming a new nation. This national identity was sanctified in the final moments of the short film with a patriotic flourish that included Ozzie Newsome, Roger Staubach, Don Shula, and Michael Strahan each declaring, "I am an American." Then, as the camera moved from a shot of the Statue of Liberty to the sun setting over the water, an actor's voice concluded, "Our great title is, Americans."

Following the dramatic reading, the screen cut to black, and the score began with the familiar sound of "Taps." Then, across the screen appeared the words, in a script to match the writing of the Declaration itself,

*Fox Sports and the
National Football League
dedicates this depiction of the Declaration of Independence,
the foundation of our democracy, to all the valiant men
and women of our Armed Forces, who have paid the
ultimate sacrifice in defense of our freedom and liberty
for more than 200 years.
"As the sun goes down, we shall honor and remember them."*

In this final segment, the "sacrifice" trope became the dominant theme of the production. Democracy from this view, indeed America itself, is a *product* of sacrifice. This is the essence of national identity, argue Marvin and Ingle (1999). A "nation" is defined, they contend, through "the shared memory of blood sacrifice, periodically renewed" (p. 4). In the case of Fox's dramatization, the renewal of blood sacrifice was sacralized in the context of one of the nation's proudest rituals of civil religion. Because the armed forces are central to this narrative, and because it was presented in the midst an ongoing war, this 6.5-minute production was nothing short of an endorsement of the "war on terror." Moreover, it reduced the available means of identifying as "American," mandating that to do so properly is to honor a history of violence and military aggression.

To be an "American," therefore, is to invoke the legacy of the Declaration of Independence. It is to trumpet the virtues of freedom and democracy. And it is to honor the sacrifice of those whose lives have been given in service to the country. On one hand, following Bellah's observations, I suggest that these characteristics can be productive rhetorical gestures that ensure identification and community. Indeed, there are many reasons for Americans to proudly reflect on the role the United States has played in enabling and ensuring democratic justice around the world. On the other hand, such proclamations should not go unchecked against the many democratic failures of the nation. Among these is the imposition of force on regimes deemed to be threats to American *interests*, regardless of whether or not such regimes present threats to American *security*. In the case of the "war on terror," a military engagement justified by the so-called "Bush Doctrine" of preemptive war, it is increasingly apparent that the use of military force to "spread freedom" is antithetical to democratic principles.

To exclaim "I am an American" in the midst of a highly problematic war mandates a more critical reflection on who Americans can, and *should*, be. Regrettably, Fox's "Declaration of Independence" contained, rather than expanded, the possibilities for democratic citizenship in the United States. By affirming the most common myths of American exceptionalism, the production relied on simplistic readings of the nation's founding document and symbolic references to patriotic images and monuments. It asserted that being American is sufficient to protecting democracy, rather than proposing that cultivating democracy is necessary for renewing America. Hughes (2004) maintains that the common use of national patriotic myths may be envisioned in more genuinely democratic terms. He writes,

A true revolution of American values will not call on Americans to scuttle their national myths. Rather, a true revolution of values might well ask Americans to embrace the myths in their highest and noblest form. A true revolution of values will, however, ask Americans to embrace those myths with extraordinary humility. It will also encourage Americans to learn to see the world through someone else's eyes, perhaps even through the eyes of their enemies. (p. 195)

Such humility has been in short supply during the past 7 years, especially within the context of commercial sport. In short, at a time in the nation's history when greater introspection is desperately needed, Fox and its Declaration instead reduced democracy to a flag-waving, chest-thumping pregame spectacle. Such pronouncements are all too "American," indeed.

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