

Paper #4 – American Exceptionalism

The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

The incumbent was compelled to say it. During the closing statements of the third and final Presidential debate of this year's election campaign, President Barack Obama promised the American people that "America continues to be the greatest nation on earth". Obama had obviously learned from his now-infamous answer to the question from a reporter at a news conference in Strasbourg in 2009 whether he subscribed to American exceptionalism. Obama replied: "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism" (Obama). At home, a storm of protest broke loose, with many conservative politicians accusing Obama of a lack of patriotism. Regardless of their political view, it seems as though every American politician has to profess their faith to American exceptionalism if she or he wants to be elected or re-elected to a given office. The notion that the United States possesses certain qualities that makes it unique, if not superior to other nation-states prevails amid an age that indicates that the US is finding itself in descent in various areas.

American exceptionalism is one of the most, if not *the* most, important narratives that pervade American culture. American exceptionalism has been the subject of a multitude of books and scholarly papers, especially since the economic crisis that began in 2008, which should be no surprise given that America's current political, social, economic, and cultural environment is a time of great anxiety. Generally speaking, debates concerning exceptionalism seem to be at their apex during junctures of anxiety for the American polity. It

is important to note that the concept of American exceptionalism is both complex and vague, and that it presumably wasn't only altered, but also received diverging assessments over time. Moreover, the notion has never been singular, unified or wholly accepted.

This paper attempts to analyze the concept of American exceptionalism and its ramifications. In doing so, I will first give an outline of the history of the notion and how it has changed over time. Examples from popular culture and politics will help illustrate this. The second part of this paper examines how US-American animated television series like *Captain America* and *G.I. Joe* depict countries hostile to the United States as well as minorities, and analyze which effect the depiction can have on children with regard to their perception of America and American exceptionalism. Finally, I will examine if America is indeed on the decline and, if so, what American exceptionalism has to do with it. This paper cannot offer a complete or final appraisal of American exceptionalism.

A brief history of American exceptionalism

The origins of American exceptionalism go all the way back to 1630, when John Winthrop's held his famous sermon entitled "A Model of Christian Clarity" to Puritan settlers on board the *Arbella*. It is widely believed that this is the founding speech of American exceptionalism. Using the biblical "city upon a hill" phrase (Matthew 5:14) as an image for America, Winthrop claimed that "America had a unique role in God's providence" (Lewis 19). According to Madsen, the trope of witchcraft that were used by John Winthrop and Cotton Mather reappears in contemporary political rhetoric where politicians constantly assert that the United States must be vigilant in its "witch-hunts" to fight an enemy that might endanger the American polity and its allies. The fights America engages in reinforce its exceptionalist ethos, while also attempting to "transform everyone into 'American' subjects

and everyone into ‘America’” (28). John Winthrop’s sermon is widely considered as a cornerstone of American identity.

Another early example of this belief is the very first of the Federalist Papers from 1788, in which Alexander Hamilton describes the American political experiment as one of “universal relevance for the future of all people” (Lewis 19-20):

“It seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.”

Despite the fact that this quote has been interpreted differently over time, it is doubtlessly one that is often referred to when talking about exceptionalism. In 1862, Abraham Lincoln called the United States the “last best hope of the earth”, a phrase that governor Mitt Romney availed himself of when he claimed that the United States of America were “the hope of the earth” during the last Presidential debate.

Originally, many immigrants associated exceptionalism with the contrast between European societies that had, to a large degree, a hierarchical structure, in which a person’s destiny was often times determined by her or his origins, and a new world in which “one could achieve whatever one’s talents made possible in an environment of freedom and possibility” (Lewis 20). Alexis De Tocqueville, the great French political thinker and historian, argued in his book *Democracy in America* (1835) that the US model not only provided European monarchies a “glimpse into a fated democratic future”, but he also believed that America was a “distinctive society with historically particular characteristics that made it quite different from the nations of Europe” (Lewis 19). The most important of these characteristics were, according to the Frenchman, a lack of a tradition of inherited status, subservience, which had a particularly strong tradition in Germany, and hierarchy. In

addition, America's vast, largely uninhabited territory "offered the possibility of extraordinary social mobility" (Lewis 19), which was closely connected to the widespread notion of Manifest Destiny, the belief held by many Americans that the United States was destined to expand westward across the continent.¹ Although the influential political thinker did not approve of all of these concepts, he nevertheless thought that they "lead to a more free and humane society" (Lewis 19).

The US-American academic William Graham Sumner, who was the first professor of sociology at Yale University, differentiated between an old and a new exceptionalism as early as 1899, when he gave his classic speech "The Conquest of the United States by Spain". He argued that

"expansion and imperialism are at war with the best traditions, principles and interests of the American people, and they will plunge us into a network of difficult problems and political perils, which we might have avoided, while they offer us no corresponding advantage in return" (Gamble 14).

It is obvious that Sumner arguments have a strong contemporary relevance. Richard Gamble agrees with Sumner, who also feared that the new exceptionalism – the belief

"that Americans were somehow secure from changing circumstances, immune to limits on power and resources, and exempt from the impact of war and empire on free institutions – had seduced the public into believing that their prosperity, liberty, and security were inevitable blessings accruing to a special people, rather than the fragile products of abundant land, a small population, and benign neighbors. Once these circumstances changed, Americans would discover that "liberty and democracy" required hard work to sustain" (Gamble 14).

¹ Other ideals included the "belief in American exceptionalism, a sense of entitlement to the North American continent, and a religious/moral obligation to spread American democracy" (Petre 2). The term Manifest Destiny was first used by John. L. O'Sullivan in the July-August issue of the *Democratic Review* (Petre 3).

We will come back to this quote later in this paper. According to Richard Gamble, Sumner believed that the tipping point – when the new notion of exceptionalism irrevocably replaced the old one – was in 1898, the year of the Spanish-American war. The American historian Walter A. McDougall called this transition from national self-restraint to national self-assertion “from Promised Land to Crusader State”. Gamble (15) succinctly describes this change in his paper:

“The old was an expression of and a means to sustain the habits of self-governing people; the new is an expression of and a means to sustain a nationalist and imperialist people. The old exceptionalism suited a limited foreign policy; the new suits a messianic adventurism out to remake the world.”

Remarks about American exceptionalism have been persistent over time. John F. Kennedy said during an address delivered to the General Court of Massachusetts in 1961 that “the eyes of all people are truly upon us – and our governments, in every branch, at every level, national, state and local, must be as a city upon a hill – constructed and inhabited by men aware of their great trust and their great responsibilities”. Ronald Reagan also used Winthrop’s sermon of 1630 to talk about American exceptionalism:

“I’ve spoken of the shining city all my political life [...]. But in my mind it was a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace, a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity [...].”

Noll remarks that these reoccurring references to the biblical metaphor suggest a line of continuous development from Winthrop's 17th-century aspirations for Massachusetts to present-day ideals for the United States. However, as Noll states, Winthrop's address had very little to do with any presumed destiny of America to promote an American ideal of liberty

throughout the world. Those who employ Winthrop's language in modern politics often distort historical fact and unwittingly undermine the American ideals they claim to support.

After World War II, the United States of America had emerged as the most powerful nation on earth. The economy was booming, and European countries like the United Kingdom were highly indebted to the US. Entering an age of unprecedented prosperity, the United States left their isolated policy behind and American exceptionalism became more apparent again.

It was during this time that John Wayne came to embody key values of America while representing the States. For more than three decades on the movie screen, John Wayne wasn't only a symbol of masculinity, but he also epitomized patriotism, strength, courage, and an unapologetic belief in American exceptionalism. Later that century, in the 1980s, Hollywood's One Man Armies also paid homage to American exceptionalism, although they did it in a different way. Above all, Sylvester Stallone (*Rambo I-III*) came to be the personification of the killing machines that took on entire armies on their own. The storylines were similar: a soldier goes into enemy territory to rescue a prisoner or take revenge on somebody, leaving behind a path of destruction. Other prominent One Man Armies were Chuck Norris (*Invasion U.S.A.*, *Missing in Action I-III*), Arnold Schwarzenegger (*Commando*), Burt Reynolds (*Malone*), the Swedish actor Dolph Lundgren (*Red Scorpion*), the Belgian Jean-Claude Van Damme (*Cyborg*, *Black Eagle*), Bruce Willis (*Die Hard*), Steven Seagal (*Nico*), and many more. Another movie worth mentioning in this context is *Rocky IV*, particularly the scenes where Apollo Creed enters the ring to fight Drago with James Brown playing *Living in America*, and the montage scene where Drago and Rocky train in the Soviet Union. There are striking parallels between the movies, America's demeanor in

the 1980s, and how American exceptionalism was interpreted at the time. Ronald Reagan², who was inaugurated in 1981, introduced the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) and significantly increased the military budget. At the same time, his rollback policy intended to weaken Communist movements in the entire world. Similar to the One Man Armies, the United States at that time were like a liberator on a mission of universal redemption. Apart from that, it is not hard to detect a zealous nationalism in these movies. After a traumatizing war in Vietnam, it is safe to say that one purpose of these movies was to revive some of the national glory lost in Vietnam, and to foster the popularity of the military, whose reputation was doubtlessly tarnished by the war.³

The popularity of the military was not the only casualty. The notion of American exceptionalism also took a blow, for both it and the military are closely connected. It has been pointed out that the “*military-idea*”, which “symbolizes a unified, coherent force – is central to the myth of American exceptionalism” (Conference Papers, 1). The following passage describes just how important the military is within this foundational myth of American identity:

“In the missionary strand of exceptionalism the need for a superior military is quite obvious, as any imperialistic endeavour will at some point require the use of force. Also, [...] the military is still central in that “fortress America” requires a military to defend it. Herein lies the apparent difference between the two strands of exceptionalism regarding the military-idea: for the missionary strand, the purpose of the military is to help “project,” while for the exemplar strand its function is to “protect” [...]. Ricard (1994) aptly shows how quickly the

² Riehl (17) states that Reagan’s rhetorical style had several characteristics: “unflagging optimism; a heroic and often mythic reading of American history [...]; and finally, synechdocal linkage of the candidate himself with American idealism or exceptionalism.”

³ It has been pointed out that films such as *Rambo* “blamed the failure of the military on politicians and restored the exceptional nature of the US soldier” (Conference Papers, 10). It also says that the second Gulf War (1990-91) and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which is seen by scholars as “America’s conquering of the Vietnam syndrome”, contributed to slowly reviving both the military’s and American exceptionalism’s reputation.

“city upon a hill” argument can lead to the need for conquest: “Originally defensive, the expansionist arguments soon took up an aggressive coloration: the initial legitimate reaction of self-defense against powerful and ambitious neighbors was soon followed [...] by an unbridled territorial growth” [...]. Thus, the distinction between “project” and “protect” is an ideological one, [...] and one that persists in present day American culture. American exceptionalism, on the whole, requires military force in order to fulfill its perceived destiny, while at the same time justifying the use of force: not only do Americans have a particular role in history, but they also have the means to satisfy this role. Therefore, if this is the destiny of an exceptional [...] people, then logically, their military will also be of an exceptional and/or superior character” (Conference Papers, 8-9).⁴

The two strands illustrated in this quote (exemplar and missionary) are in keeping with what Sumner said about the old and new exceptionalism and what Noll said (see page 5): whereas the former “posits the US as an isolationist “city upon a hill”” that would not engage in conflicts, and “where a *diverse* group of people – stemming from the lack of common ancestry, language, territory, etc. – could lead the world by their own example”, the latter sees America in an imperialist role that is “crusading and militant”: not only does the US have “a special role to play in the world”, but it also “differs drastically from the “old world””, and, finally, that “unlike previous great nations, America will never fall” (Conference Papers, 4-5).

The influence of American exceptionalism on children

Children are inapt to distinguish between the real and the unreal on television until they are about five years old. Before that, it is widely believed that they perceive television as the simple, unvarnished truth of what is happening in the real world. Those younger than three years of age look at television as a magic window. As their minds mature, however, they

⁴ Apart from this, the military and American exceptionalism are also linked in their shared role in defining American identity (see Conference Papers, 9-10).

develop skepticism about the literal reality of media messages, and they are better able to tell apart reality from fantasy. Children age five and older are capable of distinguishing between fictional content and news or documentary. Although they have a clear understanding of fiction, they continue to develop a better understanding about nonfiction (Potter 127).

Superheroes that are fighting against villains started emerging in comic books shortly after the outbreak of World War II as a response to atrocities of Nazi Germany in Europe. *Captain America* was created in 1940 as a super patriot during a time when America was contemplating involvement in the conflict, and it continued his crusade for nine years (Pearson 2-3, Scott 326-7), while *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* was turned into a comic book and then into a television cartoon that aired from 1983 to 1986 and from 1989 to 1992. *The Marvel Super Heroes* was an animated cartoon series that was largely based on the original comic books that were published in the 1940s. *Captain America* was one of 195 half-hour segments, which aired from September 1 until December 1, 1966.

In episode 150 (*The Invaders*) of season one of *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero*, which aired on November 29, 1985, Duke and the rest of the mission force are pursuing two Cobra agents in the desert when they see an Arab with his camel at a small oasis. After the local told him in which direction the agents went, one of the Joes says “me and the camel jockey got a lot in common. He loves the desert, same as I do”. This is a clear example of how the cartoon perpetuates a stereotype. Soon after that, Rock ‘n Roll says about the *Oktober Guard*, a Soviet special operations unit that is also pursuing the Cobra agents “Ruskies. Next to toothache there’s nothing I hate more than a Ruskie.” A little later he says “I knew it! Those sneaky Russian rats tryin’ to get [...]”. Like Nazis in *Captain America*, the Russians are referred to as an animal that stands for pestilence and disease. Before they depart, Rock ‘n Roll utters “there’ll be another time, you dumb Russian bear”. As we can see, the Russian

soldier, who is really a Soviet soldier, is slurred by means of derogatory terms and referred to as an animal.

Moreover, Cobra, the Joes' archenemy, is often portrayed as a deceiving, hideous villain who uses perfidious, cowardly means to defeat the G.I. Joes and rule the world. There are numerous episodes that exemplify this: in *Flint's Vacation* (143), for example, Cobra brainwashes the inhabitants of a small town. In *The Traitor, Part 2* (147), the villain utilizes mind control gas; the episode *The Wrong Stuff* (149) features infectious propaganda, and in *Cold Slither* (151), the rogue uses music with subliminal messages to control the masses. Moreover, the struggle between Cobra and the Joes represents the typical Axis versus Allies theme that can be found throughout popular culture.

The Red Skull, one of the best known villains of all time, is the long time arch-enemy of Captain America. First introduced in the Captain America Comics #1, the rogue serves as the embodiment of everything evil the Nazis stood for and fits nearly every existing archetype for enemy image. According to Pearson (19), "he's the embodiment of death"; in season one, episode two (The Sentinel and the Spy), Hitler says to him "you will be evil personified". The Red Skull says about himself: "Wherever there was injustice, tyranny, ruthlessness, I was there, attacking the weak and helpless. Day by day my power grew. Armies were destroyed, cities were leveled at my command, no one was safe from my ruthlessness." It is easy to see that he is the devil himself. Pearson (19) states that the "strong imagery of the Red Skull serves as the perfect vessel for anti-Nazi messages: a sadistic, inhuman [...], arrogant killer with no regard for human life."

Moving on to another theme in the Captain America television series, it is not surprising to see the championing of Judeo-Christian values, as the creators of the comic character were of Jewish descent. Like the Golem from the Jewish folklore, Captain America is brought into being to help mankind against the Nazi menace. Pearson (20) is right when he

says that he takes on the role of “judge, jury, and executioner.” In season one, episode five (Return of Captain America), the superhero comes back after having been gone for 20 years, which is remindful of Jesus’ resurrection. Apart from that, Pearson (21) rightfully claims that “American political administrations have been notorious for letting fundamental Christian values lead their political decisions”, leading to what Jewett (1973) calls “The Captain America Complex”. He argues that the United States has a tendency to believe that its motives and reasons for its decisions are not only righteous, but should be followed suit by the rest of the world. Consequently, the zealous US military doctrine is to protect the world, whether the latter wants its help or not.

America on the decline?

Let us have a look at the United States’ state of affairs today. At first, I will assess the situation of America’s middle class. In the US, it costs \$2.38 per hour for an employee’s health care coverage, while it is just 98 cent on average in the remainder of rich world. It has been argued that America’s unique employer-provided health care system undermines competitiveness (Luce 35). Moreover, China is set to overtake the US economy by 2020 (Luce 53). In terms of America’s educational system, the situation looks bleak. More than a quarter, that is, 1,3 million of American students drop out of high school (SPIEGEL 45, 12), and in just one generation, America fell from first to 9th in the proportion of its young people with graduate degrees (Luce 80). On top of that, no other Western democracy except Switzerland diffuses power to the same degree as America, and no single policy area is as decentralized as education. Altogether, Washington spends less than one tenth of its national spending on public education. In addition, teachers have to cope with relatively low salaries⁵ and the “no kid left behind” or “good job” approach to teaching in the US. Reportedly, few

⁵ The average salary for a high school sports coach in Texas is \$73,000, versus \$42,000 for a high school teacher (Luce 75).

values are more fiercely held than the importance of self-admiration. One indicator is the dramatic rise of incidences of narcissistic personality disorder (delusional levels of self-esteem), which has more than doubled since the 1980s (Luce 76).

In terms of its infrastructure, the condition of every fourth of the nation's more than 600,000 bridges is either unsatisfactory or dilapidated. There are studies that recommend \$225 billion per year to modernize the inadequate infrastructure – but that would be 60 percent more than the government invests at the moment (SPIEGEL 45, 6-7). In 2009, the US spent three percent of its gross domestic product on infrastructure, compared to nine percent in China and five percent in Europe (Luce 133-34).

The United States are known as a country of innovators and entrepreneurs, and Silicon Valley is still beacon of entrepreneurship. Having founded more than half of all companies in the Valley between 1995 and 2005, immigrants have been the driving force behind the valley's late success. In recent years, however, America has been on the decline in terms of inventiveness, risk capital, and research money. For 150 years, the American pioneering spirit has been alive and well, because immigrants usually show far greater risk than native-born people. What was replenished in the 1960s was forfeited after 9/11, however, as a vast majority of foreign students were now required to return home. Besides that, many countries have caught up with the States, allowing many graduates, especially those from China and India, to turn their backs on the US because they can get a lucrative job at home. Another alarming development is the ever-increasing tuition fees. Although many US-American institutes of higher education are still among the world's best, they have become prohibitively expensive for many potential students, especially because colleges can no longer reckon with adequate financial support (states like California spend more money on their prisons than on their universities). The accumulated college debt of all US graduates amounts to one trillion dollars, which prevents those college hopefuls of all hopefuls who come from lower-income

families from enrolling at a university. Today, one's promotion prospects are more dependent on one's financial and social background than in Europe, whose class society the United States had intended to leave behind (SPIEGEL 45, 12-14). Besides this, surveys have shown that just over half of all Americans read books to their young children, and more than a fifth of American adults have a reading age of fifth grade (Luce, 89).

Another issue is how little money the government provides for research and development. Think tanks like the NASA or the DARPA, a driving force behind the development of the Internet, don't get nearly as much money any more. Another example of low commitment to public science is the supercollider particle accelerator project, for which the government refused to pay for in 1993. It was built in Europe instead. Moreover, Wall Street, which used to invest heavily in Silicon Valley, has found more lucrative partners elsewhere, leading to fewer start-ups and shrinking funds for the Valley. Overall, Luce (119) persuasively describes the US financial system as a "growing problem for America's competitiveness."

Another troubling trend is the ever-growing bureaucracy in the US government and its agencies. A prime example is the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, which "takes three year to process an application" (Luce 142). In 2000, the United States was ranked first in her ability to innovate. As a result of bureaucracy and budget resolutions, by 2010 it had moved down to sixth (Luce 145). The complexity of the US government is, moreover, getting bigger every year, one barometer for which is the tax code, which now comprises 70,000 pages. The Transportation Security Authority (TSA), which was put into being by George W. Bush after 9/11, is an example of the growing number of outside contractors. Moreover, a lack of accountability of those contractors and little control presidents have left over civilian bureaucracy are alarming (Luce 149-51).

Unlike most other countries, the United States there is no central agency with money or leverage to keep jobs in America. The General Accounting Office (GAC), which “chronicles the government’s decomposition in merciless detail” (Luce 169), appears to be unable to make the government put into practice what they advice. It cannot prevent Washington, for instance, from spending \$746 billion on economic mobility, which is more than the total annual budgets of most industrialized countries, according to Luce (171). Nevertheless, “two-thirds of Washington’s subsidies go to the wealthiest 40 percent of Americans”, while less than four “percent goes to the poorest fifth”. Luce calls this “the most sprawling and most self-defeating program of economic mobility in the rich world” (171-72). It is a striking example of how one of the republic’s most valued and celebrated principles, that is, the equality of opportunity, has been undermined and gone awry.⁶ Just like the lower likelihood for adolescents from poorer families to be able to afford college, the inequitable distribution of subsidies for economic mobility illustrates how appearance and reality differ in America of all countries. It shows how hollow the American dream has become.

Yet another startling tendency, which was particularly visible during this year’s election campaign, is how the majority of the US populace is seemingly unwilling to accept that America has flaws and that it is in the midst of relinquishing its preeminence on many levels. Held by many Americans, the belief that the United States cannot fall (see page eight) is forcing politicians to lie to the electorate. Having been exposed to American exceptionalism in movies, cartoons, comics, the media, and other entities for all their lives, I believe it is safe to say that a majority of the people in this country won’t admit that it has defects like every other country in this world. This collective denial forces politicians to lie – they simply cannot afford to tell the electorate the truth if they want to be elected. There is evidence everywhere.

⁶ Luce’s (172) compares the US to Germany and Canada, where it is more than twice as likely and twice as likely to move up to a wealthier income bracket in your lifetime, respectively. Is it worth going back to the quote of Alexander De Tocqueville on page four: he said that America offered the “possibility of extraordinary social mobility”. The social and, with it, economic mobility in the United States is not quite the same almost 180 later.

Instead of talking about how they would fix the country's problems, both Romney and Obama got entangled in petty grievances, constantly accusing each other of making mistakes, trying to tarnish each other's reputations, exploiting the other's blunders, and degrading each other with biting and political ads.⁷ Even the media seems to be contributing to this trend, for it tends to focus on what the candidates do wrong instead of comparing the two or informing the viewers about what they stand for. It seems as though Americans have been lulled with phrases like "America is the greatest nation in the history of the world" for so long that they think of criticism of America as treason. It is selective exposure: not only do many Americans want to hear what reinforces their view, they also want to hear how great America is.

One President once dared to tell the American people that they needed to make sacrifices. In what came to be known as the "malaise" speech, Jimmy Carter addressed what he thought was a "crisis of confidence". He appealed to his fellow countrymen's conscience by asking them to change their energy consumption. In the 1980 election one year later, Carter only carried four states. Thenceforth, very few politicians have dared to ask the populace for sacrifices. John F. Kennedy's famous plea "ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country" will most likely be not as popular today as it was when he said it during his inaugural address 41 years ago. As I showed in my introduction, politicians who don't subscribe to American exceptionalism or even dare to tell hard truths are branded Cassandras and naysayers. This criticism is not limited to Republicans. The country is so steeped in American exceptionalism that Republicans and Democrats alike are revolting when America is criticized (Schmitz). What happens when politicians have to lie to be elected? They are unlikely to keep the promised comment they made during the election campaign,

⁷ One example is how Obama used Romney's comment about PBS and Big-Bird against him. Romney's remark ("I love Big Bird [...] but I'm not going to keep on spending money on things to borrow money from China to pay for") was not only turned upside down, but it was also depicted as a major mistake. If anything, it was a benign weakness that would have otherwise presumably gone unnoticed. It is a disturbing example of how ridiculous election campaigns have become.

and the electorate in turn loses confidence in politics. Needless to say, the impression that Americans seemingly cannot see beyond the next electoral cycle does not help.

Indeed, the United States seem to reside in an age of denial and narcissism. Luce (224) points out that

“Samuel Huntington identified America’s key fault line as the gap between the ideals of America’s national creed [...] and its reality, which often fails to live up to them. Whenever the gap becomes too glaring, as it seems to have done in the early twenty-first century, Americans are prone to bouts of “creedal passion.”

Huntington believed that during such periods, Americans tended to respond in four different ways: complacency, hypocrisy, cynicism, or moralism. In Luce’s words (224), “Huntington saw these tendencies as *sui generis*, given that America was uniquely founded on a creed rather than on shared history or ethnicity.” This is very telling. Complacency has definitely befallen this country, as a consequence of the perpetuated phrases like “America is the greatest nation on earth”. To overcome a problem, however, you must first recognize it exists. As long as telling the truth is frowned upon in this country, there is little chance for change. For Huntington, hypocrisy was the worst of America’s creedal vices. Obama had big plans when he came into office in 2009. Huntington wrote that “if you are extraordinarily high-minded in your political pronouncements, then you are bound in the nature of things to be more than ordinarily hypocritical.” In other words: it is in the nature of things that you won’t be able to put the majority of your plans into practice – but you nevertheless need to promise those things, hence the need to be hypocritical in order to get elected.

Conclusions

Now that Obama is re-elected, he did not have to fear that his words could jeopardize the outcome of the election. In his victory speech on November 6, Obama said:

“By itself the recognition that we have common hopes and dreams won’t end all the gridlock, or solve all our problems, or substitute for all the painstaking work of building consensus and making the difficult consequence to move this country forward. [...] We got more work to do. But that doesn’t mean your work is done. The role of citizen in our country does not end with your vote. America’s never about what can be done for us, it’s about what can be done by us, together, through the hard and frustrating, but necessary work of self-government.”

Similarly, during his inaugural speech on January 20 2009, he told Americans that

“what is required of us now is a new era of responsibility - a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly [...]. This is the price and the promise of citizenship.”

Soon after that, however, Obama started facing the harsh realities of American politics and subsequently failed to live up to most of his promises. At some point, there was not much left of the courage and the hope that he had embodied when he became the 44th President of the United States of America. Now, though, with four more years as head of this country and without having to worry about getting re-elected, Barack Obama showed similar promise as in 2008. We will see if this man will plea to his countrymen that it is time to start thinking and to face facts.

As I have shown in this paper, American exceptionalism is a concept that has been a crucial part of American national identity. Madsen (1) writes that “American exceptionalism permeates every period of American history and is the single most powerful agent in a series of arguments that have been fought down the centuries concerning the identity of Americans”. A sense of nationhood in the US was not built on “a shared language, culture, common descent or historical territory” and thus required an alternative, an idea that would unite a nascent people. The myth of American exceptionalism provided just that by distinguishing those who had travelled to the new world from the Europeans of the old world; it is a narrative of “difference and exception”. As a founding myth, American exceptionalism has an important place in American culture and political thought (Conference Papers, 3-4).

The military-idea and American exceptionalism are blurred and “America’s technological and logistic superiority in warfare became culturally transmitted as signs of cultural-moral superiority” (Gibson, 1989, p. 14). This point is reinforced by the effect of Vietnam on American exceptionalism. The war was seen as bringing an end to America’s “moral exclusivity, its military invincibility, its manifest destiny” (Conference Papers, 10). While damaging both the military-idea and American exceptionalism, it also highlights the connection between the two.

Animated cartoons like *G.I. Joe* and *Captain America* perpetuate stereotypes and promote America’s superiority over other nations. Comic characters make going to war sound desirable and heroic, thereby also trivializing violence. The villains generally have little or no regard for human life, and they tend to be inherently evil and deceitful. The superheroes, on the other hand, stand for everything that’s American.

Even though older children know that animated cartoons are fictional, the cartoons can still impact their cognitive, emotional, and moral development. Without help to process the information or to show alternatives to what it is being exposed to on television, the child will

probably take the lessons from Captain America for the truth. Children who are exposed to this content time and again can develop knowledge structures. At some point, their brain will perceive information about American superiority, stereotypes of other nations, and minorities as factual.

Mancur Olson, the great American political economist, talked about how “stable nations tend to wind down over time”. As “success and prosperity become normal, it gets ever more difficult for proponents or reform to dislodge the coalitions that control their nation’s resources” (Luce 226). As the nation becomes more complex and more bureaucratic, it gets harder to govern. Joseph Tainter talks about comparable things in his book “The Collapse of complex Societies”. There is obviously no absolute answer to where the United States of America are headed, but I believe that it will have to come to terms with losing its economic and geopolitical preeminence.

America will have to acknowledge that no civilization and no democracy is history in its final stage, but a temporarily secured form of existence. Maybe this country needs more people like James Baldwin, who once said:

“I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.”

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