

The Myth of American “Democracy”

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The era of Trump and Trumpism has wrought a great number of unprecedented developments, many of which have been horrific. I need not detail any of those here, however. They are well-known and much lamented among at least two sizable groups of Americans: first, the 150-million-or-so “good liberals” who believe in America’s mythic history and social institutions, and second, the many Americans of any persuasion who suffer from “Trump derangement syndrome” and simply hate Donald Trump, whatever their political leanings. I might also list that percentage of Americans who have retained at least some semblance of sanity, but I’m not sure that this group is sufficiently noteworthy or large enough to matter.

At any rate, not a day has passed over the past decade when someone in the legacy or alternative media hasn’t broadcast the opinion that Donald Trump and his minions represent a dire threat to democracy and the future of our country.

The subject of this commentary, however, is not about how terrible the Trump era has been. While that is a given, it’s not the whole story. Far from it. Instead, I want to write about a quite singularly unexpected result of Trump’s reign that’s becoming more obvious with each passing year, namely, the ripping off of the comforting and false mask about American history, bringing to light numerous damning facets of America’s past that tend to get swept under the rug. Before I launch into my diatribe, though, let me state that what is being revealed in this regard — debunking some of the positive myths about America — was hidden only in popular lore. All of it is contained within the factual records of American history and is well-known among various critics of our supposed goodness, purity, and perfection. These harsh truths may not be popular or taught in elementary school, but they are available to anyone who cares to study who we have actually been rather than who most Americans prefer to believe we are.

Throughout my lifetime of 76 years, the longstanding and continuing saga of *American Exceptionalism* has been the bedrock of popular attitudes about this country in the minds of its citizens and too many of its leaders. That is essentially the astonishing belief that, from its inception, the United States of America has been ordained by God or some other agency of Divine Providence to be the “Shining City on the Hill,” the one essential nation fated to safeguard the future of humanity. This lunatic notion has remained so powerful a meme that anyone

who deviates from absolute fealty to our American Exceptionalism is immediately discredited and diminished in the eyes of the public. In general, a majority of Americans love to think of our country as “the good guys.” That has been and remains the patriotic norm — America was good in the beginning, and we’re still good today. Hell, we’re not just good, we’re the best. We’re Number One.

How many times have you heard someone state with absolute certainty that the United States of America is “the best country in the world.” This opinion is often offered by people who have little to no knowledge or experience of any other nation, society, or culture. But never mind that. For most Americans, our country IS the 800-pound gorilla of the world.

The most potent justification for American Exceptionalism was probably contained in the idea of what came to be called “Manifest Destiny.” That phrase, coined in the early 19th century, defined the widespread belief that the United States was destined to expand its territory across North America, from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. It justified the largely white and British colonial expansion westward from the original 13 colonies of the Atlantic seaboard to claim, possess, and dominate the entire continent “from sea to shining sea.” This belief was based on a powerful and altogether romantic sense of nationalism that flourished in America throughout the 19th and into the 20th century.

Even foreigners recognized it. Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville’s set of two books entitled *Democracy in America*, published in the 1830s, were a literary and political sensation throughout western civilization the conferred upon the new nation an vibrant sheen. Given the staying power of this myth among Americans, it’s a wonder that the United States hasn’t invaded and conquered both Canada and Mexico. Still, the U.S. didn’t do too badly for ourselves in grabbing most of the Northern Hemisphere of the so-called “New World.” In addition, the countries and cultures of Central and South America have been deeply affected by U.S. domination and meddling.

By the end of the 18th century, when America officially became a nation, the great bulk of the estimated 50 million indigenous native inhabitants of the western hemisphere who had been living here for millennia before the European colonizers arrived were already long gone, mostly killed off in the 16th and 17th centuries by the scourge of various European diseases (smallpox, measles, influenza, typhus, etc.) against which the indigenous populations had no biological resistance. U.S. Army General Phil Sheridan’s racist sentiment that the “the only good Indian is a dead Indian” was an attitude held by many throughout the Indian wars of the late-19th century.

Of the 10-20% of natives who survived death by disease, a majority of the survivors were then subsequently dispatched during the 18th and 19th centuries by the trickery of illegal treaties (land grabs), the displacement of westward

settlement and forced relocations (e.g., the "Trail of Tears"), or by outright and sustained violence. It was a very effective genocide. To finish off the job of removal, the remnants of once-vibrant indigenous cultures, customs, and even languages were then gutted by forced cultural assimilation.

Of course, the genocide of indigenous peoples was not America's only racist sin. The enslavement of African Blacks is equally notorious and even more obvious in its effects. Slavery has been a hallmark of civilization since its beginnings in prehistory, but America was among the last countries to outlaw it. The two terrible World Wars that pockmarked the first half of the 20th century were steeped in racist ideologies and eugenics, marinated in fear and hatred of The Other. Despite everything that's happened, America still hasn't outgrown or reconciled the impact of slavery and racism on our collective national psyche. Maybe we will achieve that at some point in the future, but we're not even close to it yet.

Throughout the 19th century, the United States claimed to be, if not the outright owner, at least the de facto landlord of the entire Western Hemisphere, both in the northern and southern continents. We did so through the unilateral proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine, although we didn't ask any of the other approximately 20 recognized nations on our side of the planet whether they wanted to be subservient to and controlled by the United States.

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, the United States expanded its domain far beyond the western hemisphere by becoming a global empire. The U.S. used its military to conquer and annex Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam as so-called American "Protectorates," which even included Panama. Then, since we were the only major nation not devastated after World War II, the United States cemented its dominance as the preeminent global empire throughout the remaining 55 years of the 20th century, a period that came to be called "the American century."

Meanwhile, within the United States, mythic propaganda flourished. We captivated our entire population with the romantic ideas of individual freedom and representative democracy, which evolved into a comforting veneer that masked the harsher truth. As wealthy land owners and slave owners, the bulk of the Founding Fathers — almost to a man — feared and hated the possibility of rule by the masses, so in setting up the new nation, they went to great pains to prevent it, even while giving lip service to equality.

The Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights were masterfully turned into sacred documents that were untouchable and held far above any criticism, even though the Founders had carefully structured how the country would be governed so as to prevent what they saw as "mob rule." Yes, they enshrined voting and the rule of law, created a government of checks and balances to prevent tyranny, but they did so in ways that insured that the United

States would actually be governed primarily by wealthy, white landowners. The early popular notion of America as a country where “anyone could become President” held on for a century or so, but then faded as the oligarchy of wealth consolidated itself behind the scenes.

Voting is another cherished myth in America. “One man, one vote” — which became “one citizen, one vote” after women were finally granted suffrage with the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution in 1920 — has always been a bedrock of our representative democracy. And yes, in local elections voting does indeed matter and, potentially at least, makes a real difference.

At the national level, however, voting is too often an exercise in futility, little more than a fictional production mounted with pomp and circumstance for the entertainment of the rubes.

The delusion here is the belief — correct on rare occasions but most often not even close to true — that the national politicians we elect to hold office and represent the public’s interests actually decide policy. They don’t. Policy is determined by those who command and wield the immense power of great wealth. Behind the mask of democracy, America is an oligarchy. It always has been.

Millions of Americans will disagree with the previous paragraph. They will point to certain Presidential and Congressional elections and assert that voting does matter, and that voting in national elections would matter even more if all the citizens who are eligible to vote did vote. The idealism of such sentiments is sincere and impressive, but I remain unconvinced and skeptical.

In America, the two-party system of Democrats and Republicans was set up and then cast in stone to prevent anyone but party-approved candidates from being elected, and it does so with the tenacious grip of laws and norms agreed upon by both major parties that effectively shut out real choice.

Add to this the corrupt but technically “legal” structures of the Electoral College, gerrymandering of Congressional districts, and underhanded disenfranchisement of legal voters, and voting loses most of its idealistic luster. America goes back and forth predictably with one party holding sway for awhile until it’s thrown out in favor of the other party. And yet, through many cycles of that predictable alternation, nearly all of what the American public wants — universal health care, decent education, affordable housing, a livable minimum wage — continues to be denied. Is that because we cannot afford such entitlement “luxuries”? No, it’s because granting these benefits to our population would require the elimination of the rampant racketeering that is the norm in America, effectively “business-as-usual.”

The first billionaire in the United States was John D. Rockefeller Sr., an oil magnate and arguably the most conspicuous member of the 19th-century club of

Industrial Robber Barons. Over the next 150 years, the elite rulers of America created and put in place a system of formal laws and informal norms that moved upwards much of the wealth of this country into fewer and fewer hands. There are now more than 800 billionaires in the U.S., from technology, finance, and other industries. It won't be long before some ultra-wealthy individuals pass the trillionaire threshold. The wealthiest 1/10th of 1% of Americans currently holds 30% of the nation's wealth. Such extreme economic inequality is a recipe for class warfare that's guaranteed to produce terrible outcomes for any nation, and ours is no exception.

Look, I understand that most Americans love their country. More often than not, though, what they love are cherished ideals that are usually illusions rather than realities. Personally, I would be thrilled to see America live up to its ideals, but I won't hold my breath waiting for that.