



MYTH AMERICA

**HISTORIANS TAKE ON
THE BIGGEST LEGENDS AND LIES
ABOUT OUR PAST**

EDITED BY
**KEVIN M. KRUSE AND
JULIAN E. ZELIZER**

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BASIC BOOKS

New York

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CONTENTS

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Introduction

KEVIN M. KRUSE AND JULIAN E. ZELIZER

1 American Exceptionalism

DAVID A. BELL

2 Founding Myths

AKHIL REED AMAR

3 Vanishing Indians

ARI KELMAN

4 Immigration

ERIKA LEE

5 America First

SARAH CHURCHWELL

6 The United States Is an Empire

DANIEL IMMERWAHR

7 The Border

GERALDO CADAVA

8 American Socialism

MICHAEL KAZIN

9 The Magic of the Marketplace

NAOMI ORESKES AND ERIK M. CONWAY

[10 The New Deal](#)

[**ERIC RAUCHWAY**](#)

[11 Confederate Monuments](#)

[**KAREN L. COX**](#)

[12 The Southern Strategy](#)

[**KEVIN M. KRUSE**](#)

[13 The Good Protest](#)

[**GLENDA GILMORE**](#)

[14 White Backlash](#)

[**LAWRENCE B. GLICKMAN**](#)

[15 The Great Society](#)

[**JOSHUA ZEITZ**](#)

[16 Police Violence](#)

[**ELIZABETH HINTON**](#)

[17 Insurrection](#)

[**KATHLEEN BELEW**](#)

[18 Family Values Feminism](#)

[**NATALIA MEHLMAN PETRZELA**](#)

[19 Reagan Revolution](#)

[**JULIAN E. ZELIZER**](#)

[20 Voter Fraud](#)

[**CAROL ANDERSON**](#)

[*Discover More*](#)

[*Notes*](#)

[*Contributor Bios*](#)

[*About the Authors*](#)

To the archivists, librarians, teachers, and fellow historians who give us a better, and more accurate, understanding of our nation's past.

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**BASIC
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INTRODUCTION

Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer

WE LIVE IN THE AGE OF DISINFORMATION.

To be sure, there have always been lies in our public discourse. But in the last few years the floodgates have opened wide, and the line between fact and fiction has become increasingly blurred if not completely erased. Unlike past eras in which myths and misunderstandings have clouded our national debate, the current crisis stands apart both for the degree of disinformation and for the deliberateness with which it has been spread.

Crises never have a single cause, but in this instance a good deal of blame can be attributed to the political campaigns and presidency of Donald Trump. His administration thrived on deceptions and distortions, reframing its own lies as “alternative facts.” The fire hose of falsehoods coming from the Trump White House was so pronounced that the *Washington Post* launched a database tracking them all, accounting for more than thirty thousand instances in the end.¹ Whereas previous presidencies might have been embarrassed by such fact-checking, Trump and his aides simply waved away these corrections as “fake news.”² Even when watchdogs inside the administration pushed back against the president’s statements, they too were ignored or, in the case of five inspector generals, simply dismissed.³ This consistent embrace of disinformation could, at times, turn deadly. As the COVID-19 pandemic swept the nation, the administration effectively went to war with scientists and medical experts, engaging in what the Union for Concerned Scientists called “an egregious pattern of ignoring, sidelining, and censoring the

voices of scientists and their research.” Refusing to face facts, President Trump insisted in February 2020 that the number of coronavirus cases in the nation would “within a couple of days... be down to close to zero.”⁴ When he left office less than a year later, however, the country had experienced tens of millions of cases and four hundred thousand deaths from the virus.⁵ The Trump administration’s long-running war on the truth culminated with a massive campaign to discredit the 2020 election and a violent insurrection at the United States Capitol designed to stop the certification of the results. This may have been, as critics charged, “the big lie,” but it was only one of many.

The Trump presidency pushed the country to this crisis point, but it was able to do so only because of two large-scale changes that have in recent years given right-wing myths a huge platform and an accordingly large impact on American life.

The first major development was the creation of the conservative media ecosystem, which ranges today from cable news networks such as Fox News, Newsmax, and One America News to websites such as Breitbart. Unlike the network news programs of the so-called mainstream media, which placed great emphasis on an evenhanded approach that hewed to objective facts and eschewed editorializing, these new outlets have taken a different tack. Abandoning the old broadcast television approach of the post–World War II era, they instead embraced a “narrowcast” model of the cable age, one that seeks to echo the partisan point of view of a carefully cultivated target audience and to amplify their assumptions back to them. Engaging and enraging viewers became the primary aim, it seems, not any conventional journalistic commitment to the truth. (Indeed, when its popular host Tucker Carlson was sued for slander, Fox News, own lawyers argued that Carlson’s on-air statements “cannot reasonably be interpreted as facts” because the show clearly engages in “exaggeration” and “non-literal commentary.”)⁶ Importantly, the conservative media ecosystem was augmented by the even more wide-open world of social media, especially Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit, where the tendency to find like-

minded partisans and the freedom from fact-checkers took disinformation to new depths. Taken together, these venues have given far-right lies unprecedented access to significant numbers of Americans and, just as important, let ordinary Americans spread lies to one another as well. As a result, misinformation and disinformation have infused our debates about almost every pertinent political question.

The second significant change, related to the first, is the devolution of the Republican Party's commitment to truth. All political parties, by their very need to pull in voters and push them to the polls, have long engaged in various versions of political spin, privileging selective evidence and occasional outright lies. But, until recently, Republicans fashioned themselves as realists who would keep the irrational idealism of Democrats in check. Despite his own record of drifting away from facts in ways big and small, President Ronald Reagan took pride in presenting his brand of conservatism as one committed to clear-eyed truths. "It isn't so much that liberals are ignorant," he liked to say. "It's just that they know so many things that aren't so."⁷

Within a generation of the Reagan era, however, Republicans' self-image as realists respecting hard facts had taken a beating. "Remember Republicans?" the screenwriter and Bush-era blogger John Rogers asked in 2004. "Sober men in suits, pipes, who'd nod thoughtfully over their latest tract on market-driven fiscal conservatism while grinding out the numbers on rocket science.... How did they become the party of fairy dust and make believe? How did they become the anti-science guys? The anti-fact guys? The *anti-logic guys*?"⁸ Surprisingly, Republicans largely did it to themselves. In 2004 a top aide to President George W. Bush famously scoffed at what he called "the reality-based community."⁹ In foreign affairs and domestic policies alike, the administration engaged in a running battle with experts and the facts they carried with them.¹⁰ By 2008, the shift had become clear, with prominent politicians like Alaska governor Sarah Palin, the party's vice-

presidential candidate, positioning themselves against intellectuals, universities, the media, and other sources of valid information.¹¹

During the Obama era, out-of-power Republicans felt freer to criticize what the administration was doing and craft fantastical complaints about what it was not. They propagated wild conspiracies about the existence of “death panels” in the Affordable Care Act and spread claims that the program would provide coverage to undocumented immigrants.¹² When Obama pushed back against the latter falsehood in a formal address to a joint session of Congress, Republican congressman Joe Wilson yelled out “You lie!” Even after fact-checkers proved that the president had not, in fact, lied, Wilson remained undeterred, promoting his outburst in a fundraising pitch that quickly raked in a million dollars.¹³ During the 2012 presidential campaign, Republicans devoted themselves to similar attacks on facts, ranging from “unskewing” poll numbers they didn’t like to dismissing employment statistics they found “suspicious.”¹⁴ Notably, as the party drifted further and further from the facts, Donald Trump gained a foothold in conservative circles by spreading the “birther” conspiracy that Barack Obama had not been born in the United States and was therefore ineligible to be president.¹⁵ With Trump’s own run for president four years later and the ascendancy of the QAnon conspiracy on the far-right fringes, the transformation was complete.¹⁶

The current war on truth has unfolded along multiple fronts. The fields of science, medicine, law, and public policy, among others, have been the subject of sustained assaults. But history too has come under attack, and for obvious reasons. As George Orwell famously observed in his dystopian novel *1984*, “Who controls the past controls the future.”¹⁷

Claims about what happened before are, in some sense, claims about what can or cannot happen again. But such claims can be misleading and even malignant. In their classic work *Thinking in Time*, Ernest May and Richard Neustadt explored the ways in which clumsy misapplications of history can create catastrophes in public

policy as the “lessons” of the past become limitations on the present, or worse.¹⁸ As Sarah Maza has echoed in her own work, “Trying to fit a scenario from the past onto one in the present can be disastrous: ‘We will liberate Iraq, as we did Europe!’ ‘Don’t go for a diplomatic solution—remember Munich!’”¹⁹

Narratives about the past can distort the present in less obvious ways as well. If people allow themselves to become “complaisant hostages of the pasts they create,” in the words of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, they find it impossible to imagine futures that are substantially different.²⁰ The recent controversies over Confederate monuments are a prominent case in point. Largely constructed in the early twentieth century, these statues and memorials were part of a campaign to promote the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, an alternate version of the past that whitewashed the role of slavery in the rebellion and recast traitors who warred against the United States as American patriots. Generations raised under this consciously crafted mythology came to believe that act of spin was “history,” and they have naturally seen efforts to undo the damage of the Lost Cause mythos—to restore the real historical record—as a devious attempt to “rewrite history.”

Efforts to reshape narratives about the US past thus became a central theme of the conservative movement in general and the Trump administration in particular. From its very first hours, when White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer lied that the new president had “the largest audience ever to witness an inauguration, period,” the Trump White House repeatedly made outlandish claims about its “unprecedented” place in history—how Trump’s approval ratings were the highest ever, how he was the first to do this or the best to do that, how past presidents like Jackson and Lincoln and Reagan were mere forerunners of his greatness, etc. With the Republican Party echoing its claims and right-wing media voices amplifying them, the Trump White House represented a concerted effort to rewrite history in real time.²¹

These efforts culminated in the closing months of the administration with the creation of the President’s Advisory 1776

Commission. The commission would provide, the president promised, a version of history that would enable “patriotic education,” but that goal is inherently at odds with the study of history. A history that seeks to exalt a nation’s strengths without examining its shortcomings, that values feeling good over thinking hard, that embraces simplistic celebration over complex understanding, isn’t history; it’s propaganda. To that end, the “1776 Report”—whose authors notably included *no* American historians—was rushed into print in the very final days of the Trump presidency, one final effort to twist the record. Among other distortions, the report compared nineteenth-century supporters of slavery to contemporary proponents of “identity politics” and equated early twentieth-century progressivism with fascism.²² When Trump finally left office, Republicans in Congress and in state legislatures picked up his “history war” as their own. They have worked to block the teaching of popular histories such as the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project and turned the advanced legal field of critical race theory into a threat that is allegedly menacing elementary schoolchildren.²³ William F. Buckley famously defined a conservative as someone who “stands athwart history, yelling Stop,” but conservatives in our era have increasingly focused on thwarting history, full stop.

To be sure, political debates about history are nothing new. But a brief look at the most recent one—the so-called history wars that unfolded in the mid-1990s—shows the ways in which our current debate is different from what’s come before.

First, there was a controversy over a proposal for a set of national history standards. The idea, launched as a joint program by George H. W. Bush’s Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities, seemed to have a thoroughly conservative lineage. NEH Chair Lynne Cheney, wife of then secretary of defense and future vice president Dick Cheney, said the standards were needed to strengthen Americans’ mastery of basic historical facts. Yet she acknowledged that interpretations of those facts might well vary. “History,” she noted in 1991, “is contentious.” The draft of the standards revealed that admission to be an understatement.

Reflecting the ways the historical profession had shifted away from conventional tropes of Western civilization and “Great Man history” over the previous decades and broadened the analytical lens to account for the experiences of working-class people, racial and religious minorities, women, gays and lesbians, and other previously overlooked groups, the standards proposed by the academics and administrators recruited for the project quickly became a new front in the culture wars of the early 1990s. In an op-ed for the *Wall Street Journal*, Lynne Cheney denounced them for providing an overly “grim and gloomy” interpretation of US history. Other conservatives washed their hands of the project as well, but so did the whole political establishment. In a stunning rebuke, ninety-nine US senators voted to condemn the standards. The project was abandoned.²⁴

In 1995 a similarly fierce controversy unfolded over the Smithsonian Institution’s plan to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. The centerpiece of the exhibit would be the *Enola Gay*, the B-29 bomber that carried out the mission; the controversy came over how to contextualize the display. Curators insisted that they sought only to provide an “honest and balanced” narrative of the event, but opponents—including military and veterans’ organizations—criticized the exhibit for providing what they saw as a forced false equivalence between the United States and Japan. Republican congressman Tom Lewis summed up the feeling of many on the right when he said the Smithsonian’s job was “to tell history, not rewrite it.” The director of the museum redid the display to avoid any controversy and, indeed, virtually even any commentary, displaying the plane on its own as a “fact” devoid of “interpretation.” And that, in turn, led to protests from historians. The Organization of American Historians formally condemned “revisions of interpretations of history” that came about not from scholarly motives but rather from patriotic demands or political considerations. Despite the controversy, historians resolved to maintain their public engagement. “The only alternative to learning from this tragedy,” David Thelen wrote in a roundtable for the *Journal*

of American History, “is to retreat into safe professional harbors where we talk only ‘with’ ourselves.”²⁵

Although those debates remind us how common it has been for history to become politicized, the tumult of the 1990s represented a crisis that was qualitatively different from the one we now face. As Joyce Appleby, Margaret Jacob, and Lynn Hunt wrote in *Telling the Truth About History*, it is one thing to acknowledge how historians were influenced by their particular context and could therefore disagree about how to interpret certain facts; it is quite another thing to ignore the facts altogether.²⁶ In the past, Americans have argued about which facts were more important in their explanatory power or causal emphasis; in the present, we are often reduced to arguing about which facts are even facts. Unmooring our debates from some shared understanding of facts inevitably makes constructive dialogue impossible because there is no shared starting point.

This shift has been driven by the rise of a new generation of amateur historians who, lacking any training in the field or familiarity with its norms, have felt freer to write a history that begins with its conclusions and works backward to find—or invent, if need be—some sort of evidence that will seem to support it. A cottage industry on the right, in particular, has flourished with partisan authors producing a partisan version of the past to please partisan audiences, effectively replicating the “narrowcasting” approach of conservative cable news. Often, these arguments are based on “facts” that simply aren’t facts or on narratives that fundamentally misconstrue what we know from the archives. Decades of well-regarded research have been simply disregarded for the sake of convenience; academic consensus built painstakingly over time has been waved away as more “fake news.” The public, as a result, is inundated with wild claims about history that don’t match what any legitimate historian—on the right, left, or center—would deem to be true.

For historians, this assault on history represents a new front in a long-standing campaign to engage and educate the general public about our shared history. For all the clichés about academics being

shut off from the real world in ivory towers, American historians have long worked to bring their expertise about the past into their present. In 1931 Carl Becker used his presidential address to the American Historical Association to remind his colleagues that their archival research and scholarly work was only the start. “The history that lies inert in unread books,” he chided, “does no work in the world.”²⁷ Becker’s call for historians to share their insights and illuminate public debate has been answered time and time again. In the early days of the civil rights movement, for instance, John Hope Franklin and C. Vann Woodward confronted then-commonplace myths about the origins and operations of segregation. During the Vietnam War, a new generation of scholars such as William Appleman Williams and Gabriel Kolko challenged long-standing legends about the workings of US foreign policy. Social and cultural historians in the 1970s and 1980s wrote new histories of the nation from the bottom up, expanding our view to include long-overlooked perspectives on gender, race, and ethnic identities and, in the process, showing that narrow narratives focused solely on political leaders at the top obscured more than they revealed. Despite the fact that the term *revisionist history* is often thrown around by nonhistorians as an insult, in truth all good historical work is at heart “revisionist” in that it uses new findings from the archives or new perspectives from historians to improve, to perfect—and, yes, to *revise*—our understanding of the past.

Today, yet another generation of historians is working once again to bring historical scholarship out of academic circles, this time to push back against misinformation in the public sphere. Writing op-eds and essays for general audiences; engaging the public through appearances on television, radio, and podcasts; and being active on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Substack, hundreds if not thousands of historians have been working to provide a counterbalance and corrections to the misinformation distorting our national dialogue. Such work has incredible value, yet historians still do their best work in the longer written forms of books, articles, and edited collections that allow us both to express our thoughts with

precision in the text and provide ample evidence in the endnotes. This volume has brought together historians who have been actively engaging the general public through the short forms of modern media and has provided them a platform where they might expand those engagements into fuller essays that reflect the best scholarly traditions of the profession.

The lies and legends addressed in the twenty essays in this edited collection are by no means the only ones prevalent in public discourse today, but they represent some of the most pressing distortions of the past in the present moment. Because there has been such a robust debate over the role of slavery in America's political development by contributors and supporters of the 1619 Project as well as by its critics, we decided to focus our limited space here on other issues that have not received as much attention.

Many of the lies and legends in this collection, as we have already noted, stem from a deliberate campaign of disinformation from the political Right. Some of these have obvious partisan motives, such as the efforts to portray Democratic programs such as the New Deal or Great Society as misguided failures or the campaign to present the "Reagan Revolution" as an unbridled success. Others have worked to bolster broad ideological stances that reinforce the modern Right, framing the free market as wholly good or democratic socialism as wholly bad, for instance, or characterizing feminism as a deliberate plot against the family.

Whereas those distortions embody the kind of predictable spin that has long been a part of US party politics, a more ominous strand of disinformation—focused on racial issues and stoking racial resentment—has surged to the forefront in recent years, driven in large part by the rise of white nationalism and the inroads it has made in Republican politics. Not long ago, during the time of George H. W. Bush, the GOP worked aggressively to confront past incidents of racism, with its leaders even going so far as to offer formal apologies for past practices like the "southern strategy." However, that push for reckoning and reconciliation was abruptly abandoned in the Trump era and replaced by outright denialism. Rather than apologize for the southern strategy, new voices on the right simply

asserted that there had never *been* a southern strategy and that, as a result, there was nothing to apologize for. Seeking to paper over proof of racism in the movement's past and present, they have tried to rewrite the history of a range of issues: immigration and the border, civil rights protests and white backlash, police violence and voter fraud. These efforts have sought to retrofit history as a rationale for present policies and programs.

Although partisan motives animate much of the current crisis of misinformation, this volume also addresses a number of lies and legends that were born long before this moment and spread well beyond a single political party or ideology. These “bipartisan” myths, without any overt motive behind them, have proved more stubborn than the partisan ones. Some of these misunderstandings are rooted in a persistent belief in American exceptionalism, expressed both generally and also in the particulars, as in claims that America has never been an empire or that Americans have not previously engaged in insurrections. Other myths have invented false pasts—about “vanishing” Native Americans or a virtuous policy of “America First”—to undergird the same claims of American exceptionalism. Americans across the political spectrum have embraced these arguments, but such widespread acceptance of a myth still doesn't make it true. Misinformation is wrong, no matter how narrowly or widely it is held.

This collection is by no means exhaustive in its coverage. There are other significant myths and misunderstandings we haven't addressed in this limited space, and there will surely be new lies and legends created in the coming years. But we hope that this intervention by some of the most prominent historians in the United States can serve as a model of sorts, both for the broader work done by historians engaged in the public sphere and for the broader debates that Americans outside the historical profession can and should have with one another. We need to see the past clearly in order to understand where we stand now and where we might go in the future.

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

David A. Bell

“AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM” HAS A DOUBLE MEANING. IT FIRST arose as an analytical term, referring to the proposition that the social and economic structures of the United States represent an exception to normal laws of historical development. To the extent that the analysis came with a value judgment attached, that judgment was negative. The United States was a historical aberration—a country that was failing to evolve in the proper, desired direction. More recently, though, the analytical meaning has been overshadowed, in the political sphere, by a prescriptive, moralizing one that refers less to American difference than to American superiority. When politicians today invoke “American exceptionalism,” they almost always mean that the United States has desirable qualities that other nations lack and has a special, chosen, superior role in human history.¹

This essay will first look briefly at the question of whether it makes sense to call America “exceptional.” It will then turn at greater length to the strange history of the term *American exceptionalism* itself, explaining why it has acquired such prominence and what has been at stake for those who have used it. In the process the essay will call attention to the two most important actors in that history: the man initially responsible for promoting the term in the 1920s and the man who did the most to introduce it to the US political mainstream

seventy years later. They were both ardent radicals, albeit of rather different sorts: Joseph Stalin and Newt Gingrich.

Is America in fact “exceptional”? To address the question concisely, consider these three propositions. First, most nations can be considered exceptional in one sense or another. After all, the word refers to deviation from a norm—but which norm? Can we group together all aspects of a nation’s development—social, economic, political, cultural—into a single framework? Marxists have very often answered this question in the affirmative, and it is therefore not entirely surprising that the term *American exceptionalism* originated in the international communist movement. But for those who don’t subscribe to such all-embracing theories, the situation is murkier. A nation may look exceptional with respect to one criterion and entirely typical with respect to another. In fact, scholars have managed to demonstrate that nearly every nation on the planet represents an exception to the planetary norm. They speak of the “exception française” and the “deutsche Sonderweg,” or special path. A sizable literature exists not only on “Chinese exceptionalism” but also on “Serbian exceptionalism.” Tunisia’s relative success in navigating the Arab Spring led some to speak of “Tunisian exceptionalism.”² The relative paucity of references to British and Japanese exceptionalisms may derive simply from the fact that scholars of both countries take the exceptional status of each so utterly for granted.

Second, very few of the copious contemporary discussions of “American exceptionalism” have come close to showing that America really does represent a deviation from a significant international norm. Doing so in a serious way would require paying attention not just to America itself but also to the countries from which America supposedly differs—something that might even involve speaking a language other than English. Yet virtually none of the politicians who speak so readily about “American exceptionalism” even mention other countries, except in the vaguest sense, and surprisingly few of the scholars who use the term discuss other countries in a systematic way.³

Finally, modern nationalism by its nature has led virtually every nation to strive to distinguish itself from others: to highlight and even to exaggerate its own unique qualities and to proclaim its own unique destiny. French nationalists tout the elegance and sophistication of their “civilization.” Serbians have traditionally considered themselves the shield of Christianity. Haitians take pride in being the first country whose people freed themselves from slavery. China has its uniquely harmonious, rational Confucian culture.⁴ The idea of “American exceptionalism,” in other words, falls squarely into an entirely common pattern. There is nothing exceptional about it.

Taken together, these three propositions strongly suggest that the term *American exceptionalism* makes very little analytical sense. Whereas scholars have found it useful to look at specific ways in which US national development differs from that of other countries (for instance, America’s failure to develop a robust socialist movement or a Western European–style welfare state), these differences do not justify calling America an exception to a comprehensive planetary rule.

On the other hand, the idea itself has had a fascinating if also dispiriting history. Before the term entered political life in the late twentieth century, political narratives about America’s exceptional character served to justify various projects of national aggression against both Native and foreign peoples, but they also highlighted what Americans saw as their best qualities and their moral duties, giving them a standard to live up to. The term *American exceptionalism* has done much not only to displace these earlier narratives but also to erase their aspirational moral content. Today, the term most often serves as an empty symbol, a mere marker of difference and superiority and a convenient rhetorical cudgel in the country’s unending, vicious political combat. As such, somewhat ironically, the rise of the term illustrates the decline of American idealism. Historians have sketched out parts of this story very well, but this last piece of it in particular, and therefore the overall arc, have so far attracted less attention.⁵

From the moment Europeans arrived on American shores, they crafted stories about their special destiny, and in the early-modern Western world, such stories usually invoked ancient models. First, there was ancient Israel: “For thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God, and the Lord hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth” (Deuteronomy 14:2). Not only did the God of the Old Testament select Israel from above other nations, and not only did he bind it to him by a covenant; in doing so, he also bound its people to one another in a tight web of commandments and ritual practices, giving their community exceptional homogeneity, cohesion, and endurance. Of course, in the eyes of medieval and early-modern European Christians, the covenant was less a gift than an obligation, and one at which ancient Israel had woefully failed. The other model was Rome, the most powerful empire in all history, one whose institutions, laws, and language still marked Europe centuries after its fall and whose history and literature remained the foundation of formal education until deep into modern times. Fables of national origin spun by medieval and early-modern European poets tended to copy the epic story of Rome’s founding imagined by Virgil in the *Aeneid*.⁶

The first of these models in particular is often seen as having special importance for American history and for the story of “American exceptionalism.” Early-modern Protestants, in their fervent and fearful belief that God had predetermined only a small elect for salvation and consigned the rest of the human race to damnation, found comfort in imagining themselves part of a new chosen people: a new Israel. The idea found purchase in England, Scotland, Sweden, the Netherlands, Dutch South Africa—and also in New England. Indeed, the idea of an “American Zion” retained a powerful hold on the national imagination until well into the nineteenth century, if not beyond. Out of this history has come the idea, shared well beyond the walls of the academy, that America’s sense of itself flows directly from that foundational moment when Puritan settlers, imagining themselves a new chosen people, alighted in the Western Hemisphere. Historians and politicians alike

have highlighted one text in particular: John Winthrop's lay sermon "Model of Christian Charity," supposedly delivered on board the Puritans' ship *Arbella* in 1630, containing the words "we shall be as a city upon a hill" (Ronald Reagan later embellished it into "a shining city upon a hill").⁷

But Americans' sense of themselves and their character was never so unitary. The insistent attention to the Puritans of New England tends to eclipse the fact that the inhabitants of all the British colonies, and their successor states, imagined themselves as Romans at least as often as they saw themselves as Israelites.⁸ Puritan rhetoric might have been resonant, but as Daniel Rodgers has demonstrated, Winthrop's sermon itself remained virtually unknown until the nineteenth century, and its text, far from expressing confidence in some sort of grand new national mission, breathed with agonized doubt regarding whether the colonists could uphold the obligations of the covenant. To be as a city on a hill meant above all exposing one's conduct to the world's judgment.

The stories that nations tell about themselves also change over time, and America has had a bewildering and contradictory plethora of them. John Winthrop accepted inequality as a basic premise of human existence, valued subjection to God above political freedom, and expected happiness only in the world to come. His vision for an American community had little in common with that of the Americans of the revolutionary generation who championed life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in this world and took pride in seeing their republican experiment copied across the globe. In the nineteenth century a powerful and fundamentally new American myth arose: that of the endless frontier. For its proponents, the essence of the American spirit lay in restless movement westward. As the Mexican writer Octavio Paz later summed up the idea, "America was, if it was anything, geography, pure space, open to human action." In much the same period, those Americans who considered slavery the "sole cause" of civilization (William Harper) identified the country with this horrific institution and believed that America had a special mission to promote human bondage throughout the world.⁹

In the later nineteenth century, yet more material flooded into the already-crowded canon of stories that supposedly defined America's essence. On the one hand, there was the vision of the country as a land of immigration, with a "golden door" open to people from around the world seeking freedom and opportunity. Yet just two years after Emma Lazarus composed those words in her poem about the Statue of Liberty, the influential clergyman Josiah Strong published a best-seller, *Our Country*, which identified America with the "Anglo-Saxon race" and its struggle for Darwinian supremacy in the world. By the end of the century, men like Senator Albert J. Beveridge were championing America's acquisition of an overseas empire as "the mission of our race, trustee, under God, of the civilization of the world." The twentieth century added further stories: that of the United States as an active apostle of democracy, spreading it not just by example but also by persuasion and if necessary by force, or somewhat differently as what Madeleine Albright called "the indispensable nation," guaranteeing global peace and security.¹⁰ Yet another set of stories identified America above all with the spirit of free enterprise, generating exceptional wealth and prosperity.

Among all these stories, and all these definitions of an American spirit, character, or mission, it is hard to find a common ideological thread, let alone to unwind that thread back to a single moment in the year 1630. Some expressions of what makes America exceptional have put strong emphasis on one vision or another of "freedom," but not all of them (not John Winthrop's or William Harper's or Josiah Strong's). Some of them still have resonance today, but not all. They arose at different moments and for different reasons, serving the needs of different constituencies. Some of them justified the expropriation of native land; others legitimized military adventurism from the Philippines War to the Iraq War. But many of them also served to promote a moral ideal: to be God-fearing, or self-reliant, or welcoming of strangers, or promoting of peace throughout the world.

The term *American exceptionalism* itself did not originally have much connection to these patriotic narratives. Indeed, the first people to use it, as members in good standing of the international communist movement, considered such narratives to be little more than bourgeois mystification. For them, anything that made America exceptional was, by definition, not a virtue but a problem.

How and where did the term first appear? In the 1920s an American communist named Jay Lovestone tried to explain, nervously, to Joseph Stalin's Comintern why communism had made such little progress in the United States. The reason, he suggested, was that the path followed by American capitalism represented an "exception" to the normal laws of historical development. But Stalin would have none of it. He knew the danger of allowing Communist parties around the world to craft distinct, independent paths for themselves, in line with what they claimed to be particular national circumstances. In 1929 he blasted Lovestone as a "deviationist" and condemned the very idea of "American exceptionalism" as a species of ideological heresy. American Communists loyally repeated his point in their own publications.¹¹

The term might easily have died a natural death then and there, in the sectarian debates of the Depression. But American intellectuals of the mid-century, usually from a socialist background, picked it up again as they sought to explain why a strong socialist movement had never arisen in the United States. Following from their inquiries, a broader academic discourse gradually took shape around the different ways that America represented an exception to general rules of historical evolution, for instance because it had avoided the "feudal" stage of history. In an era of vibrant social-scientific inquiries into comparative social and economic development, lavishly funded by foundations and government agencies eager to understand why some nations *did* turn toward socialism, the topic of "American exceptionalism" flourished. But into the 1980s these discussions remained essentially scholarly. The figure most associated with the term was probably the sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset. Vigorous debates also took place among historians about the exceptional

nature of American labor politics and America's failure to create a full-fledged welfare state.¹²

But then "American exceptionalism" jumped from the seminar rooms to the culture at large. The frequency of its appearance in the Google Books database rose nearly twelve-fold between 1985 and 2019. In the LexisNexis periodical database it rose nearly twenty-five-fold just between 2000 and 2010.¹³ What had previously been an academic term of art became a rhetorical weapon in the increasingly polarized US political landscape.

Many figures helped the term make this transition, but Newt Gingrich—a history PhD who considers himself an intellectual and likes to show off his command of scholarly language—was the most important. In the 1994 election, in which Republicans took control of the House of Representatives for the first time in forty years, the then minority whip was already making the term a centerpiece of his stump speeches:

We have to recognize that American exceptionalism is real, that American civilization is the most unique civilization in history, that we bring more people of more ethnic backgrounds together to pursue happiness with greater opportunity than any civilization in the history of the world. And we just don't say that anymore. Let me be candid. Haitians have more to learn from America than Americans have to learn from Haitians. The same is true of Bosnia. As far as I'm concerned, this counterculture notion, this politically correct notion that, "Oh, gee, we shouldn't make any value judgments," that's silly.

Gingrich has since returned to "American exceptionalism" at every possible opportunity. It is arguably his Big Idea. He has taught college courses on the subject, some of them available online.¹⁴ With help from a ghostwriter he has produced a book titled *A Nation Like No Other: Why American Exceptionalism Matters*. And with his wife, Callista, he has turned the book into a film titled *A City upon a Hill: The Spirit of American Exceptionalism* (a Citizens United

production).¹⁵ He presents America as possessing more freedom, more opportunity, more faith, and more moral strength than any other nation on Earth (although his discussion of these other nations is cursory in the extreme) and as having a unique mission to transmit its values to others.

Gingrich's passion for American exceptionalism was not, of course, motivated by abstract intellectual curiosity. With his unerring instinct for the political jugular, he recognized that the term could provide a highly effective political weapon against the Democratic Party and "the Left." By the 1990s, with international communism vanquished and McCarthyism long largely discredited, accusations of treason no longer served the Republican cause well. But the charge of not believing in "American exceptionalism" could accomplish the same purpose in a more subtle manner by casting Democrats and leftists as unpatriotic, countercultural cosmopolitans who, in an age of globalization, preferred other countries to their own and who despised the values of ordinary Americans. For Gingrich, demonstrating America's exceptionality has always mattered less than denouncing the Left for not believing in it. Other conservatives—notably William Kristol and David Brooks, whose "American Greatness" project was grounded in the idea of America as "an exceptional nation founded on a universal principle"—arguably took the term more seriously. But they had less influence than the Georgia congressman.¹⁶

In a basic sense, of course, Gingrich was right about at least one set of his ideological opponents. Very few Americans who describe themselves as "progressive"—and almost no academics in this category—would subscribe to Gingrich's version of American exceptionalism. The more progressive that Americans are in their politics, the more likely they are to see America as exceptional, if at all, in large part because of the harm it has done: the treatment of indigenous peoples, slavery, US foreign policy in the twentieth century, and contemporary inequality and racism. In a 2011 Pew Research poll, 67 percent of "staunch conservatives" agreed with the

statement “The U.S. stands above all other countries,” whereas just 19 percent of “solid liberals” did.¹⁷

Mainstream Democratic politicians, though, were not so squeamish, especially after September 11, 2001. As the LexisNexis statistic suggests, the use of the term *American exceptionalism*, already on the rise, accelerated significantly after the terrorist attacks. To many, the term offered a ready explanation for why the attacks had occurred: Al-Qaeda struck at us because it hated our exceptional values and positive role in the world. The idea of “American exceptionalism” also served as a source of pride in a country badly shaken by the catastrophic events. And the idea justified subsequent actions, including especially the invasion of Iraq, as natural extensions of America’s historic, exceptional mission to spread democracy throughout the world.¹⁸ Mainstream Democrats not only embraced the term but also found that its very emptiness made it strategically useful. They could happily profess their belief in American exceptionalism in the hope of winning over, or at least appeasing, voters who had very different ideas about what made America “exceptional.” In the early 2000s the journalist Charlie Rose made a habit of asking interviewees if they believed in American exceptionalism, and mainstream Democrats almost always answered in the affirmative. In 2007 Barack Obama’s campaign strategist David Axelrod told Rose that “I really do. I think that, you know, we are a remarkable experiment, an ongoing project in self-governance... we are and should be a beacon to the world.”¹⁹

But throughout the early twenty-first century the term continued to serve the purposes of the Right especially well, never more so than when Obama himself burst upon the political scene. The son of a foreign, Black, Muslim father and a white American mother widely described as a hippie, and with a cool, professorial mien, Obama could easily be caricatured as the embodiment of cosmopolitan, countercultural, “un-American” values. At a 2009 press conference, Edward Luce of the *Financial Times* asked Obama if he believed in 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 went on to offer a warm appreciation of America’s special place in world history, but Republicans gleefully quoted him out of this context and fell over themselves to pillory him for the remarks. Obama himself, recognizing the power of the attacks, quickly began inserting even more fulsome praise for American exceptionalism into his speeches, but the Republicans continued to highlight the original remarks. Gingrich, in his 2011 book, called Obama “outright contemptuous of American exceptionalism.”²⁰

The strange story of “American exceptionalism” did not end with the Obama presidency. Donald Trump took it in yet another strange new direction. Trump detests as elitist and phony the sort of pseudo-intellectual lucubrations that Gingrich adores. He prefers the blunt language of “making America great” and “winning” to the multisyllabic complexities of “exceptionalism.” He has, on occasion, read speeches that incorporate the concept, as in his acceptance of the Republican presidential nomination in 2020.²¹ But as he made clear in a 2015 interview, and amply confirmed in his actions as president, he does not in fact see America as an “exception” to any sort of worldwide pattern. Trump’s vision of history and of international affairs is one of brute competition between nation-states that differ principally in their degree of toughness and strength, not in their essential qualities. When asked directly about “American exceptionalism” in the interview, Trump responded:

I never liked the term. And perhaps that’s because I don’t have a very big ego [*sic*] and I don’t need terms like that... I want to take everything back from the world that we’ve given them. We’ve given them so much. On top of taking it back, I don’t want to say, “We’re exceptional. We’re more exceptional.” Because essentially we’re saying, “We’re more outstanding than you. By the way, you’ve been eating our lunch for the last 20 years, but we’re more exceptional than you.” I don’t like the term. I never liked it.²²

Gingrich and other conservatives, who would have spontaneously combusted if Barack Obama had spoken these words, largely acquiesced to Trump on this issue. In the 2016 presidential campaign, it was the mainstream Democrat Hillary Clinton, not her opponent, who repeatedly invoked American exceptionalism. (“If there’s one core belief that has guided and inspired me every step of the way, it is this. The United States is an exceptional nation. I believe we are still Lincoln’s last, best hope of Earth. We’re still Reagan’s shining city on a hill.”)²³

With Trump, did we reach the end of “American exceptionalism” as a salient political concept? Between him and those on the other side of the aisle who (for very different reasons) share his dislike for the term, the fraction of Americans who see it as having real meaning and serving a real purpose is almost certainly shrinking. Some on the left may continue to see America as having played an exceptionally destructive role in world history, but this version of the concept does not exactly have much potential as an electoral slogan. The sad experience of the United States in the COVID-19 pandemic, when the country proved “exceptional” only in the incompetence of its government on many levels and the bizarre resistance of much of the population to basic public health measures, made the myth harder to sustain than ever. As one much-cited article put it in August of 2020, “In a dark season of pestilence, Covid has reduced to tatters the illusion of American exceptionalism.”²⁴

Yet we have been here before. In 1975, well before Gingrich came on the scene, the sociologist Daniel Bell wrote an article titled “The End of American Exceptionalism.” Reflecting the grim mood of the post-Vietnam moment, he commented: “Today, the belief in American exceptionalism has vanished with the end of empire, the weakening of power, the loss of faith in the nation’s future.”²⁵ The diagnosis was understandable, but the obituary was premature. The notion of America having a unique role among all nations and the specific term *American exceptionalism* proved far too useful to pass away in that earlier season of national despair. The very vacuity of the notion has been its strength, for it can be filled with whatever

content is desired, even as it flatters US audiences by assuring them of their membership in the elect. There is little reason, then, to think that it will pass away in the new season of despair that we are living through today. But the mere notion of being exceptional can do very little to inspire Americans actually to *be* exceptional and to aspire to become a better people.