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# **American Patriotism and the Obama Presidency: How an Attempt to Rebrand Patriotism Created Increased Political Polarization in the United States**

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AMERICAN PATRIOTISM AND THE OBAMA PRESIDENCY: HOW AN ATTEMPT TO  
REBRAND PATRIOTISM CREATED INCREASED POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN  
THE UNITED STATES.

Master's Thesis

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## Abstract

In the post-9/11 era, patriotism has remained a vital and evolving concept in the United States. This thesis argues that the Obama administration's efforts to rebrand patriotism significantly increased political polarization within American society. By examining primary sources, including memoirs and speeches, the research traces the development of patriotism throughout the Obama presidency. The analysis is supported by news and magazine articles, along with a variety of secondary sources, to reinforce the arguments presented. Additionally, this thesis positions President Obama's interpretation of patriotism on a scale within John Bodnar's concepts of war-based patriotism and empathetic patriotism. It examines the coherence between Obama's words and his actions, revealing that his words often did not match his deeds due to multiple different factors, for instance, right-wing criticism. The emphasis on patriotism by Obama was sometimes exaggerated, often due to criticism, complicating his ability to fulfill his articulated vision of the concept. The aftermath of 9/11, particularly the War on Terror, posed challenges for the Obama administration to be perceived as empathetic patriots, thus contributing to the broader political divide that arose in the post-9/11 era.

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## Introduction

On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, while listening to the radio on his drive to a meeting in Chicago, then-Illinois state Senator Barack Hussein Obama heard that hijacked planes had struck the World Trade Center. When he arrived at his destination – a state government building – it was already evacuated. On the curb, he learned that it had been a terrorist attack. That night, as he rocked his youngest daughter, Sasha, to sleep while watching the news, he felt a deep sense of national vulnerability.<sup>1</sup> A little over seven years later Obama was elected President of the United States, and the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks was still high on his political agenda. Barack Obama's journey from witnessing the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks to becoming President of the United States encapsulates a period of profound change in how patriotism was understood. The continued change in the concept of patriotism throughout his presidency will be discussed in this thesis.

Right after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the term patriotism was seen as even more meaningful than it had been before. It is a term with multiple aspects, including one's devotion and support for their country.<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, patriotism is defined through the scholar Bodnar's concepts of war-based patriotism and empathetic patriotism. Bodnar claims that war-based patriotism is defined by an aggressive stance, a desire for revenge, and a collective commitment to defend one's nation. It creates an attitude of hostility and violence.<sup>3</sup> Empathic patriotism, conversely, is defined by stronger feelings of disapproval for the violence frequently associated with war-based patriotism.<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that no

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<sup>1</sup> David Nakamura, "Obama Discusses His 'Where Were You on 9/11' Memory on Solemn Anniversary" *Washington Post*, September 11, 2015. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-discusses-his-where-were-you-on-911-memories-on-solemn-anniversary/2015/09/11/588ce85c-58c3-11e5-8bb1-b488d231bba2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-discusses-his-where-were-you-on-911-memories-on-solemn-anniversary/2015/09/11/588ce85c-58c3-11e5-8bb1-b488d231bba2_story.html).

<sup>2</sup> Tom W. Smith, and Seokho Kim, "National Pride in Comparative Perspective: 1995/96 and 2003/04." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 18, no. 1 (2006): 127.

<sup>3</sup> John Bodnar, *Divided by Terror: American Patriotism After 9/11* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 23.

<sup>4</sup> Bodnar, *Divided by Terror*, 3.

violence occurs within empathetic patriotism, just that the step towards violence is more thought through than it is within war-based patriotism. The thesis does not claim that any individual is either a war-based patriot or an empathetic patriot. One can be a bit of both. The thesis does, however, aim to examine where Obama fits within Bodnar's concepts of patriotism.

In the post-9/11 era, the term patriotism has developed into a more complex and debated concept, with interpretations varying among individuals. The term still includes a strong sense of pride for one's country, active participation in the civic life of the nation, and a defense of values. However, the term has undergone shifts in interpretation and perception, influenced by various factors, including geopolitical events, social changes, and cultural shifts. An important actor during the change of the concept of patriotism was President Barack Obama. He made history by being the first African American to hold the nation's highest office, from 2009 until 2017. He is known to have different views than his predecessors. Moreover, Obama is seen as a 'softer' president than republicans George W. Bush and Donald J. Trump, who took office prior to and after Obama, respectively.

Overall, the academic field on patriotism in the post-9/11 era reflects a complex and multifaceted discourse. Many scholars, like Brian Monahan, discuss the change in the meaning of the concept in the post-9/11 era. They do this by, for example, examining how the media portrayed this concept and thereby influenced society. Scholars also focus on how measures taken in the name of patriotism, such as the Patriot Act, impacted individual freedoms and civil rights. Furthermore, the post-9/11 era included military interventions by the United States, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq. Scholars such as John Bodnar delve into the relationship between patriotism and the support for these military operations. There are also many different perspectives on the concept of patriotism within scholarly work.

Some scholars discuss the topic through a critical lens, while others take on a more global perspective, or utilize a memory studies perspective.

As the first African American President of the United States, Barack Obama is a much-discussed individual in academic literature. A key area of focus within the scholarly field is the significance of his race and ethnicity, including how it shaped his political career, affected his presidency, impacted the larger public and brought about changes in the United States. The relationship between racism and patriotism during his presidency is an often-discussed topic within literature as well. For instance, Parker et al. discuss how these two concepts were very closely intertwined during the 2008 elections. Furthermore, his portrayal in the media and public perceptions of him are also frequently discussed topics. Ackerman, for instance, discusses the critique Obama received from the right-wing. The term patriotism within this discussion is mentioned in relation to how Obama's ideologies shaped public attitudes towards himself. Since he left office, his legacy has been a growing interest within the academic field. For instance, some recent studies have discussed his longer-term impact on American politics and society. Recently, the enduring effects of his policies have also become a more frequently discussed topic among scholars. Overall, the academic field on Barack Obama continues to evolve as new research is published and scholars reassess his presidency in light of ongoing political developments and societal changes. Although the above shows that the two concepts, Barack Obama and patriotism, combined are discussed within the academic field, the relationship between the two has not been examined extensively, and many questions relating to patriotism in the Obama era remain. This research aims to discuss a topic that is hardly discussed in the current scholarship: the significance of the Obama presidency for American patriotism.

The research question to be answered in this thesis is: What was the significance of the Obama presidency for American patriotism? The thesis will also aim to answer the

following sub-questions: How did Obama's actions in relation to patriotism match his words? How did Obama translate his interpretation of the concept of patriotism to U.S. citizens? And how did Obama's interpretation change the meaning of the concept of patriotism between 2009 and 2017? All in all, this thesis aims to connect Obama's interpretation of the concept of patriotism to the bigger picture and see how the Democrat changed the meaning behind the concept for U.S. citizens in the post-9/11 era.

This thesis will use a multidisciplinary approach of speech analysis and comparative analysis. By analyzing primary sources, including speeches from Obama and memoirs written by him and his advisers, this research aims to explore the development of the term patriotism during Obama's presidency. This thesis aims to answer the research question by comparing and contrasting these memoirs and analyzing some of Obama's speeches. Furthermore, this thesis will use many news and magazine articles to strengthen its arguments. The analysis of the sources will thus mostly be focused on how Obama interpreted patriotism and how this is translated into his actions and influenced the concept of patriotism.

There are many different memoirs written by people close to Obama during his eight years in office. In examining Obama's interpretation of patriotism, three memoirs offer valuable insights. The written memoirs include his own, *A Promised Land* (2020),<sup>5</sup> and one about Ben Rhodes' time in office, named *The World as It Is: A Memoir of The Obama White House* (2018).<sup>6</sup> Rhodes started as Obama's speech writer during his presidency and worked closely with Obama over the eight years. The third relevant memoir is about Hillary Clinton's time in office, *Hard Choices* (2014).<sup>7</sup> She was Obama's rival during the primary elections, and she was the Secretary of State during his first term. By analyzing their narratives, we can

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<sup>5</sup> Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (First Edition, New York: Crown, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Ben Rhodes, *The World as It Is: A Memoir of The Obama White House* (New York: Random House, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Hard Choices* (Simon & Schuster UK Ltd., 2014).



corroborate Obama's articulated patriotic ideals with real-world examples, which will show us whether his actions were in line with his beliefs. Through extensive examination of these three memoirs, this thesis will set out to identify Obama's interpretation of the concept of patriotism.

Throughout his eight years in office, and even before and during his campaign, Obama gave numerous speeches to United States citizens discussing his views on political issues, his resolutions on how to better the country, and more. The speeches used for the research are his first inaugural speech on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009,<sup>8</sup> his second inaugural speech on January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2013,<sup>9</sup> and his speech after the death of Osama bin Laden on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011.<sup>10</sup> These speeches were chosen because they represent pivotal moments where Obama was compelled to use patriotic language to address the nation, underscoring his commitment to the country and its values. The speeches of Barack Obama follow a quite similar pattern. Both of the inaugural speeches follow a similar pattern as those of prior presidents. The majority of presidents used their inaugural speeches to outline their vision for the United States and state their political objectives for the upcoming four years in office.<sup>11</sup> This is what Obama did as well, both times, during the roughly twenty minutes he addressed U.S. citizens and the rest of the world. During the speech he gave after Osama bin Laden was killed, he discussed whatever he could share about the mission, and his future political objectives after this major turn of events. The speeches show us how he transmitted his idea of the concept of patriotism to U.S. society and how he used his words to make the listener believe in his ideas.

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<sup>8</sup> Macon Phillips, "President Barack Obama's Inaugural Address," National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed April 16, 2024, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/01/21/president-Barack-obamas-inaugural-address>.

<sup>9</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, "Inaugural Address by President Barack Obama," National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed April 16, 2024, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/21/inaugural-address-president-barack-obama>.

<sup>10</sup> Macon Phillips, "Osama Bin Laden Dead," National Archives and Records Administration, Accessed April 16, 2024, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/05/02/osama-bin-laden-dead>.

<sup>11</sup> The Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies, "Inaugural Address," The Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies, November 13, 2020. <https://www.inaugural.senate.gov/inaugural-address/>.

There are a few limitations to this thesis. Firstly, the term patriotism has many different connotations, which complicates the research. To tackle this issue, the thesis establishes one definition of patriotism and only discusses Bodnar's concepts of war-based patriotism and empathic patriotism. This does mean that this research is limited to one connotation of patriotism while other connotations remain unexplored. The justification for the decision to use Bodnar's concepts is that his study is very recent, and these new concepts within the state of the field are a good opening to continue to use those for research. Secondly, this thesis is written in the Netherlands, which means there is no access to undigitized U.S. sources to use for this thesis. There are, however, plenty of digitized sources that can be used to complete this research as best as possible.

The first chapter of this thesis consists of a literature review discussing academic literature on patriotism and Obama in the post-9/11 era. This chapter will highlight the main concepts and events that need to be discussed and understood in order to comprehend the research case. Furthermore, it discusses the most important scholars in this field and how their arguments compare to each other. This chapter will aim to determine the current state of the academic field with regard to Obama's interpretation of the concept of patriotism.

The second chapter will explore primary sources and secondary sources that will confirm that Obama is indeed a patriot, and under which of Bodnar's concepts of patriotism he fits. In order to do so, we first need to examine how Obama understands the concept of patriotism. This chapter aims to analyze both his interpretation of the term and use Bodnar's theoretical framework as a starting point to examine the type of patriot Obama can be seen as. Lastly, this chapter aims to create a starting point for the next chapter, by examining what U.S. society understood as patriotic ideals in the post-9/11 era, but before Obama took office.

The third and final chapter will first examine whether Obama's actions matched his words in relation to patriotism, and then it will go on to show how right-wing criticism

influenced his constant emphasis on patriotism for the public eye. Overall, it will show how multiple events, like the drone attacks in the Middle East, speeches by Obama, and more, influenced the development of the term throughout his presidency and how this set the stage for the 2016 presidential elections. This chapter aims to show the development of the term patriotism during Obama's presidency, and how external factors, like right-wing media critics, also influence the development of the term.

Just as Barack Obama could recall, billions of other people remember exactly where they were and what they were doing when they heard about the 9/11 attacks. They have also seen the world and the United States itself change. New principles, new policies, and new ideals became important in the post-9/11 era. The views on the world changed. Patriotism became a very important concept. While the connotation of the concept seems to have changed through multiple presidencies, the importance of the concept remains, which is why research keeps on adding new insights to the academic field.

## Chapter 1: Literature Review

Before the main part of this thesis, some more general background knowledge on the topic of patriotism and Obama is needed. There is a variety of recent scholarly literature on patriotism, and also many older academic works discussing post-9/11 patriotism. After 9/11 there was a wave of academic works focusing on the event and discussing its relation to the term patriotism. As Harry Boyte describes it; “New American Patriotism” of the post 9/11 era.<sup>12</sup> An era where patriotism became a very important ideal intertwined with society. Even more important than in the previous decades when the term already was intertwined with American society. This had been an era where the love for one’s country became prominent too. So prominent that “the Bush Administration called for a new patriotic spirit in which service figures as the central counterpart to a unilateralist foreign policy.”<sup>13</sup> Hence the War on Terror.

The concept of patriotism and President Barack Obama are linked together within scholarly literature sometimes. During the Obama era, some of the most ‘patriotic’ moments discussed were Osama bin Laden’s death, and nearly everything related to the United States’ wars with Afghanistan and Iraq. These patriotic moments also occur within academic literature as case studies related to either Obama, patriotism, or both. As Jarvis and Holland argue, patriotism and patriotic events became particularly important in the post-9/11 era as the memory of 9/11 and the pain that the event caused translated into patriotic potentialities. This is how patriotism becomes a product of political desire, by capitalizing on the nation’s patriotic feelings.<sup>14</sup> The War on Terror, Arab Spring, and the death of Osama bin Laden increased patriotic feelings, which is why these events had such an impact on the United

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<sup>12</sup> Harry C. Boyte, “Civic Education and the New American Patriotism Post-9/11,” *Cambridge Journal of Education* 33, no. 1 (2003): 85.

<sup>13</sup> Boyte, “Civic Education and the New American Patriotism Post-9/11,” 90.

<sup>14</sup> Lee Jarvis and Jack Holland, “‘We [for]Got Him’: Remembering and Forgetting in the Narration of Bin Laden’s Death,” *Millennium* 42, no. 2 (2014): 444.

States and the Obama administration. When academic literature discusses Obama and his presidency in relation to patriotism, the War on Terror he continued after years of efforts from the United States cannot be missed. While Obama had a different way of influencing society to support the war and even fighting the War on Terror compared to President George W. Bush<sup>15</sup>, as highlighted in Ackerman's *Reign of Terror*, scholars tend to agree that patriotism was still an important factor in justifying the War on Terror. Even if patriotism differed in meaning during Obama's presidency compared to other periods in US history.

The term patriotism is linked to politics, society, and even economics. As Daniels et al. argue, patriotic thoughts can influence the economy of a country. According to the research, the post-9/11 era brought many patriotic ideals with it, and those ideals tended to create a desire to limit imports into the United States.<sup>16</sup> But most often patriotism in the United States researched through a scholarly lens focuses on the relation between society and politics, as patriotism is often linked to politics. In the post-9/11 era, the research on the relationship between society and politics discusses a lot of the new technologies and the rising influence of the media that came into play. Especially how discourse and narrative in, for example, media and literature have great effects on society. For instance, in Monahan's book *The Shock of the News Media Coverage and the Making of 9/11* he emphasizes that American television networks participated in a patriotic reconstruction of American self-identity in the post-9/11 era.<sup>17</sup> By constructing the idea that the response to 9/11 was patriotic, which was seen as positive, patriotism became more intense. Even government officials

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<sup>15</sup> Spencer Ackerman, *Reign of Terror: How the 9/11 Era Destabilized America and Produced Trump* (Penguin, 2021), 122.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph P. Daniels, Emily Kapszukiewicz, and Marc von der Ruhr, "International Trade Policy Preferences: The Impact of Patriotism and Nationalism Pre- and Post-9/11," *Atlantic Economic Journal* 48, no. 1 (2020): 97-98.

<sup>17</sup> Brian A. Monahan, *The Shock of the News Media Coverage and the Making of 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 144.

influenced what was shown in the media, which mostly put emphasis on patriotic ideals, to further their own agenda, according to Monahan.<sup>18</sup>

Much of the academic literature focuses on patriotic symbols that influenced society in both the pre- and post-9/11 era. For instance, scholarly works on the United States flag, the Statue of Liberty, or the Pledge of Alliance. A relevant example in this regard is the work of Bratta. In line with the argument of Monahan, he argues that the influence of television, thus media, helped construct the patriotic behavior of United States citizens.<sup>19</sup> His discussion delves further into how the flag is a symbol of patriotism. He argues that the flag is linked to a patriotic narrative, as it unifies Americans who acknowledge each other's love for their country by displaying the flag.<sup>20</sup> Patriotic symbols are also used by politicians to advance their own agenda and influence their popularity. A study by Kalmoe and Gross that delves into U.S. flag imagery effects in presidential elections, using data from campaigns from early 2016 and efforts from 2012, elaborates on the importance of patriotism within politics. The study's findings indicate that political campaigns frequently try to exploit the flag's status as a national symbol for electoral advantage. The flag strengthened the influence of symbolic patriotism on voting behavior and the advantages of the flag was felt a little more strongly by Republicans. This was particularly because Republican candidates gained a lot from flag exposure among voters who identified as Republicans, and who were highly patriotic.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, while the use of patriotic symbols could benefit Obama in terms of citizen support in the post-9/11 era, being a Democrat, there was no need to put much emphasis on patriotism as it would not affect his followers that much.

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<sup>18</sup> Monahan, *The Shock of the News Media Coverage and the Making of 9/11*, 142.

<sup>19</sup> Phillip M. Bratta, "Flag Display Post-9/11: A Discourse on American Nationalism," *Journal of American culture* (Malden, Mass.) 32, no. 3 (2009): 233.

<sup>20</sup> Bratta, "Flag Display Post-9/11," 241.

<sup>21</sup> Nathan P. Kalmoe and Kimberly Gross, "Cueing Patriotism, Prejudice, and Partisanship in the Age of Obama: Experimental Tests of U.S. Flag Imagery Effects in Presidential Elections," *Political psychology* 37, no. 6 (2016): 897.

It is difficult to put a fixed definition on the concept of patriotism. According to the scholar Wayne Journell, the term patriotism has been taught at US schools for ages.<sup>22</sup> However, what this particular work shows is that the term patriotism is much more complicated than expected by many. The term comes with controversial discussion, and there are many different notions and expressions related to the concept. There is not one type of patriotism, and many different scholars discuss many different meanings and notions of patriotism. One of them is Westheimer, who discusses patriotism as authoritarian patriotism or democratic patriotism, two concepts created by political scientist Douglas Lummis.<sup>23</sup> Within this ideology, authoritarian patriotism is the belief that one's country is superior compared to others, where supporters show a non-questioning loyalty and follow their leaders unconditionally. Democratic patriotism, on the other hand, is the belief that their nation's ideals are worthy of admiration and respect, but supporters can be critical and deliberative.<sup>24</sup> Then there is also Bodnar, who discusses both war-based and empathic patriotism. The definition of these concepts will be discussed later in this chapter.

For U.S. citizens, feelings of patriotism are a product of socialization. Many values and traditions contribute to feelings of patriotism. As Journell mentions, patriotism is taught in U.S. schools from an early age.<sup>25</sup> Wolak and Dawkins's research argues that patriotism is learned to be associated with a positive connotation at a young age.<sup>26</sup> This explains the pride people take in being patriotic. If every American from a young age is taught that patriotic values are good, this develops an overall attitude about the United States' place in the world. According to this particular research, when people find themselves in political and social

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<sup>22</sup> Wayne Journell, ed. *Reassessing the Social Studies Curriculum: Promoting Critical Civic Engagement in a Politically Polarized, Post-9/11 World* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 42.

<sup>23</sup> Joel Westheimer, "Politics and Patriotism in Education," *Phi Delta Kappan* 87, no. 8 (2006): 610.

<sup>24</sup> Westheimer, "Politics and Patriotism in Education," 610.

<sup>25</sup> Journell, ed., *Reassessing the Social Studies Curriculum*, 42.

<sup>26</sup> Jennifer Wolak and Ryan Dawkins, "The Roots of Patriotism Across Political Contexts," *Political Psychology*, 38(3), (2017): 392.

environments that match their ideal definition of America, their patriotic feelings will even strengthen.<sup>27</sup> This idea explains how politicians can strengthen patriotic feelings among their supporters. They can do so by creating the perfect political and social environment to match their supporter's ideal values.

There is a distinction between patriotism and nationalism, which is important to emphasize before starting this research. Both involve individuals taking pride in one's country. However, nationalism is a strong sense of national devotion that prioritizes one's own country over all other nations, whereas patriotism is a love or devoted allegiance to one's own country.<sup>28</sup> In other words, patriots believe in their ideals and have a particular way of life that they think is best but have no wish to force this way of living onto other people. The concept of patriotism is not associated with hostility toward outgroups.<sup>29</sup> Nationalism, on the other hand, is inseparable from the desire for power, and the urge to force this upon others is much bigger than with patriotism. Multiple scholars delve into the importance of distinguishing patriotism from nationalism, as these terms are often misused and become synonymous. According to Bratta, patriotism is more ethically correct than nationalism.<sup>30</sup> It can however be debated how ethical patriots are, as there are many different notions of patriotism, with one seeming more ethical and morally right than the other.

War-based patriotism and empathetic patriotism are the terms used to refer to the different types of patriotism within this thesis. One of the more well-known scholars focused on patriotism in the United States is John Bodnar. In his recent works, he discusses different forms of patriotism and the impact of the concept after 9/11 on the United States. Two terms that Bodnar describes in his book *Divided by Terror* will be mentioned frequently in this thesis: war-based patriotism and empathetic patriotism. According to Bodnar, war-based

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<sup>27</sup> Wolak and Dawkins, "The Roots of Patriotism Across Political Contexts," 392.

<sup>28</sup> Smith and Kim, "National Pride in Comparative Perspective," 127.

<sup>29</sup> Wolak and Dawkins, "The Roots of Patriotism Across Political Contexts," 391.

<sup>30</sup> Bratta, "Flag Display Post-9/11," 233.



patriotism is characterized by an aggressive stance and desire for revenge, and a collective willingness to fight for one's country. It nurtures the feeling of hatred and aggression.<sup>31</sup> Empathic patriotism, on the other hand, is characterized by more critical feelings towards violence that often is accepted with war-based patriotism.<sup>32</sup> Many authors agree, albeit using different terminology, that there was a shift from the so-called war-based patriotism towards the more empathetic patriotism during the Obama era. Bush's interpretation of patriotism was very harsh and comes with violence, while that of Obama was often described as softer.

The concept of patriotism has many different interpretations, as we have now established. Bodnar's earlier work from 1996 contains multiple essays from different scholars that have contributed to different critical viewpoints on the concept of patriotism. All of the essays are from a different time period over the prior century, and they all discuss the main issues and concerns regarding American patriotism during their own particular time period. The starting point of his study is from the 'so-called' pioneer in the study of American patriotism: Merle Curti. What can be learned from Bodnar's extension of the work of Curti is that existing conceptions of patriotism will continue to flourish as long as competing interests within the United States battle for dominance and power.<sup>33</sup> This idea supports this thesis' argument that the concept of patriotism changes connotation and that the meaning of the term is dependent on multiple different influences.

Barack Obama has often been discussed in academic literature, as he was the forty-fourth and the first African American President of the United States. However, academic research on him and his presidency varies massively, which is why this research remains limited to Obama and his interpretation of patriotism. Research on the forty-fourth president

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<sup>31</sup> Bodnar, *Divided by Terror*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> John Bodnar, *Bonds of Affection: Americans Define Their Patriotism* (1st ed, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 9.

varies from his effects on African American citizens in the country to financial changes during his term and a lot more. With regard to his interpretation of patriotism, academic works remain limited. A few studies do dive deeply into this topic. For instance, Sheila Croucher argues that while Obama was widely noted for his cosmopolitan sensibilities, he relied heavily on themes of patriotism and American exceptionalism. Referring to both his inaugural speeches, she states that the former president subtly shifted from a more cosmopolitan stance towards a more nationalist one, which is in line with the harsher connotation of patriotism.<sup>34</sup>

Patriotism and racism are two terms closely intertwined, which can be clearly shown in scholarly literature by using Obama as an example. There is no denying that Obama's presidency was a big achievement due to him being the first black man to become President of the United States. Multiple scholars have examined the link between patriotism and the politics of race in the United States. Take, for example, the research of Parker et al., in which they discuss how both race and patriotism were a few of the biggest reoccurring themes to highlight the difference between Obama and his opponents during the 2008 campaign. In the article, the authors argue that racism and patriotism can be intertwined, as Obama was not seen as a 'real' American by some, and his patriotism was questioned by those same people.<sup>35</sup> Some scholars argue that since Obama's presidency, the discussion about the concept of patriotism has intensified. According to Burkey and Zamalin progressive thinkers and progressive politics have shown a renewed interest in patriotism in recent decades, and black politics used patriotic narratives in their latest forms during the presidency of Barack

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<sup>34</sup> Sheila Croucher, "From World Citizenship to Purified Patriotism: Obama's Nation-Shaping in a Global Era," *Identities (Yverdon, Switzerland)* 22, no. 1 (2015): 9.

<sup>35</sup> Christopher S. Parker, Mark Q. Sawyer, and Christopher Towler, "A BLACK MAN IN THE WHITE HOUSE?: The Role of Racism and Patriotism in the 2008 Presidential Election," *Du Bois review* 6, no. 1 (2009): 194.

Obama.<sup>36</sup> Patriotic ideals were very important to many Americans, which is why Obama's presidency in relation to patriotism (and racism) is a reoccurring topic in academic literature.

Multiple scholars argue that U.S. citizens had difficulties viewing Obama as a true American. As Devos and Ma argue in their work on this topic, during the 2008 campaign Obama was viewed as less of an American than his opponents, mostly because of race and due to the fact that he lacked 'American identity' and therefore had less support.<sup>37</sup> Research by Gilmore et. al. argues that Obama invoked American exceptionalism in his speeches to the American public.<sup>38</sup> According to them, this is most likely due to him being a target of attacks on patriotism, impacting the exaggerated quantity of these invocations.<sup>39</sup> There could be a link between citizens having difficulty viewing Obama as a 'real' American and his use of American exceptionalism in his speeches. The emphasis on American exceptionalism is an important aspect of patriotism. When seen as patriotic, chances are an individual is also seen as a 'real' American. Obama may have utilized this effect to gain more support from U.S. citizens.

Right-wing supporters are mostly critical of Obama and his ideals, according to scholars. As Ackerman describes in his book, especially white supremacists were critical of Obama.<sup>40</sup> In some cases, however, this may have more to do with islamophobia than with how patriotic Obama was. Islamophobia is a form of racism against Muslims. This is also a recurring theme in scholarly articles discussing Obama's presidency and is related to patriotism. As Parker et al. discuss: Obama's middle name 'Hussein' gives people a window

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<sup>36</sup> Maxwell Burkey and Alex Zamalin, "Patriotism, Black Politics and Racial Justice in America," *New political science* 38, no. 3 (2016): 371.

<sup>37</sup> Thierry Devos and Debbie S. Ma, "How 'American' Is Barack Obama? The Role of National Identity in a Historic Bid for the White House: National Identity and Presidential Election," *Journal of applied social psychology* 43 (2012): 221-222.

<sup>38</sup> Jason Gilmore, Penelope Sheets, and Charles Rowling, "Make No Exception, Save One: American Exceptionalism, the American Presidency, and the Age of Obama," *Communication monographs* 83, no. 4 (2016): 514.

<sup>39</sup> Gilmore, Sheets and Rowling, "Make No Exception," 516.

<sup>40</sup> Ackerman, *Reign of Terror*, 186.

to label Obama as not a ‘true’ American. Citizens even go as far as to brand him a terrorist.<sup>41</sup> This refers back to the main discussion of whether Obama is patriotic enough, which remains a question for American citizens, according to the overall scholarly literature.

Both post-9/11 patriotism and Barack Obama are often discussed topics in academic literature. The two concepts combined are discussed too, but not as extensively, and many questions relating to patriotism in the Obama era remain. The definition of the term patriotism used in this thesis is one’s love or devoted allegiance to their own country, and this should not be mixed up with the concept of nationalism, as this mistake is often made. For this thesis, Bodnar’s interpretation of the concept of patriotism, based on the terms war-based patriotism and empathic patriotism, will be used. While there are many different connotations of the term patriotism, the recency of Bodnar’s work that discusses these interpretations of the term gives this thesis a good starting point to further use his interpretations of patriotism. As prior scholarly research has already established, the relation between politics and society is intertwined and patriotism plays a great role in how politics affect society and vice versa. Furthermore, research has already highlighted that an important difference between President Obama and other presidents has to do with the concept of patriotism, but how his interpretation of the concept of patriotism affected society and national identity is still up for debate.

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<sup>41</sup> Parker, Sawyer, and Towler, “A BLACK MAN IN THE WHITE HOUSE?” 194.

## Chapter 2: Obama's Understanding of Patriotism

### 2.1 Introduction

From the earliest days of his rise to presidency, Obama's middle name – Hussein – became a focal point of discussion, particularly among the extreme right wing. The echoes of these doubts reverberated so strongly that Obama felt compelled to publicly release his birth certificate, a symbolic act in defense of his allegiance to the United States. Yet, for Obama, patriotism was not merely a shield against accusations but a deeply personal concept as well. This chapter seeks to unravel Obama's understanding of patriotism. With the use of the primary sources – the memoirs and the speeches – Obama's interpretation will be compared to Bodnar's definitions of patriotism. I argue that we cannot put Obama's interpretation in either the war-based patriotic box or the empathic patriotic box but that we can find the right place on this scale to put Obama's interpretation.

In this chapter, first I confirm that Obama has many patriotic values, which especially shows in his own memoir and is confirmed by the memoirs of Rhodes and Clinton. Second, I contend that while Obama does show a few ideals that seem more war-based patriotic during his time in office, overall, his presidency consists of more empathetic patriotic ideals. This particularly shows when discussing his policies and within his speeches. Lastly, I define the state of patriotism within U.S. society post-9/11 and prior to the Obama administration arriving in office, to set the stage for what actually transformed within the concept during the Obama era.

### 2.2 The Importance of Patriotism for Barack Obama

Neither Obama, Clinton nor Rhodes explicitly mentions their interpretation of patriotism in their respective memoirs. This is most likely due to various reasons. Firstly, all three memoirs are commercial books. Definitions of certain terms will not help sell the book to a larger

audience, as it might bore readers. Secondly, most likely, all three individuals still had some political motivations when they published their memoirs. Especially Clinton, as she – at the time – was still planning to run for future United States President. Thus, her memoir had to mostly discuss her success, and mention what her followers wanted to hear to not lose future supporters and voters. On the other hand, Obama would never return as President, as there is a maximum of two terms per individual. However, he still had certain beliefs and most likely still wanted to emphasize democratic ideals to keep his supporters on that side. The same goes for Rhodes. By sometimes remaining more objective on certain topics and by not explicitly mentioning their idea of the right definition for certain topics, they probably deliberately attempted to keep the political support on the Democratic side.

While Obama was not raised in a patriotic family, he developed his own ideas about the concept throughout the years. In the very first chapter of his memoir *A Promised Land*, Obama describes his own history related to the term patriotism. “My mother and grandparents had never been noisy in their patriotism,” he writes. For them, patriotic ideals were more seen as pleasant rituals, and even his grandfather’s military service was downplayed in their family. He continues: “Yet the pride in being American, the notion that America was the greatest country on earth – that was always a given.”<sup>42</sup> The way in which he then goes on to tell about discussions he had with friends about American exceptionalism, and that he knew that America fell perpetually short of its ideals,<sup>43</sup> shows that from an early age on the concept of patriotism has played a role in his life and that he was able to develop his own ideas about this concept. He had his own internal discussion of what “his” America was.<sup>44</sup> Throughout his memoir, this does become clearer, just as his interpretation of the concept of patriotism. There, he shows that he is indeed patriotic, and that feeling got

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<sup>42</sup> Obama, *A Promised Land*, 13.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 14.

stronger over time during his presidency, which you can see in the way he writes about the United States throughout his memoir. Especially the pride he felt after the killing of Osama bin Laden shows how strong of a patriot he was.

The importance of patriotism for Obama himself can be seen within the speeches he gave throughout his presidency. For instance, in his speeches he discusses the U.S. military a lot. Gratefulness towards the U.S. military is often regarded as a distinctive feature of the concept of patriotism. By discussing the U.S. military positively multiple times within his speech, he thus implies his patriotic stance and encourages the listeners to have this same attitude towards the military as well. In his second inaugural speech, he weaves many symbols into his speech. For instance, he discusses the founding documents, “our” Constitution, or when he says: “My oath is not so different from the pledge we all make to the flag that waves above and that fills our hearts with pride.”<sup>45</sup> Notably, the American flag, an enduring symbol of patriotism, is invoked to underscore his unwavering commitment to national pride. Obama's deliberate inclusion of these symbols suggests a calculated effort to emphasize his dedication to patriotism and evoke a shared sense of national identity. By weaving these symbols into his speech, Obama aims not only to inspire but also to reaffirm the collective allegiance to the principles of patriotism.

Obama is characterized as a true patriot throughout Rhodes’ memoir. Take for example the quote: “Obama believed in a competent, stabilizing force: the necessity of taking military action against certain terrorist networks, [...] the indispensability of the United States to international order.”<sup>46</sup> This quote shows Obama’s dedication to lifting the country up. Especially his need for taking military action against certain terrorist networks seems quite patriotic. “Obama was committed to taking out al Qaeda,”<sup>47</sup> according to Rhodes.

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<sup>45</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, “Inaugural Address by President Barack Obama.”

<sup>46</sup> Rhodes, *The World as It Is*, 49.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

During his presidency, the war in Afghanistan escalated more, while the Iraq War de-escalated. Furthermore, one of Obama's priorities remained to find Osama bin Laden. After Osama bin Laden's death, Obama said "America can do big things." He wanted to remind the country, he said, that "we once came together around 9/11; that for all the pain and polarization of the last decade, we stuck with it, and we got bin Laden." He said, "No other country in the world could have done that."<sup>48</sup> The implementation of that particular quote by Obama in Rhodes' memoir shows the patriot in Obama. It shows the pride he takes in the United States, and how good the country is in relation to the other countries in the world. And, in addition, how they can accomplish what no other country in the world could have done.

Obama's devotion to patriotism is important for all United States citizens. One of the most discussed events during Obama's presidency was when he succeeded in killing Osama bin Laden. This was celebrated in a very patriotic way by American citizens. By running into the streets, chanting patriotic sentences, waving American flags, and more. In his memoir, Obama describes the mission and the importance of this mission for him personally. From his very first public reaction to America's response to 9/11 to his presidential campaign, he had advocated for a renewed focus on bringing bin Laden to justice.<sup>49</sup> In his speech after the successful operation he wanted to recall the shared anguish of 9/11 and the unity in the following days, he wanted to thank the military, and wanted to tell the world that "America does what it sets out to do."<sup>50</sup> This shows how important capturing Osama bin Laden was for him. This event shows that Obama cares about his country and for sure has patriotic ideals. He also describes how the country's mood shifted, and how this was the first and only time that Republicans did not attack their decisions and Democrats did not accuse them of

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<sup>48</sup> Rhodes, *The World as It Is*, 137.

<sup>49</sup> Obama, *A Promised Land*, 677.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 697.



compromising some of their core principles.<sup>51</sup> This entire event shows the importance of patriotism for citizens in the United States. Not only for conservative Republicans but also for all other citizens. Therefore, Obama being patriotic was important for U.S. citizens, and as President of the United States, with the power that he holds, he was able to influence society's interpretation of the term.

While patriotism might not be as important to the Democratic President as the concept is to the Republican Presidents, as he was raised patriotic only in a subtle manner, the above paragraphs confirm that he is in fact a patriot. Since his youth, his devotion to patriotism seems to have grown. His devotion to patriotic ideals is proven through the multiple acts by him discussed in these paragraphs. Besides his discussions on patriotism from his youth, his actions confirm his devotion to the ideal. In his speeches, patriotic symbols and quotes are often referenced. With his speeches, Obama not only aims to inspire but also to unite, harnessing the collective power of the people to tackle the challenges ahead, which is a very patriotic ideal. His constant emphasis on the military within his memoir and speeches shows the importance of the military to him, also a very patriotic ideal. Furthermore, both Rhodes and Clinton confirm his devotion to patriotism within their memoirs. Ultimately, Barack Obama's commitment to patriotic values, evident in his speeches, actions, and the testimony of those who know him well, solidifies his status as a true patriot. His interpretation of the term, however, is personal and differs from the interpretation that other presidents have.

Barack Obama reclaimed patriotism for the left, but the term changed its meaning due to society's different vision of the concept of patriotism, which he emphasized even before his presidency. Patriotism was seen as a concept that 'belonged' to right conservatives shortly after 9/11, as most of their supporters longed for revenge and war to show that America was

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 697-698.

still the greatest country.<sup>52</sup> The ideas of revenge and war at that time were seen as patriotic ideals too.<sup>53</sup> However, Obama reinvented the requirements of a patriot even before the 2008 elections. In 2004, Obama gave a speech at the Democratic National Convention that helped launch his political career massively.<sup>54</sup> Here, he argued that the United States' greatness derives from its diversity. "There's not a liberal America and a conservative America — there's the United States of America. There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America."<sup>55</sup> This vision especially resonated with and attracted young voters to the Democratic Party.<sup>56</sup> According to research by Pew Research Center, compared to older voters, younger voters are more diverse in terms of race and ethnicity. These traits, coupled with the political environment in which they have grown up, lean them toward a more liberal political identity, stronger opposition to the Iraq War, less social conservatism, and greater support for activist government.<sup>57</sup> These visions do not particularly align with the Republican emphasis on war-based patriotism. Their patriotic identity must then be reshaped by the Democratic Party through a new vision of the concept, which is what Obama did.

### 2.3 War-Based Patriotism Versus Empathetic Patriotism

Obama as a president should not be put in a box of either being a war-based patriot or an empathetic patriot, but he could be put somewhere in the middle because he had elements of both. John Bodnar draws attention to the two expressions of patriotism, but there is

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<sup>52</sup> Bodnar, *Divided by Terror*, 15.

<sup>53</sup> Bodnar, *Divided by Terror*, 15.

<sup>54</sup> The American Presidency Project, "Keynote Address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention," The American Presidency Project, July 27, 2004. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/keynote-address-the-2004-democratic-national-convention>.

<sup>55</sup> The American Presidency Project, "Keynote Address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention.,"

<sup>56</sup> Scott Keeter, Juliana Horowitz and Alec Tyson, "Young Voters in the 2008 Election," Pew Research Center, November 13, 2008. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2008/11/13/young-voters-in-the-2008-election/>.

<sup>57</sup> Keeter, Horowitz, and Tyson, "Young Voters in the 2008 Election."

undoubtedly more complexity concerning the concepts. He distinguishes two forms of patriotism within his own framework: war-based patriotism and empathetic patriotism. His framework however does not go far enough into what is in the middle, nor whether other patriotic beliefs and ideals also occur within the current post-9/11 U.S. society. Furthermore, in his discussion on the two types of patriotism, war-based patriotism has often purported to be the most relevant form of patriotism in the post-9/11 era.<sup>58</sup> This is not necessarily true. While the larger group of U.S. citizens might feel more attracted towards having war-based patriotic ideals, which would be the argument for it being more relevant, empathetic patriotic ideals played as much of an important role within minority groups, creating debates surrounding the meaning of patriotism. For the most part, Bodnar establishes a great discussion on both forms of patriotism within his book, but his framework has shortcomings that should be further discussed.

When examining Barack Obama's perspective through the lens of primary sources, there emerges a compelling argument suggesting that he could be classified as a war-based patriot. A significant aspect of this interpretation stems from Obama's stance on U.S. military interventions following the 9/11 attacks, particularly his views on operations such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Obama's willingness to undertake military actions during his presidency shows war-based patriotic ideals. Obama, in his own words, expressed the belief that military actions undertaken in the aftermath of 9/11 were "necessary and just."<sup>59</sup> According to him, his administration often had the same view. "For them, a responsible foreign policy meant continuity, predictability, and an unwillingness to stray too far from conventional wisdom."<sup>60</sup> This led to most of them supporting the U.S. invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. These ideas

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<sup>58</sup> Bodnar, *Divided by Terror*, 4-5.

<sup>59</sup> Obama, *A Promised Land*, 309.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

are based on patriotic ideals, as the love for America is shown by defending their pride and attacking the enemy. This shows a more war-based patriot, as the willingness to fight for the United States based on revenge is very strong here. This alignment with patriotic ideals, characterized by a readiness to defend the nation and assert its dominance in the face of perceived threats, underscores Obama's inclination towards a war-based interpretation of patriotism related to this particular topic.

Obama's speech after the death of Osama bin Laden puts more emphasis on a war-based form of patriotism, but definitely not in any extreme form. This argument is supported by the fact that Obama did not excuse the use of violence in this attack within this speech. Instead, he puts more emphasis on violence than in his inaugural speech in 2009. For instance, "Yet his death does not mark the end of our effort. There's no doubt that al Qaeda will continue to pursue attacks against us. We must – and we will – remain vigilant at home and abroad."<sup>61</sup> Or "So Americans understand the costs of war. Yet as a country, we will never tolerate our security being threatened, nor stand idly by when our people have been killed. We will be relentless in defense of our citizens and our friends and allies."<sup>62</sup> While he does not threaten any foreign country with violence, he also does not highlight that no violence will occur anymore. He is more focused on other patriotic aspects, but the speech surely has a different undertone than the one during his inauguration. It has a more aggressive undertone to foreign threats who are listening. This more aggressive tone shows his more war-based patriotic side, as emphasis on aggression is part of that concept.

When comparing his first and second inaugural speeches, Obama's devotion to patriotism gets more intense. This second speech was in 2013, more than one and a half years after the death of Osama bin Laden. Again, just as in his 2009 speech, he expresses his

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<sup>61</sup> Phillips, "Osama Bin Laden Dead."

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

gratefulness towards the United States military and all they had done for the country. This is seen as a distinctive feature of the concept of patriotism, and the repeated gratefulness towards these men and women throughout his speeches shows Obama's patriotic side. In particular, the continued focus on the military and its pivotal role in safeguarding American interests and values can be interpreted as indicative of a more war-based interpretation of patriotism. Moreover, there are many quotes in this speech that can be seen as patriotic. Maybe even more than in his first inaugural speech. Not only does he use sentences such as "may He forever bless these United States of America,"<sup>63</sup> Obama also implements mentions of patriotic symbols into his speech, as mentioned before in this thesis.

Obama's words and actions suggest a nuanced and evolving understanding of patriotism, and one that encompasses elements of war-based patriotism. Particularly in his approach to U.S. military interventions post-9/11. His belief in the necessity and justice of these actions reflects a commitment to defending American pride and confronting perceived enemies. While his words might not always adopt an overtly aggressive tone, they nonetheless reflect a firm stance against foreign threats, which can relate to a more war-based interpretation of patriotism.

Examining Obama's perspective through primary sources reveals a nuanced understanding of patriotism, blending elements of both war-based and empathic ideals. The empathetic ideals seem to dominate within these primary sources. Moments of policy decisions, speeches, and more underscore Obama's reservations about military force and his emphasis on empathy and moral values.

A few parts in his own memoir imply that Obama's interpretation of patriotism is more empathic. For instance, he describes how signing condolence letters to the families of military men who were killed in the line of duty was a task he would never let himself get

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<sup>63</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, "Inaugural Address by President Barack Obama."

comfortable with.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, while he gets why the impulse after 9/11 was to do whatever it took to stop the terrorists, and how “a military forced to clean up the mess” was seen as a more competent and trustworthy idea than “the civilians that were supposed to make a policy,” he thought that weighing the costs and benefits of military action against everything was important.<sup>65</sup> His way of wording the first sentence, with a negative tone, already shows that he does not agree with how military action was taken before his presidency. While he does not deny the importance of defending American values and getting back for 9/11, he does emphasize the fact that military action is not always the right solution. For instance, in his first inaugural speech, when discussing foreign policy issues, he does not threaten any foreign country with violence or war. The opposite even as he states “To the Muslim world, we seek a new way to move forward, based on mutual interest and respect. To those leaders around the globe who seek to sow conflict, or blame their society's ills on the West, know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy. To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.”<sup>66</sup> The above shows that his ideals do lean more towards the empathic form of patriotism.

Obama used a different main approach to the war in the Middle East compared to prior U.S. Presidents – focusing on drone strikes in Afghanistan and extricating from Iraq – which is a more empathetic patriotic approach to defending the United States. According to Rhodes, Obama often complained that he was constantly demanded to “do more,” referring to the war-based type of patriotism. He was asked to bomb Assad, arm Ukrainians, etc. However, he had little evidence that it would actually benefit the United States.<sup>67</sup> A well-

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<sup>64</sup> Obama, *A Promised Land*, 429.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 435-436.

<sup>66</sup> Phillips, “President Barack Obama’s Inaugural Address.”

<sup>67</sup> Rhodes, *The World as It Is*, 274.

known part of Obama's military strategy was using drone strikes. This was a mostly new technique, which upheld Obama's ambition to keep up the war with al Qaeda, while according to his administration, they were "exceptionally surgical and precise," which put fewer civilians in danger.<sup>68</sup> This idea of drone strikes thus shows Obama's ideals to be more of an empathic patriotism instead of a war-based patriotism, as civilians' safety was an important factor for his choices in fighting the war. While the actual number of killings of civilians created a new debate on how precise these drone attacks were, and how many lives this approach saved compared to a different form of military attack, this is not relevant to the current discussion. Besides the focus on drone strikes in Afghanistan, Obama also slowly extricated the United States from the war in Iraq. By doing this, the administration saved many lives of American soldiers.<sup>69</sup> While defeating al Qaeda was important to the administration, American citizens were also important, which resulted in a more empathic form of patriotism by the administration.

The entire Obama administration overall seems to believe in empathetic patriotic values and as all of these people were chosen by Obama, this shows his preference for these types of patriotic ideals. This argument can be substantiated by Clinton's memoir. Unfortunately, what is missing from Hillary Clinton's memoir are her more 'private' moments and conversations with President Obama. This limits the book's useful information on Obama's interpretation of the concept of patriotism. Very few times she does discuss more personal moments of the Obama administration that the public has not seen. For instance, after the Consulate in Benghazi got attacked, and Americans died, she describes how heavy the responsibilities of office could feel. She also describes the fear the entire administration

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<sup>68</sup> Jessica Purkiss, "Obama's Covert Drone War in Numbers: Ten Times More Strikes than Bush," The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, January 1, 2017. <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-01-17/obamas-covert-drone-war-in-numbers-ten-times-more-strikes-than-bush/#:~:text=A%20total%20of%20563%20strikes,reports%20logged%20by%20the%20Bureau.>

<sup>69</sup> Rhodes, *The World as It Is*, 290.

felt for the military that was involved in the dangerous Osama bin Laden operation, as well as the pride they felt afterward. All in all, these descriptions of feelings they felt show an empathetic form of patriotism. War and military intervention were not the administration's first choices for handling certain situations, as this causes harm and deaths. It is more of a last resort if we were to believe Clinton's thoughts, which were written in her memoir. We can interpret this as the entire Obama administration valuing empathetic patriotism as a way of handling issues in the post-9/11 era.

While the killing of Osama bin Laden clearly was a war-based patriotic mission, the mission included more empathetic patriotic moments too. Clinton primarily discusses the foreign policy choices made by the Obama administration in which she played a big role. Most of the memoir therefore focuses on choices that were still related to conflicts created by the 9/11 attacks. Especially the wars in the Middle East are a topic of discussion in her memoir. As Secretary of State of the Obama administration, she had a lot of decisions to make about sending the military into the Middle East. Both she, Obama, and the rest of the administration did not get used to sending people to war and wondering whether they would be coming home.<sup>70</sup> Throughout her memoir, she discusses the more vulnerable moments she had personally and the difficulties she had in making some decisions that put American citizens or innocent foreigners at risk. This is reflected in her statement about the capture of bin Laden, where the military had to blow up a helicopter. Amid all the dangers they made sure all Pakistani citizens close by were put to safety first. "Amid all the dangers and pressures of the day, this humane gesture by our military spoke volumes about America's values."<sup>71</sup> This action definitely shows an empathic form of patriotism within the Obama

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<sup>70</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 127.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.



administration. Even though the person who caused extreme harm on 9/11 had to be captured in any way possible, the lives of other people were still very important as well.

Obama often portrayed himself as an empathetic patriot when he spoke to the citizens of the United States. For example, Obama's second inaugural speech includes many quotes that would lean more towards Bodnar's concept of empathetic patriotism. Multiple times throughout his inaugural speech Obama emphasizes the fact that war is not necessary. For instance: "This generation of Americans has been tested by crises that steeled our resolve and proved our resilience. A decade of war is now ending."<sup>72</sup> This is a reference to the Global War on Terror which started after the 9/11 attacks. Later in his speech he goes on to say: "We, the people, still believe that enduring security and lasting peace do not require perpetual war. Our brave men and women in uniform, tempered by the flames of battle, are unmatched in skill and courage."<sup>73</sup> Here, he focuses not only on the view that a perpetual war is not necessary, but also on the brave men and women in uniform. This seems very much what an empathetic patriot would say, as patriotism is important to them, but violence is unnecessary to uphold patriotic values.

While we have already concluded that Obama definitely held some war-based patriotic values, the empathetic-based values seem to have dominated the former president's thinking during his years in office. Throughout his presidency, Obama displayed a consistent emphasis on empathy, moral values, and a thoughtful approach to decision-making, particularly in matters of national security and foreign policy. Additionally, insights from key figures within his administration, such as Ben Rhodes and Hillary Clinton, provide further evidence of Obama's empathic approach to patriotism. Through his actions and words, he demonstrated a profound commitment to upholding the principles upon which America was

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<sup>72</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, "Inaugural Address by President Barack Obama."

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

founded, making him the ultimate exemplar of empathetic patriotism in the modern era. If we were to put a label on what type of patriot Obama was, we would need a new definition, which would emphasize the fact that Obama had both empathetic and war-based patriotic ideals. Eclectic patriot may be a fitting characterization, as he derived his ideas on patriotism from various sources.

#### 2.4 State of Patriotism in The U.S. Prior to the Obama Presidency

Extensive research published on the website of Pew Research Center, which included many polls on the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, clearly shows the impact of the attacks prior to Obama's presidency, and during Obama's presidency. Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan American think tank that conducts public opinion polling, demographic research, and other data-driven social science research.<sup>74</sup> There are a few claims made in this research that go hand in hand with some of the claims that Bodnar makes in his book *Divided by Terror*. Using both sources we can determine what the concept of patriotism meant to U.S. citizens between the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> and the 2008 elections. Furthermore, we can see what the most important patriotic ideals were within the U.S. government at that point in time.

The attacks changed U.S. public opinion on patriotic topics in the short term and some opinions stuck around for a longer time. For instance, according to the research, patriotic sentiment surged in the aftermath of 9/11. According to the polls, in October 2001, 79% of U.S. citizens had displayed an American flag. The majority said that they had often felt patriotic as a result of the attacks<sup>75</sup>. The support for the government at the time was at the highest it had been in thirty years. Furthermore, overall support for government decisions

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<sup>74</sup> "About Pew Research Center," Pew Research Center, March 25, 2010. <https://www.pewresearch.org/about/>.

<sup>75</sup> Hannah Hartig and Carroll Doherty, "Two Decades Later, the Enduring Legacy of 9/11," Pew Research Center, September 2, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/09/02/two-decades-later-the-enduring-legacy-of-9-11/>.

relating to 9/11 was also high. Public opinion polls backed the president's declaration of war straight after the attacks.<sup>76</sup> Not only did support for the government grow, there also was a sense of political togetherness. Political differences were set aside for a short period of time to support the nation's major institutions and political leadership.<sup>77</sup> Support for Bush and his actions was big, even under a sizable group of Democrats. This shows that if people share the same values and ideals, and these are matched by the characteristics of the political and social context where they reside, patriotism rises.<sup>78</sup> Feelings of patriotism are created by socialization, and due to the commonly shared values at the time, these feelings were strengthened for a short period of time. However, after the handling of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the trust in the government declined immensely.

War-based patriotism was way more prominent shortly after 9/11 compared to empathetic patriotism. The poll numbers discussed in Hartig and Doherty's study confirm this. The amount of support for the war in Afghanistan was massive, with 83% of American citizens approving of the U.S.-led military campaign against the Taliban and Al Qaida in Afghanistan a few months after the start of the war. Even five years later, about 69% of the citizens thought that using military force in Afghanistan was still the right decision.<sup>79</sup> This shows there was still a great amount of war-based patriotism, even though the number of support for military action seemed to have lowered a bit already. The decline in numbers can be explained by the fact that the first wave of empathic patriotism started after the start of the war in Afghanistan. Besides the terrorists, civilians in Afghanistan were killed as well.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, the first U.S. military servicemen were also killed in the line of duty, which led to a slow increase in empathetic patriotism. Looking at the statistics of the opinion of the Iraq

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<sup>76</sup> Bodnar, *Divided by Terror*, 30-31.

<sup>77</sup> Hartig and Doherty, "Two Decades Later, the Enduring Legacy of 9/11."

<sup>78</sup> Jennifer Wolak and Ryan Dawkins, "The Roots of Patriotism Across Political Contexts," *Political Psychology*, 38(3), (2017): 391.

<sup>79</sup> Hartig and Doherty, "Two Decades Later, the Enduring Legacy of 9/11."

<sup>80</sup> Bodnar, *Divided by Terror*, 36.

War, in 2003, 71% of U.S. citizens thought it was the right decision to use military action in the country, compared to 43% in 2018.<sup>81</sup> This is a massive decline and shows a shift in forms of patriotism as the majority of citizens understood it.

Popular culture fueled war-based patriotism within U.S. society in the short term after the 9/11 attacks. To quote Bodnar, “In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, a number of movies quickly endorsed the imperatives of a war-based patriotism by infusing the dramatization of American suffering and sacrifice with themes that were highly moral and inspirational.”<sup>82</sup> After the 9/11 attacks, Hollywood and media outlets were more politicized.<sup>83</sup> News outlets suffered from issues of objectivity.<sup>84</sup> When discussing issues related to the War on Terror, the rise of the Internet played a large role in the issues of objectivity with respect to the sources people got their information from. Alternative news sites flourished during this period.<sup>85</sup> This led to dangerous extremism and extreme forms of war-based patriotism. The issue of objectivity was also present in Hollywood. Take, for instance, the movie *Fahrenheit 9/11*. The movie proves that 9/11 is a collective trauma. It triggers traumatic memories for viewers with, for instance, the use of sound.<sup>86</sup> By evoking traumatic memories in the viewers, this trauma comes up and that patriotic feeling reoccurs strongly too. Overall, within popular culture, the normalization of imperial conflict became common after 9/11. By triggering certain emotions, popular culture could steer citizens into believing certain ideals relating to patriotism.

The issue of defending the country from future terrorist attacks was a top priority for many U.S. citizens shortly after 9/11, which explains the increase in belief in war-based

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<sup>81</sup> Hartig and Doherty, “Two Decades Later, the Enduring Legacy of 9/11.”

<sup>82</sup> Bodnar, *Divided by Terror*, 181.

<sup>83</sup> David Holloway, *9/11 and the War on Terror*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 82.

<sup>84</sup> Holloway, *9/11 and the War on Terror*, 60.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>86</sup> Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula and Karen Randell, *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the “War on Terror”* (1st ed. London: Bloomsbury Publishing (US), 2010), 142.

patriotism. While more Republicans than Democrats have this concern as a political top priority, both groups ranked this concern as high shortly after the attacks.<sup>87</sup> In the weeks after, Americans supported military action against those responsible for the terrorist attacks.<sup>88</sup> This is due to the initial reaction of the citizens, which is fear.<sup>89</sup> This fear transitioned into a war-based patriotism where the desire for revenge and the collective willingness to fight back was high. The support for military intervention was massive. Other options to protect their country were less popular. According to Hartig and Doherty, in the fall of 2001, about half of U.S. citizens thought that the best way to prevent future terrorism was to use military force against the threat in a foreign country instead of building a strong defense in their own country or finding other solutions.<sup>90</sup>

The USA Patriot Act of 2001 shows how important emphasizing patriotism could be to gain political support. On October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2001, President Bush signed the Patriot Act. The stated goal was the tightening of United States national security, particularly focused on foreign terrorist threats.<sup>91</sup> Since then, some of the extreme laws that came with the Patriot Act have been removed or have loosened, and backlash over civil liberties and privacy issues has created many debates.<sup>92</sup> The naming of the act, again, does not seem incidental. The symbolism of the word patriotism used in the Act suggests that the Act was a way to protect the country. The term is politically potent, and legislators might find it difficult to oppose a bill that has such a meaningful connotation within its name. If they were to oppose, they might be pictured as unpatriotic, which is not how people wanted to be defined as shortly after 9/11. Furthermore, the name is likely to gain more public support. As patriotism was

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<sup>87</sup> Hartig and Doherty, "Two Decades Later, the Enduring Legacy of 9/11."

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Bodnar, *Divided by Terror*, 17.

<sup>90</sup> Hartig and Doherty, "Two Decades Later, the Enduring Legacy of 9/11."

<sup>91</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, "USA PATRIOT Act," National Archives and Records Administration, Accessed May 16, 2024. <https://georgewebush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/patriotact/>.

<sup>92</sup> Holloway, *9/11 and the War on Terror*, 34.

important to many, calling the bill the 'Patriot Act' was likely to garner public support. The legislation served to frame the national security debate by emphasizing the need for immediate reaction and the urgency of the measures outlined in the act, as well as the crucial importance of protecting America and its citizens. By framing the entire legislation like this, Bush set out to gain as much support as possible.

The start of the war in Iraq was a major milestone in the transition from a predominant belief in war-based patriotism towards a division within U.S. society between war-based patriotism and empathetic patriotism. The nation of Iraq was not part of the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, even though some people, including President Bush, thought so.<sup>93</sup> There was no evidence for this, however, so using the terrorist attacks as a reason for war was not legitimate. In March 2003, Iraq was invaded by the United States, and the mission was called "Operation Iraqi Freedom." The naming of this operation was no coincidence, as it is a phrase that echoes the war-based patriots' moralizing goals. The main goal was to destabilize Hussein's government and find weapons of mass destruction, which were a threat to America, and to free the Iraqi people, according to Bush.<sup>94</sup> There was a lot of controversy that came with the Iraq invasion. The many deaths of the U.S. military and Iraqi people, and the failure of the mission to find weapons of mass destruction, all translated into less and less support for the operation. The predominant belief in war-based patriotism started to decline due to the failure of the mission. It went as far as to provoke intense anti-war demonstrations and movements.<sup>95</sup>

Another big shift of war-based patriotism towards empathetic patriotism within U.S. society before Obama took office was due to the Abu Ghraib pictures being leaked in April 2004. The famous picture of the "hooded man" came to represent the wrongdoings that took

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<sup>93</sup> Bodnar, *Divided by Terror*, 88.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>95</sup> Holloway, *9/11 and the War on Terror*, 32.

place, and it still comes up in historical and ethical debates. The government excused the incident by labeling the men responsible as ‘rotten apples’ within the administration. Administration officials and supporters accepted this excuse.<sup>96</sup> However, the “un-American” and dehumanizing incident changed many citizens’ views towards the War on Terror, and empathetic patriots started to gain ground. The use of torture, intensified interrogation methods, and secret CIA prisons were all revealed, which added to the public's growing disenchantment with the Bush administration's conduct of the war and further accelerated the transition.<sup>97</sup> Advocacy for more humane and morally guided approaches to national security and foreign policy became more popular after the inhumane images, which laid the groundwork for the support of Barack Obama’s campaign, which promised change and transparency.

While shortly after 9/11 war-based patriotism was the prevalent form of patriotism within U.S. society and government, the years after were marked by a decline in how much people held onto war-based patriotic ideals. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were ongoing, which influenced public opinion around patriotism. This was due to political decisions about foreign policy and the political discourse around military service. As the conflicts dragged on, the human and economic costs mounted, and public sentiment started shifting. In 2008, during the presidential elections, the patriotic ideals had thus already changed compared to shortly after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. However, patriotism was still an important concept for U.S. citizens during the elections.<sup>98</sup> Obama’s Republican opponent, John McCain was viewed as more patriotic. As a Vietnam War veteran and a long-serving senator, he embodied traditional patriotic ideals, in particular those tied to military service and sacrifice.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>98</sup> Tasha Diakides and Chris Welch, “Obama Responds to Attacks on His Patriotism,” *CNN*, June 30, 2008. <https://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/06/30/campaign.wrap/index.html>.

Furthermore, Obama often had to defend his patriotism during the 2008 campaign.<sup>99</sup>

Republicans exploited Democratic perceived shortcomings in patriotism in every election, and the public seemed to believe that Republicans "own" patriotism as a trait regardless of the candidates.<sup>100</sup> Despite all this, Obama managed to articulate a version of patriotism that resonated with a large group of American citizens, elaborating on themes of unity and hope.<sup>101</sup>

## 2.5 Conclusion

Barack Obama's presidency unfolded amidst the complexities of post-9/11 America, where notions of patriotism were often intertwined with debates over military intervention and national security. Examining Obama's perspective through primary sources reveals a nuanced understanding of patriotism, which blends elements of both war-based and empathetic ideals. While elements of both war-based and empathic ideals are evident in his actions and rhetoric, Obama's presidency highlights the nuanced nature of patriotism in a changing world. From his reluctance to embrace military intervention without careful consideration of its costs and benefits to his emphasis on empathy and moral values in decision-making, Obama's approach shows a balance between defending national interests and upholding the principles of humanity, and therefore American values.

If we were to compare Obama's interpretation to Bodnar's concepts, he would lean more towards the empathetic patriotic side. Overall, throughout his speeches many quotes seem quite patriotic, and he includes many references to patriotic symbols. He often focuses on the military in a thankful and honorary way, which also is a very patriotic practice. His

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<sup>99</sup> Diakides and Welch, "Obama Responds to Attacks on His Patriotism."

<sup>100</sup> Nathan P. Kalmoe and Kimberly Gross, "Cueing Patriotism, Prejudice, and Partisanship in the Age of Obama: Experimental Tests of U.S. Flag Imagery Effects in Presidential Elections," *Political psychology* 37, no. 6 (2016): 884.

<sup>101</sup> John Blake, "How Obama Era Gave Us a Dangerous Patriotism | CNN Politics," *CNN*, October 19, 2016. <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/10/18/politics/obama-dangerous-patriotism/index.html>.



speeches, however, are mostly on the more empathetic patriotic side rather than the war-based side. Through his speeches, actions, and expressions of gratitude towards the military, Obama demonstrated a deep love for his country, rooted in a belief in its founding principles and a dedication to its improvement. Thus, despite the complexities of his tenure, Barack Obama emerges as an American – and mostly empathetic – patriot, embodying the multifaceted nature of patriotism in a modern and ever-evolving world.

Shortly following the September 11th attacks, war-based patriotic ideals became deeply entrenched within American culture. This period saw a surge in patriotic expressions, with Americans rallying around the flag and endorsing the government's efforts to fight terrorist threats coming from the Middle East. However, the prolonged conflict in Iraq and the mounting casualties and costs associated with it began to shift citizens' ideas about patriotism. Rising skepticism led to a more divided national sentiment regarding patriotic ideals. By the time Barack Obama launched his presidential campaign, this division had become pronounced, and people started to find hope in Obama's message during his campaigns.

## Chapter 3: Obama's Patriotic Ideals Put into Action

### 3.1 Introduction

Barack Obama's presidency is often marked by his attempts to redefine American patriotism, which highlighted inclusivity and a commitment to shared national values. Despite these efforts, he faced continuous skepticism, particularly from right-wing critics who questioned his patriotism. This skepticism, often laced with racial undertones, posed a significant challenge for Obama, compelling him to frequently demonstrate his commitment to American ideals. However, his approach to patriotism, particularly in the context of his foreign policy and use of drone strikes, often fell short of fully convincing all Americans of his distinctiveness from previous presidents. This chapter delves into the complexities of Obama's patriotic rhetoric and actions, exploring how they shaped, and were shaped by, the broader political landscape.

This chapter will first delve into Obama's actions throughout his presidency, highlighting Bodnar's terms of war-based patriotism and empathetic patriotism as well. It will compare how much Obama's actions have lived up to what he told U.S. citizens his ideas about patriotism were. It will show his shortcomings and successful policies and how much he could be distinguished from his predecessors. Then, this chapter will discuss the right-wing criticism the Obama administration faced and how this changed the narrative regarding patriotism throughout his presidency. The chapter will conclude by showing how the Obama era set the stage for the 2016 elections due to the rise of political polarization and the different perceptions of patriotism throughout the country.

### 3.2 Obama's Actions Throughout His Presidency

Obama's devotion to patriotism is shown by some of the actions he took during his presidency. He had to show his devotion, as patriotism is a value that needs to be seen within

a president for them to be accepted by society. In many parts of his memoir, Obama shows how important patriotism is to him as the President of the United States. For instance, when it came to choosing his administration, the people he chose were selected based on multiple important character traits, one of them being a patriotic individual. As he states, when choosing Hillary Clinton as his State Secretary, who was his opponent during the primary elections, he still thought she was the best person for the job. This decision was based on his trust in “her patriotism and commitment to duty.”<sup>102</sup> This story is confirmed in Clinton’s own memoir. What is also confirmed in her memoir is that Obama was right to choose her because of her patriotic values. Take, for example, the quotes “Americans have always worked smarter and harder”<sup>103</sup> and “I have always believed that [...] America’s values are the greatest source of strength and security.”<sup>104</sup> This shows that she was proud to be an American. “Our military was by far the most powerful in the world, our economy was still the biggest, our diplomatic influence was unrivaled, our universities set the global standard, and our values of freedom, equality, and opportunity still drew people from everywhere to our shores.”<sup>105</sup> This quote almost feels like she is exaggerating her pride in the country. She is not the only person in American politics whose focus on patriotism feels exaggerated. Every single candidate for political office in the U.S. feels obligated to broadcast their patriotism in a uniquely American way to gain supporters and get elected because patriotism is such an important concept for U.S. citizens.

The 2008 elections highlighted the evolving nature of patriotism in the United States. The traditional principles of patriotism, like military service, symbols, and national pride were still very important to U.S. citizens. However, on the one hand, there was also a growing acceptance of more diverse expressions of patriotic values, due to the influence of

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<sup>102</sup> Obama, *A Promised Land*, 218.

<sup>103</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 316.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 25.

the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, political discourse, and more. On the other hand, people who had a more conservative view of patriotism connected racism to the concept.<sup>106</sup> Likely due to the acceptance of these more diverse expressions of patriotic values, that outnumbered the number of conservative patriots, Obama was elected President of the United States in 2008. The concept of patriotism was however still evolving and kept evolving during his presidency.

Throughout his years in office, Obama gave many speeches in which he could transfer his idea of patriotism, as being an inclusive concept, to U.S. citizens. When looking at his speeches, you see one strategy he implemented a lot, which is speaking linguistically inclusive. In his first inaugural speech, many examples can be found. He started off the speech by addressing the people as “my fellow citizens.”<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, he continually used the pronouns “we” and “us” instead of “I.”<sup>108</sup> It should be noted, however, that he used “we” not only to refer to all of the citizens of the United States, but also to all of the people in his administration. Using “we” to refer to citizens indicates that Obama saw a ‘unity’ within the country and that the changes that needed to be made required a collective effort. Using “we” to refer to all of the people in his administration indicates that Obama believed his presidential run was a ‘team’ effort, not a ‘solo’ effort. This, again, refers to a collective effort from his entire administration. His inclusive language suggests that Obama intended to deliver his speech in a more intimate way, as he spoke to the audience as if they were a single individual, in a conversational style. Other examples are his frequent use of terms like “nation,” his use of “our economy” when referring to the economy, and talking about “our Founding Fathers,” “our common defense,” etc.<sup>109</sup> Through being linguistically inclusive, he evoked a feeling of togetherness, of unity, but also a feeling of pride for the country. This

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<sup>106</sup> Bodnar, *Divided by Terror*, 237.

<sup>107</sup> Phillips. “President Barack Obama’s Inaugural Address.”

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

shows how he pushed his interpretation of patriotism onto the audience, through an intimate way of speaking and by his use of inclusive language. As a result, listeners experienced a similar feeling of togetherness and pride, as they felt included and connected, which made Obama gain support for his ideas and policies.

Obama's strategy to use the "new economic patriotism" to advance his political goals, also increased patriotic feelings too among U.S. citizens. Patriotism is often linked to war. This had been the case during the start of the War on Terror and was still the case during the start of the Obama presidency. However, we must not forget other aspects of American life where patriotism comes into play. Obama often focused on these other aspects. Economic patriotism was thus a very important aspect during the Obama presidency and helped shape patriotic ideals throughout those eight years. He used the term multiple times throughout his 2012 campaign. As defined by Ben Clift and Cornelia Woll, economic patriotism is the practice of prioritizing specific businesses, industries, and organizations in economic decisions because of their geographic location.<sup>110</sup> According to Obama, a thriving middle class in the United States was crucial for the growth of the economy. For him, the U.S. was the region that needed to be prioritized and needed to establish the strongest economy. He called it the "new economic patriotism."<sup>111</sup> The new economic patriotism that Obama proposed can create an intense sense of pride in the U.S. among its citizens if accomplished. Working towards this accomplishment already creates a proudness among those investing their time and resources into the goal. This pride created a stronger patriotic feeling throughout the country and thus a stronger sense of patriotism, going beyond the typical idea of patriotism in the post-9/11 era under the Bush presidency, which was related to war and

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<sup>110</sup> Ben Clift and Cornelia Woll, "Economic patriotism: reinventing control over open markets," *Journal of European public policy* 19 (2012): 308.

<sup>111</sup> Frank James, "Obama Invokes 'economic Patriotism' as New Rallying Cry," *NPR*, September 27, 2012. <https://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2012/09/27/161899439/obama-invokes-economic-patriotism-as-new-rallying-cry>.

revenge. Due to this concept being linked to Obama, he gained support by using patriotism as a strategy.

Obama tried to shift the belief that patriotism belongs to one specific ethnocentric group to the notion that diversity is part of patriotic ideals. The close relationship between patriotism and racism, linked to radicalized thinkers, was shown throughout the Obama presidency. As the first black president, he tried to get rid of this idea. In his victory speech of the 2012 elections, on November 7<sup>th</sup>, Obama stated: “What makes America exceptional are the bonds that hold together the most diverse nation on earth. The belief that our destiny is shared; that this country only works when we accept certain obligations to one another and future generations. The freedom that so many Americans have fought for and died for came with responsibilities as well as rights. And among those are love and charity and duty and patriotism. That's what makes America great.”<sup>112</sup> Here, he establishes that everybody can be patriotic, whether you are Black, White, Hispanic, Asian, or another race. According to President Obama, the diversity of the country's citizens and the dedication to ensuring that everyone has equal opportunities are what make the United States strong. For this reason, his administration prioritized diversity and inclusion across the federal government.<sup>113</sup> Within this speech, he shifts the belief from decades ago, that patriotism belongs to a single ethnocentric group,<sup>114</sup> to the belief that everybody can be patriotic. Throughout his presidency, national pride, an important aspect of the concept of patriotism, transformed into a concept based on inclusivity.

During the 2012 elections, the state of patriotism in the United States reflected ongoing debates over multiple issues related to national identity and military engagement. By

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<sup>112</sup> Obama White House, “Empowerment Through Diversity,” National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed May 27, 2024. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/civil-rights/empowerment>.

<sup>113</sup> Obama White House, “Empowerment Through Diversity.”

<sup>114</sup> Patrick. C. L. Heaven, Devi Rajab and John J. Ray, “Patriotism, Racism, and the Disutility of the Ethnocentrism Concept,” *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 125(2), (1985): 181-182.

2012, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were getting less intense, but they still influenced discussions of patriotism. The killing of Osama bin Laden bolstered Obama's credentials in terms of national identity, and positively affected how U.S. citizens viewed his patriotic ideals. In Iraq, troops were already withdrawn and the administration had planned to draw down in Afghanistan too. This shift from active engagement in these wars to a focus on strategic withdrawal marked a significant change in the patriotic narrative, emphasizing the ending of conflicts and the well-being of service members in the military. However, political polarization within the United States was getting more intense. After the initial shock of 9/11, political polarization was at one of the all-time lows.<sup>115</sup> The high divisions between democrats and republicans that started to occur a few years after the initial shock of 9/11 affected how patriotism was expressed and perceived. A contributing factor to the growing political division was the media's growing impact, especially on social media.<sup>116</sup> Republicans and Democrats became more polarized as a result of the conflicting narratives about patriotism that various media outlets frequently portrayed.

Barack Obama's presidency saw notable shifts during his second term, marked by both achievements and challenges. Important challenges related to U.S. patriotic ideals were the ongoing challenges in the Middle East, which remained significant, but also the continued political polarization in the country, and much more. The concept of patriotism in the U.S. continued to evolve. Obama held onto the idea of patriotic ideals reflecting a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of national identity, which comes forward in his second inaugural speech.<sup>117</sup> His emphasis on inclusivity, but also diplomatic leadership, and civic engagement

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<sup>115</sup> Hartig and Doherty, "Two Decades Later, the Enduring Legacy of 9/11."

<sup>116</sup> James Hawdon, Shyam Ranganathan, Scotland Leman, Shane Bookhultz and Tanushree Mitra, "Social Media Use, Political Polarization, and Social Capital: Is Social Media Tearing the U.S. Apart?" In *Social Computing and Social Media. Design, Ethics, User Behavior, and Social Network Analysis*, Springer International Publishing, (2020): 255-256.

<sup>117</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, "Inaugural Address by President Barack Obama."

reflected a more empathetic and progressive form of patriotism, encouraging a more comprehensive understanding of what it means to be patriotic.<sup>118</sup>

The biggest argument for Obama not being an empathetic patriot is that he embraced the U.S. drone program. In the first year of his presidency, he carried out more drone strikes than Bush had done during his entire presidency.<sup>119</sup> Naturally, technology had improved which made it easier to carry out more drone strikes. However, this does not take away from the fact that Obama did carry out all of these strikes, killing innocent civilians overseas. According to The Bureau of Investigative Journalism “A total of 563 strikes, largely by drones, targeted Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen during Obama’s two terms, compared to 57 strikes under Bush. Between 384 and 807 civilians were killed in those countries.”<sup>120</sup> The total count of drone strikes in Afghanistan was 1071 in 2016 only.<sup>121</sup> Using drones was in line with Obama's desire to continue the fight against al Qaeda while limiting U.S. soldiers in the Middle East. Interestingly, non-battlefield settings were also targeted, specifically Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. This heavy reliance on drone strikes shows a big contradiction in Obama's image as an empathic patriot, exposing the complicated and sometimes conflicting nature of his presidency.

Because Obama did not speak out much about his use of drone strikes to attack the Middle East, we can label him as a “quiet” war-based patriot. Some titles of articles discussing Obama and his drone strikes read: “Barack Obama Is a War Criminal,”<sup>122</sup> and “Obama’s Weak Defense of His Record on Drone Killings.”<sup>123</sup> Both articles discuss the many negatives that came with the way Obama fought al Qaeda. Nearly every article written about

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<sup>118</sup> Blake, “How Obama Era Gave Us a Dangerous Patriotism.”

<sup>119</sup> Purkiss, “Obama’s Covert Drone War in Numbers: Ten Times More Strikes than Bush.”

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Prince Williams, “Barack Obama Is A War Criminal,” *Harvard Political Review*, September 29, 2021. <https://harvardpolitics.com/obama-war-criminal/>.

<sup>123</sup> Conor Friedersdorf, “Obama’s Weak Defense of His Record on Drone Killings,” *The Atlantic*, December 23, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/president-obamas-weak-defense-of-his-record-on-drone-strikes/511454/>.



this topic does, however, lack explicit explanations by Obama about the drone strikes. Many mistakes were made during the program, one of the most famous being the first strike on Yemen, killing 55 innocent people.<sup>124</sup> In his memoir, Obama barely talks about the drone strikes. When asked about the drone strikes, Obama made sure to emphasize the necessity of the strikes and the effort they put into not striking civilians. However, he also argued that civilian deaths were sometimes a ‘necessary risk.’<sup>125</sup> All in all, Obama did not often speak out about the mistakes that the administration made in relation to drone strikes. While he may not have been very outspoken about the fighting of the wars in the Middle East and more outspoken about extracting troops from the war zones, quietly thousands of people were still killed by the Obama administration. Arguably, Obama can fit into the box of a “quiet” war-based patriot. While he did not talk about it much, violence was still used in order to defend the U.S. from foreign terrorists, just in a more modern way and with fewer American casualties.

Obama characterized himself as different from other presidents, but the extent to which Obama actually was different from his predecessors is still up for debate. Obama constantly pushed the idea that he was different, both during his campaign and during his presidency. As his campaign was characterized by a message of hope and change, there were high expectations of transformative policies. He indeed represented a significant milestone in American politics, as he was the first African American president in the history of the United States. However, while promising a lot, his policies and sometimes empty promises turned into a debate on how different the 44<sup>th</sup> President actually was compared to the prior men in office. Hiccups in the realization of his goal to stop domestic terrorism, the Gulf oil disaster, his handling of the Syrian Civil War, failure to make big changes to immigration policies, and

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<sup>124</sup> Williams, “Barack Obama Is A War Criminal.”

<sup>125</sup> Chris Woods, “Obama Frames Covert Drone War as Necessary Evil,” The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, May 23, 2013. <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2013-05-23/obama-frames-covert-drone-war-as-necessary-evil/>.

much more were critiqued during his presidency and do not help argue his case that he is very much different from his predecessors. According to some, Obama over-promised and under-performed.<sup>126</sup> While Obama achieved significant milestones in various other areas – think of Obamacare, and how he got America out of the 2008 economic crisis – many perceived shortcomings highlight the complexity and challenges of presidential leadership.

While Obama emphasized being different from his predecessors, he was not as different as he made himself out to be. President Obama was much less outspoken when it comes to patriotism compared to President George W. Bush. Famous quotes like “Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorist,”<sup>127</sup> and “America will never seek a permission slip to defend the security of our people,”<sup>128</sup> are very outspoken war-based patriotic quotes made by Bush in the years after the 9/11 attacks. While Obama made patriotic statements and referred to patriotic ideals every once in a while, this was not a big outspoken concept within his presidency, when looking at it from the outside. Obama was very outspoken about the fact that he was ‘different’ from his predecessors. Up until this day, critics still debate what Obama actually did as a liberal president that was that different from the prior presidents in office. While he did lead the U.S. out of the economic crisis of 2008, improved the healthcare system, and extracted troops from war zones overseas, many critics argue he was not as different as he told people he was. He continued to expand certain policies from the Bush era, particularly in national security. Relevant examples to consider in this respect, are Obama’s widespread use of drone strikes,

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<sup>126</sup> Robin V. Sears, “The Surprising Failure of the Obama Presidency,” *Policy Options*, April 23, 2019. <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/obama-at-midterm/the-surprising-failure-of-the-obama-presidency/>. & Elaine Kamarck, “The Fragile Legacy of Barack Obama.” Brookings, January 11, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-fragile-legacy-of-barack-obama/>.

<sup>127</sup> The Washington Post Company, “Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation,” *Washington Post*, September 20, 2001. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress\\_092001.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html).

<sup>128</sup> Michael E. Eidenmuller, “George W. Bush Third Presidential State of the Union Address,” Online speech bank: George W. Bush - 2004 state of the union address. Accessed May 29, 2024. <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/stateoftheunion2004.htm>.

which raised many ethical concerns,<sup>129</sup> and the fact that the detention facility Guantanamo Bay stayed open despite his efforts to close the much-criticized facility.<sup>130</sup> Similarly, despite the fact that Obama had brought about improvements to the healthcare system through Obamacare, the Affordable Care Act did not achieve the full reform of healthcare that many progressive thinkers had hoped for,<sup>131</sup> and Obama had not been able to achieve substantial immigration reform.<sup>132</sup> These features highlight the fact that, despite Obama's claims to be a transformative leader, his actions and policies in many areas were more like those of previous administrations rather than entirely new.

While Obama emphasized being different, he failed to fully convince U.S. citizens of this. Furthermore, while he managed to show his patriotism through his actions, he was not as empathetic of a patriot as he set himself out to be. Mainly due to his continuous use of drone strikes to fight terrorism in the Middle East, he failed to distinguish himself on both challenges. While he did have some new and creative ideas related to patriotism, with his focus on inclusivity and the “new economic patriotism,” this was not convincing enough to fully set him aside from his predecessors.

### 3.3 Response to Right Wing Criticism

It is well known that throughout his entire political career, the right wing questioned Obama's patriotism. The discussion went even as far as to whether Obama held American citizenship. In this discussion, the close relationship between patriotism and racism becomes clearly visible. It is not entirely clear to what extent this constant criticism had an actual effect on

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<sup>129</sup> Purkiss, “Obama's Covert Drone War in Numbers: Ten Times More Strikes than Bush.”

<sup>130</sup> Connie Bruck, “Why Obama Has Failed to Close Guantánamo,” *The New Yorker*, July 25, 2016. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/08/01/why-obama-has-failed-to-close-guantanamo>.

<sup>131</sup> Brian Blase, “The Disappointing Affordable Care Act,” *Forbes*, April 14, 2022. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/theapothecary/2020/09/23/the-disappointing-affordable-care-act/>.

<sup>132</sup> Amanda Sakuma, “Obama Leaves behind a Mixed Legacy on Immigration,” *NBCNews*, January 15, 2017. <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/president-obama-the-legacy/obama-leaves-behind-mixed-legacy-immigration-n703656>.

Obama's political choices. It does, however, seem logical that an exaggerated effort to show his devotion to patriotism may have been a strategy to handle these critics.

While Obama's emphasis on patriotism may have been a bit exaggerated due to the constant right-wing critique, he remained true to his beliefs, and he did not respond with extreme patriotic ideals he did not believe in to prove his patriotism. Obama would sometimes put in extra effort to show his devotion to the country and his patriotic values, which can be seen throughout his presidency. This strategy was intended to please the constant critics a bit more, as already mentioned in the literature review. One of the biggest public discussions during the Obama presidency was the discussions regarding Obama's devotion to patriotism. Many examples of these criticisms are discussed in the memoirs. Obama himself describes a few incidents. For instance, when Obama described his view on American exceptionalism to the press, saying that he believed in it just as the Brits would believe in British exceptionalism and other countries in their own exceptionalism, Republican news outlets reported this as weakness and insufficient patriotism on Obama's part.<sup>133</sup> For Obama, it went even further than just criticizing his patriotism. Racism played a huge role in his presidency. "I was no longer just a left-of-center democrat [...], I was something more insidious, someone to be feared, someone to be stopped."<sup>134</sup> Obama repeatedly described right-wing attacks on his patriotism, revealing how these attacks forced him onto the defensive. According to the extreme-right, he could not be patriotic, as he was not even a 'true' American citizen according to some. Eventually, Obama even published his birth certificate to prove to the public that he in fact was an American citizen. At no point in his memoir does he discuss anti-patriotic ideals.

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<sup>133</sup> Obama, *A Promised Land*, 343-344.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 194.

While from the outside it may look like Obama stressed being patriotic from time to time in response to being constantly criticized, these patriotic values still were his own beliefs. Besides Obama referring to himself as an American patriot, Rhodes' and Clinton's memoirs also support this argument. As Rhodes states, Fox News, a right-wing medium, said things like "Obama does not believe in American exceptionalism, he's not patriotic, [...]." <sup>135</sup> Rhodes shows that all of these comments from the more republican side of society did put Obama in a difficult position. According to Rhodes, questions of whether Obama was a 'true' American, whether he carried the right beliefs, and whether he was capable of leading their country, were intensified by the constant attacks.

The behind-the-scenes of Obama's speech in Cairo in 2009 shows how he stayed true to his own beliefs, despite the influence of others in his administration. One of the ways in which Ben Rhodes was crucial for Obama during his presidency, was by being one of his great speechwriters, as Obama also states in his own memoir. <sup>136</sup> The final decision on what was going to be said in a speech was, however, still up to Obama. When reading Rhodes' memoir, it shows how important authenticity was for Obama when giving his speeches. For instance, Rhodes describes an incident where Obama needed to give a speech in Cairo. Rhodes drafted a speech, discussing the protests in Egypt, which explicitly stated how governments should respect the rights that their citizens have, and how they should pursue a "path of political change." After other members of the Obama administration had made changes, almost all of the language Rhodes used to discuss the protestors and human rights had been removed. Obama ended up using Rhodes' speech largely intact. <sup>137</sup> This shows how Obama, while being surrounded by a whole administration, still implemented his own ideas and opinions on what he thought was important. This was extremely bold though, as Egyptian

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<sup>135</sup> Rhodes, *The World as It Is*, 44.

<sup>136</sup> Obama, *A Promised Land*, 357-358.

<sup>137</sup> Rhodes, *The World as It Is*, 101.

officials were not on Obama's side after he said the things he said. This incident shows Obama's honesty and authenticity when it comes to addressing the public. What we can take away from this is that if Obama mentions patriotism in his speeches, or makes particular patriotic statements, it is most likely not just to please the audience, but also because it reflects his own ideas and ideals.

Obama also defended others in his administration when it came to their devotion to patriotism. One incident Clinton describes in her memoir shows how important patriotism was to Obama after getting backlash from the right-wing media. This incident involved her close adviser Huma Abedin. Conservative Republicans claimed she had ties to the Muslim Brotherhood within the media. During the annual Iftar dinner to break the Ramadan fast, President Obama defended Abedin, saying that "the American people owe her a debt of gratitude – because Huma is an American patriot, and an example of what we need in this country [...]." <sup>138</sup> This quote by Obama shows his emphasis on patriotism and its importance to him. The background of members of the administration does not matter, as long as they are still "true" Americans and patriotic. Democrats and conservative Republicans will most likely never agree on this, which is why this type of criticism will remain. This, however, does not define Obama's patriotic ideals and does not make him less patriotic from an objective view.

Within the speeches, Obama does not directly address the right-wing critique, but he definitely does it indirectly through the words used in his speeches. Throughout all three speeches, there is much focus on patriotic ideals through his statements and references to patriotic symbols. When listening to the speeches you can hear the crowd roaring when Obama says something patriotic, which shows the importance of patriotism for United States citizens. When he states, "We are ready to lead once more," <sup>139</sup> referring to the United States

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<sup>138</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 293.

<sup>139</sup> Phillips, "President Barack Obama's Inaugural Address."

becoming the most powerful country in the world, the cheers from the crowd are extremely loud. This is only one example of many patriotic statements throughout his many speeches. Another very patriotic remark within his first inaugural speech is: “And for those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken -- you cannot outlast us, and we will defeat you,”<sup>140</sup> after which the cheers are loud and clear as well. This statement obviously was made in response to the 9/11 attacks, as during this period it was still high on Obama’s agenda, according to his campaign. Again, this shows his patriotic ideals and the importance of the concept to him. The ideals discussed in his speeches thus clash with what the right wing believed his ideals to be. He indirectly reacted to these claims by showing the opposite.

Obama was patriotic both publicly and privately. Publicly, the emphasis on patriotism intensified due to right-wing criticism, but his private idea of patriotism only seemed to change due to the current events within his political career. As Obama said himself, his thoughts about American exceptionalism, and thus patriotism, have been developing since his childhood.<sup>141</sup> At some points during his political career, patriotic ideals seemed very prominent. For instance, his discussion on the importance of patriotism intensifies when talking about the military operation of killing Osama bin Laden in his memoir.<sup>142</sup> Or when he had to choose individuals who were going to work with him in his administration.<sup>143</sup> Publicly, he had to prove his patriotic ideals to the right wing and everybody who was critical. While he was not as patriotic as his Republican predecessors, his patriotic ideals were expressed publicly in his speeches, as discussed before. His emphasis on patriotism publicly seems to have grown throughout his presidency. Over time, he used more patriotic language within his speeches, for instance. Privately, his patriotism seems to have remained more constant,

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Obama, *A Promised Land*, 14.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 697.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 218.

although this is difficult to determine because he has not talked about this extensively.

Overall, Obama's public and private views on patriotism show a complex and changing understanding of American exceptionalism, shaped by his personal life and the political landscape.

While Obama did emphasize showing his patriotic side, it has never been confirmed whether right-wing criticism was the only reason for this. All of the memoirs mention this constant criticism, so it is most likely that it did have an effect on the Obama presidency. Throughout his speeches, he never addresses this criticism directly, but a lot of emphasis is put on patriotic ideals through statements and mentions of symbols. Obama always stayed true to his beliefs. So, while his emphasis on patriotic ideals sometimes might feel a little bit forced, due to the right-wing criticism, he did not mention ideals to the public he did not believe in.

Obama's different patriotic ideals attracted a new group of patriots in the U.S. John Blake explains how he views patriotism differently since the Obama era. He had never felt patriotic before, but now he does. What changed his mindset was how Obama shifted the concept from a "love it or leave it" America, to believing in another America, "the one that never was and yet must be."<sup>144</sup> In his article, Blake primarily focuses on the fact that Obama also looks at the bad history that the country has seen, like slavery and protests, and not only looks at the good of America. According to Blake, the nation's highest office has never demonstrated patriotism of this kind so strongly.<sup>145</sup> It is very likely that many others, especially people from minority groups, have experienced the same shift in attitude towards patriotism since the Obama era, since they can now relate to this concept more. American people were always taught that dissent is patriotic, but often only after a longer time. During

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<sup>144</sup> Blake, "How Obama Era Gave Us a Dangerous Patriotism."

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.



uncertain times, like war or massive social changes, the “love it or leave it” form of patriotism is prioritized in the U.S.<sup>146</sup> This is why Obama has, besides the support, also faced a lot of criticism towards his stance on patriotism, mostly from the conservative right wing.<sup>147</sup> Obama has, however, left a legacy with regard to patriotism, as scholars and authors still try to define this ever-changing concept, often including the importance of the Obama era within their discussion.

During the 2016 presidential elections, the state of patriotism was characterized by intense political polarization. The election saw a significant rise in nationalist and populist sentiments, particularly associated with the campaign of Donald J. Trump. Trump’s campaign slogans, like “Make America Great Again” and “America First,” may have triggered patriotic ideals within U.S. society. His campaign was a polar opposite to Clinton’s stances within her campaign, as her approach was much more internationalist.<sup>148</sup> The difference between Trump’s patriotic and nationalistic ideals, associated with the degree to which an individual takes pride in their nation – where some individuals even put their nation over other nations – and Clinton’s appreciation for other nations, drew different support groups towards their campaign. The support for Trump most likely stemmed from the pride in the U.S.<sup>149</sup> According to some political experts, the outcome of the 2016 presidential election in the United States demonstrated racism's continued existence in the country, which had already been very visible under President Obama's administration and before.<sup>150</sup> As we have already established, patriotism and racism are closely related. The election highlighted how issues of race and identity were intertwined with expressions of patriotism. For many Trump

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Natalie. J. Shook, Holly. N. Fitzgerald, Shelby. T. Boggs, Cameron G. Ford, Patricia. D. Hopkins and Nicole. M. Silva, “Sexism, racism, and nationalism: Factors associated with the 2016 U.S. presidential election results?” *PloS One*, 15(3), (2020): 4.

<sup>149</sup> Shook, Fitzgerald, Boggs, Ford, Hopkins and Silva, “Sexism, racism, and nationalism,” 4.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.,” 3.

supporters, the rhetoric of reclaiming America included an element of preserving a specific cultural and demographic makeup of the nation.<sup>151</sup> The appeals to nationalism and patriotism and the emphasis on securing borders, restricting immigration, and protecting American jobs often intersected with racial and ethnic anxieties. On the other hand, Clinton's conception of patriotism was based on the notion of an inclusive United States. She supported policies that attempted to uphold social justice, defend racial equality, and safeguard the rights of immigrants. Her candidacy aimed to advance the cause of a more inclusive society by building on the achievements established under the Obama administration.<sup>152</sup>

The persistent questioning of Obama's patriotism by the right wing, often intertwined with racial undertones, underscores the complexity of Obama's presidency. The extent to which this particular criticism influenced Obama's emphasis on patriotism remains unclear, but it is plausible that his heightened emphasis on patriotic rhetoric and actions served as a strategic response to such scrutiny. Obama managed the difficult task of demonstrating his patriotism in a setting where people were constantly doubting it by continuously expressing his commitment to American principles. While he contributed to a new group of Americans believing in patriotic ideals, the conservative patriots remained. This increased political polarization and set the tone for the 2016 elections.

### 3.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the complicated dynamics of patriotism in modern American politics were demonstrated by Barack Obama's presidency. His attempts to redefine patriotism through placing value on diversity, inclusivity, and shared national values represented a radical break from the more conventional, ethnocentric ideas about patriotism. Obama's tenure was

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<sup>151</sup> Michael Grunwald, "Clinton vs. Trump: The America They'd Build," *Politico Magazine*, November 6, 2016. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/2016-clinton-trump-election-policy-differences-president-214423/>.

<sup>152</sup> Grunwald, "Clinton vs. Trump: The America They'd Build."

hindered by deep-seated racial biases, which led to persistent doubt and media confrontation, especially from right-wing opponents who questioned his citizenship and dedication. The political climate and the questioning of Obama's patriotism had him continually demonstrate his commitment to American values. His foreign policy actions, particularly the widespread use of drone strikes in the Middle East, offered a stark contrast to his public advocacy of unity and inclusivity. These actions, intended to combat terrorism and limit U.S. military casualties, also resulted in significant civilian casualties, undermining his image as an empathetic patriot. This contradiction between his words and actions made it challenging for Obama to fully distinguish himself from his predecessors.

Additionally, Obama made important advancements toward a more progressive interpretation of patriotism with his innovative concepts such as the "new economic patriotism" and his inclusive national identity framework. But in the eyes of many Americans, these concepts fell short of making him truly unique as a president. The persistent questioning of his patriotism, often intertwined with racial undertones, underscored the complexities of his presidency. This constant scrutiny likely influenced his heightened emphasis on patriotic words and actions as a strategic response to defend his legitimacy and leadership towards the American public eye.

Despite these efforts, the conservative right wing remained largely unconvinced, leading to increased political polarization. Obama effectively created an entirely fresh group of Americans who shared his inclusive brand of patriotism, but he also deepened the gap between that group and the conservative patriots. This polarization not only characterized the end of his presidency but also set the tone for the 2016 elections, highlighting the evolving nature of American patriotism. Obama's presidency, thus, serves as a reminder of the complexities of leading a diverse nation and the ever-changing nature of the concept that is patriotism.

## Conclusion

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 2017, Obama spent his last morning in the Oval Office. This day consists of many traditions, including a round of farewell to the staff of the White House, a cup of coffee in the White House's regal Blue Room, and leaving a letter for the next president in the Oval Office, which was Donald J. Trump.<sup>153</sup> This day is most likely one of the days Obama will still remember years from now. His feelings when remembering this day will be completely different from the feelings evoked by recalling the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. He might associate his last day in office with patriotic feelings of pride in what he had accomplished, feelings of relief after having finished eight years in office, and feelings of regret, about the goals he did not achieve during his presidency. The patriotic feelings of September 11<sup>th</sup> translated into many of the decisions he made in office. Overall, many of his policy decisions, especially those related to foreign issues, were haunted by the events that took place that year.

Within the academic field, much has been written on patriotism in the United States. However, this is an ever-changing field that will keep on changing over the years. The concepts of Obama and patriotism combined still lack detailed academic literature. The current scholarly field on patriotism mostly discusses the concept from various angles, including the political angle, which this thesis does as well. It is important to distinguish between patriotism and nationalism. For this thesis, Bodnar's framework is used to define patriotism, which includes war-based patriotism and empathetic patriotism. The current scholarly field on Obama in relation to patriotism mostly includes works on the tremendous backlash and criticism Obama has had from the public regarding his patriotic ideals. What

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<sup>153</sup> Mazin Sidahmed, "Obama's Last Hours as President: A Cup of Coffee, Farewells and a Letter to Trump," *The Guardian*, January 19, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/19/barack-obama-donald-trump-inauguration-day-what-next>.

comes forward within the academic literature on Obama and patriotism is how much racism is intertwined with the concept of patriotism, especially when it comes to conservative patriots.

The research question for this thesis was: What was the significance of the Obama presidency for American patriotism? To answer this question, we first discussed how Barack Obama interpreted patriotism and how he expressed this to the public. Then we discussed whether his actions matched his words and the extent to which the meaning of patriotism changed throughout his presidency.

U.S. patriotism is the love, pride and sacrifice a person has for one's nation. Shortly after 9/11, war-based patriotism, as Bodnar distinguished it, became immensely popular. In war-based patriotism, an aggressive stance, a desire for revenge, and a collective commitment to defend one's nation are widely accepted. In the later years, but before Obama was elected, the softer empathetic patriotism rose as a defense against war-based patriotism. This was mostly due to the consequences of the War on Terror and the media. However, war-based patriotism still remained widely popular, especially under the more conservative patriots. When it comes to candidates for political elections, patriotic appeals are electorally powerful because they bind candidates to the ideas, values, and norms that people associate with the heart and soul of America. If you are seen as patriotic, it gives you an advantage during the election. Obama knew this, which is why he did emphasize his patriotic ideals during the campaign. However, the link between patriotism and racism was clearly visible during this campaign. When whites are exposed to conservative Republican's patriotic appeals, they tend to express greater hostility toward African Americans, immigrants, and the poor. This is why Obama had to express his devotion to patriotism in an exaggerated way. Another reason why Obama had to exaggerate his devotion to patriotism was the constant right-wing critique, that came paired with racism, which therefore led to increased political polarization.

Obama always set himself out to be different from his predecessors, but during his presidency he did not live up to his words. He always put emphasis on the fact that patriotism was an inclusive concept, instead of the more conservative belief that it was ethnocentric. With his emphasis on this ideal of patriotism, he did attract new U.S. citizens to become patriotic. However, he also increased the debate on what were the 'right' patriotic ideals, which in turn increased political polarization within the U.S. during his presidency. If we were to believe Obama's words, we would say he is more of an empathetic patriot than a war-based patriot. However, his actions show that this is not the case. Although he decreased the intensity of the wars in the Middle East, they did continue. He mainly used the modern technique of drone strikes to fight those wars. This violence clearly shows he actually was not an empathetic patriot. This contradiction between his words and actions made it challenging for Obama to fully distinguish himself from his predecessors. Furthermore, while he did refocus the concept of patriotism to be more inclusive and tried to further develop the term through innovative concepts such as the "new economic patriotism," these concepts fell short of making him truly unique as a president.

Just like every other United States President, Obama holds a legacy. When it comes to patriotism, his legacy can be seen too. Obama's years in office were truly significant for American patriotism, both in a negative and in a positive way. Positively, the Obama administration succeeded in rebranding the concept for certain groups in a way that they could relate to the concept and could feel patriotic. Nowadays, patriotism has changed much compared to shortly after 9/11. The Obama presidency played a large role in this, by rebranding the term as inclusive and diverse, and by including new concepts such as "new economic patriotism." This, however, also affected American patriotism in a negative way, as the polarization between people supporting the rebranded concept and the more right-wing conservative patriots grew. This polarization was strengthened by the rise of the modern

media and the constant critique within this media by the conservative right-wing. The extreme right-wing held onto the war-based patriotic ideals, which included justified violence to show one's pride for their nation, while others held onto the rebranded inclusive concept of patriotism.

In conclusion, the significance of the Obama presidency on American patriotism is that it resulted in an increasing division within American society, especially in what American citizens saw as the correct American patriotic ideals, as Obama's rebranded and newly accepted interpretation of patriotism and the conservative post-9/11 war-based patriotism differed massively in terms of ideals.

There still remain unanswered questions in relation to how far Obama influenced patriotic ideals during his presidency. His presidency was significant for a new, refreshing look at the concept of patriotism. Undoubtedly, so-called war-based patriotism played a huge role in the post-9/11 era. While Obama succeeded in shifting away from war-based patriotism during his presidency, it still lingered around. The question that is still unanswered, however, is whether this form of patriotism has fed the rise of the self-named superpatriots, who have embraced nativism and racism as being an essential part of patriotism. While Obama partly succeeded in reshaping patriotic ideals in the U.S., at least within a large group of society, a question that will remain from this research is to what extent Obama's legacy in relation to patriotic influence will continue to shape American life and politics. Although research can help us estimate the long-term effect of Obama's legacy, only time and future events will tell.

Since the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the concept of patriotism has become a prominent topic of debate which can be seen throughout all of the United States presidencies since. The strong Republican Bush was necessary for the U.S. shortly after 9/11, as he made the citizens feel patriotic and created overwhelming support to strengthen America and fight the terrorists. After the initial shock and the years highlighted by the War on Terror, the

Democrat Obama was necessary to reshape patriotic ideals in order to make everyone feel included in the U.S. and to regain support for the country from various minorities. The lingering conservative feelings towards patriotism and failures during the Obama presidency then created a window for Trump to come into the picture of American politics, where the aftermath of 9/11 still played a big role in the election. As Rhodes remarked eloquently: “Trump was impossible without 9/11. The jingoism in the media; the assertion of a new, militaristic American nationalism; the creeping fear of the Other, the wars that sapped America’s strength, and unsteadied our place in the world [...]”<sup>154</sup> The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> remain a core memory for many and will continue to influence American politics and American patriotism for as long as this generation lives on.

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<sup>154</sup> Rhodes, *The World as It Is*, 420.



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