

*After America: Narratives for the Next Global Age*  
Paul Starobin

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## Introduction

Early in 1941, Henry Robinson Luce, the founder of *Life* magazine and a man who commanded a large audience in America among both elites and ordinary folks, spoke in Tulsa, Oklahoma at a dinner hosted by an association of oilmen. His subject, as ever, was America, and more particularly the prospects facing the country with Europe plunged into the war started by Adolph Hitler. Pearl Harbor was still nearly a year away. Luce, though, had a vision of America's global destiny in a world that seemed bent on destruction. "Ours is the power, ours is the opportunity—and ours will be the responsibility whether we like it or not," he declared. In February, these remarks became the basis of "The American Century," a still-famous five-page editorial in the pages of *Life*, in which Luce, as one biographer noted, "equated a happy future with American hegemony." In his exhortation, which began on a page opposite an advertisement for Texaco's Havoline Motor Oil ("distilled and insulated...against heat...against cold"), Luce expanded on America's unique role as a cultural and economic lodestar for a planet that had become hooked on American jazz and Hollywood films and was no less awed by the affluence of America's middle classes. Luce called America "the powerhouse from which the ideals spread throughout the world." America would reign supreme in the world—and America, and the world, would be blessed for it.

Henry Luce was right to predict the coming of The American Century—America had already achieved an economic and cultural global preeminence and after World War II the country attained a military one as well. But he was clearly wrong to see it as a culmination

of history. Luce was driven by missionary impulses and his view of America as the child of providence ignored the fundamental fact that the rise and fall of civilizations is an organic matter, not one based on destiny or providence. As a great civilization, America is not immune from the life cycles that all civilizations have. Their health depends on their internal vigor but also on changes, over which they have limited control, in the external environment. America is a civilization which, like all others before it, cannot operate outside of these principles; America, in short, cannot exist outside of history.

This is not, it seems, an easy lesson to absorb. In an essay published in the summer of 1989, shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Francis Fukuyama, a U.S. State Department policy analyst with a taste for the philosophy of Hegel, echoed Henry Luce in declaring an “end of history.” Fukuyama’s vision was of the arrival of an American-dominated liberal world order, with no ideological rival in sight. Americans, in their triumphal moments, seem prone to history-ending visions.

Reality has intruded. America is now having its rendezvous with history: American civilization has reached the end of its long ascendancy in the world. The breakdown of American dominance can be seen across the military, political, economic and cultural dimensions of influence. In the case of the military component, America’s ebbing clout is illustrated by its inability to achieve decisive victories over insurgent bands in Iraq and the tribal borderlands of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Nor can America easily withdraw from these engagements: Like imperial powers of the past, America has come to be confined in a prison of its own making. In the meantime, America is finding itself less able politically to

bend outcomes to its interest, as seen in its difficulties in persuading powers like China and Russia to take collective action to keep Iran from developing nuclear weapons. In the summer of 2008, Washington watched helplessly as Vladimir Putin's Russian military effectively dismembered Georgia, the small former Soviet Republic that provoked Russia's ire by seeking a military, political and economic alliance with America. In surveys, peoples around the world, including in traditionally American-friendly places like South Korea and Poland, reject "the idea that the United States should continue to be the world's preeminent leader." In these circumstances, American jurisprudence is losing its prestige: Decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court are less frequently cited as guidance in rulings of judges in countries like Canada and Australia, while the work of other legal bodies, like the European Court of Human Rights, is attracting growing global attention. A chief justice of the Supreme Court of Israel has said that the U.S. Supreme Court "is losing the central role it had once had among courts in modern democracies."

America's reduced political leverage is a function in part of its mounting economic liabilities. Foreigners, including the Chinese government, hold more than 50 per cent of total U.S. Treasury debt, thus making U.S. foreign policy potentially hostage to the willingness of geopolitical rivals to finance America's borrowings. The dollar is losing its longtime status as the leading currency for global transactions, while a rising share of global output is claimed by the burgeoning economies of Asia, like India's and China's. Institutions established by Washington at the end of the Second World War to manage the global economy, like the International Monetary Fund, are becoming irrelevant. No less an American business icon than General Motors hovers near bankruptcy, while Washington is

forced to mount an enormously expensive rescue of Wall Street—leaving the U.S. taxpayer on the hook for more than \$700 billion. Amidst the financial meltdown, the U.S. economic model of deregulated capitalism—the model offered to the world as superior to all others as a way to raise living standards—seems discredited. And on the dimension of cultural influence, the collapse of American hegemony can be seen in the ‘lost pillar’ of Hollywood. What was once perhaps the preeminent means by which American-style values were communicated beyond America’s shores has now become, in response to commercial imperatives, a global creator of multicultural product for a culturally-diverse marketplace.

A fluid world is entering an inter-regnum—a period between acts. What comes next—what will be the contours of an ‘After America’ world, of the world in which America is no longer the dominant influence? And how can Americans adjust to a world in which their civilization is no longer dominant? These two questions are at the heart of this book.

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My starting premise—that American civilization, broadly considered, has come to the end of its long climb to global preeminence—is a staple in corners of the global intellectual and political elite that *hope* this will prove the case. This is not a surprise: There have always been people who are resentful or envious of America’s rise in the world. But there is also a growing consensus behind this premise among those who wish America well—among those who believe that the time of American dominance has been very good not only for America but also for the planet. America has few better overseas friends than the likes of Michael Stuermer of Germany, a historian who in the 1980s was

a close advisor on foreign policy to Chancellor Helmut Kohl of the Christian Democratic Party. Stuermer knows everyone in the Washington foreign-policy establishment; his name was suggested to me by Richard Burt, a former U.S. ambassador to Germany, for a balanced foreign perspective on America. We met for drinks and dinner on a warm evening in May of 2007 in the executive dining room of the Berlin corporate headquarters of the Axel Springer media conglomerate. Stuermer writes a weekly column for one of Springer's papers. He is a courtly man with a mop of white hair, a taste for fine wines, and a decidedly conservative take on global politics and culture. From our perch on the 19<sup>th</sup> floor, we sipped a Riesling or two and ate poached salmon and asparagus while watching a pale orange sun set over the dome of the Reichstag.

"America's cultural supremacy has been lost," Stuermer told me, describing the widespread hostility to the cowboy-like style of George W. Bush as "a thin veneer of something deeper" in the global psyche. As for America's ability to keep world order through its massive military presence, Stuermer again shook his head. "Iraq will be the nemesis of American hubris." He pointed to another building in our line of sight: The new United States embassy, then under construction, just across from the Brandenburg Gate. The building is a massive, ugly fortress, withdrawn from the street—and hated by architects who have added dozens of jewels to Berlin in the rebuilding spree after Germany's reunification in the late 1980s. "That's the end of the Pax Americana—the embassy embodies it," Stuermer said. "It goes away from the people—it is built not with the representation of America in mind but for security, for defensive purposes. It is a kind of Maginot."



In political circles in America, it is not uncommon to hear liberals make the case that America's global influence has peaked. But that perspective is shared as well by Cold Warriors like James Schlesinger, a steward of the American Century. Schlesinger, who was born in New York City in 1929, served as director of the CIA under Richard Nixon, secretary of defense, at first under Nixon and then under Gerald Ford, and secretary of energy, the first to hold that job, under Jimmy Carter. He has a reputation for being acerbic but even his detractors concede his brilliance. We got together at his offices at the northern Virginia campus of the Mitre Corp., a non-profit contractor for the Pentagon and other agencies in Washington. From the window could be seen the next-door building of Northrup Grumman, the defense giant. I replayed for him my talk with Michael Stuermer, and he nodded his head. "After World War II, we were the fairy godmother" for a world on its knees, Schlesinger said. But this could never be a permanent situation, because the rest of the world, contrary to what many Americans think, does not want to be "like us"; in fact, "they never particularly wanted to be like us," and now, "the world is going to quite ostensibly pay less attention to what America thinks." Schlesinger's concern is that Americans will have trouble recognizing how things have changed from the past—even now, he said, present-day America is living "an illusion" with a mindset that is "a kind of mental illness." He asked me if I had read *Buddenbrooks*, the 1901 novel by Thomas Mann. In Mann's tale, the fortunes of the once-grand Buddenbrooks, a mercantile family in the North German port of Lubeck, erode over the course of four generations. By the story's end, one member of the family, Christian, has become "more and more subject to uncanny delusions and morbid hallucinations," while in the case of Frau Permaneder,

“the more depressing the present appeared, the more she strove to depict the elegance of the life that went on in the houses of her parents and grandparents.” The Buddenbrooks are hopelessly mired in a life of make believe; the world around them has changed and, as Schlesinger noted, “They don’t know it. They don’t acknowledge that the prestige and the power of the family has declined.” And that, he said, is going to be a problem for Americans, who must make cognitive adjustments to adapt to new realities beyond their capacity to alter.

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It is clearly not enough to talk about the end of the American ascendancy, as some analysts do, in terms of “the rise of the rest”—China, India and others. A deterioration of aspects of American civilization is an essential element in the tale. While all of this may sound terribly gloomy and painful, the After America world does not have to be a disaster for America and for Americans. In fact, it could even be a liberating moment; it is not hard to see circumstances in which the country and the people could thrive in an After America world. But now I am getting ahead of my story. First it is necessary to put in perspective how America came to be the world’s dominant civilization: How America acquired its founding myth of American Exceptionalism, its sense of being unique and apart from all that had come before; how America rose to be the world’s dominant economic and cultural power; and how America came to possess an Accidental Empire. This is the subject of Part One of the book. Part Two explores how America came to its present straits: How America, which has always prided itself on being a land of tomorrow, has become a middling in various modern respects, including the uses of

everyday technology; how the American Goliath has overstretched its imperial frontiers in places like the Middle East; how countries once thought hospitable to the American model, like Russia, are instead rediscovering their own cultural and political roots.

Part Three casts the question of what comes next, *After America*, into the future. The short answer is, we don't know, but it is possible to build some plausible scenarios. Indeed, the second major premise of this book, following on the first premise that the American influence has peaked, is that *After America* landscapes are *already* being constructed, all over the planet. The world is pregnant, not with one possibility for what might next, but with multiple possibilities. These embryos exist in parallel with each other—although at some point a “victor” will presumably emerge, we are still probably a long ways from reaching that point. My approach to Part Three is to take each of these plausible possibilities and suggest how they might emerge in a fuller-fledged form.

The scariest possibility is a dark chaos, a new Dark Ages, as large parts of the world experienced after the collapse of the Roman Empire. This is the sort of prospect that worries the Michael Stuermerers of the world, knowing that there is no ready replacement for America as a global policeman. Parts of the Middle East—a supposed American patrol zone—are already in a semi-anarchic condition and it is conceivable that instability could spread through Turkey and into Europe itself. But there is another way to look at chaos. I also will consider the possibility of a happy chaos, in which the world, without *any* Big Daddy, takes advantage of new technologies of personal empowerment that allow individuals to make their own connections in an *After America* setting.

Another possibility, the scenario that many geopolitical analysts consider most likely for a post-American world, is a multi-polar order of nation-states in which America would assume a scaled-down position as one great power among others. A 21<sup>st</sup> century multi-polar order would be a first for the world—unlike the Eurocentric balance of power of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this arrangement would bring into play a mix of the world's great civilizations, including China and India. I explore a rising India, with its ambition of developing a blue-water navy to police the far reaches of the Indian Ocean, as a test case for the proposition of a new kind of multi-polar order. A stronger India, with interests broadly aligned with America's, might help America by lightening its load of global-policeman responsibilities. But a multi-polar world is by no means assured, because the foundation on which it would rest—the modern system of nation-states—is battered and besieged by those who would seek to subvert or bypass it, from the 'non-state' terrorist group to the multinational corporation and supranational tribunals of human rights. The state must reestablish its primary role in global life for a new multi-polar order to take root.

Nor is it assured that a multi-polar order would be stable. It may be that the world, as politically-incorrect as this sounds, needs a hegemon, a recognized alpha dog to keep order in the pack. China is the most obvious candidate to replace America for that role. After all, if there was a somewhat accidental character to the arrival of the American Century, then the trajectory for a Chinese Century could follow a similar line. In its planet-wide search for raw materials, China may already be sowing the seeds of an

imperium that extends to America's own backyard of Latin America. I explore Chile, whose treasure trove of copper deposits is the basis for an intensifying political, economic and cultural engagement with China, as a case in point of China's expanding global reach. Although the Chinese foray in places like Latin America may sound threatening to Washington, the Chinese, unlike the Americans, are not known around the world for trying to impose their values on other civilizations. A capitalism-friendly, trading-oriented Chinese Century would not necessarily put in jeopardy America and the American way of life.

Perhaps the time is past for the age of empires as well as for the age of the nation-state. This scenario considers the possibility of a new age of global city-states. History suggests a precedent: After the collapse of the Roman empire, and once the dark ages had run their course, it was the city-states of Europe, not the nation-state (that invention came later), that became the bulwark against the chaos of the medieval countryside. The most successful of them, in Italy, gave birth to the Renaissance. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the global city, in our age of economic globalization, is already a powerful force—think New York, London and Hong Kong, and toss in an invented city like Dubai and a rising ancient one like Bangalore—and the global city could become the defining feature of an After America era. In that kind of era, America, which has already given the world such distinctive urban landscapes as Los Angeles and Las Vegas, both with a global orientation, would stand to be a prime participant, so long as 21<sup>st</sup> century America does not allow itself to be subsumed by its fear of the immigrant. The one key to the success of

the great city, through the millennia, is its openness to the outsider, the newcomer, as a source of creative energy and an antidote against provincialism.

And finally, there is a path that leads first to a universal civilization of “global people” and ultimately to global government. Such people already exist in growing numbers, operating in globally-oriented business and finance, in global regulatory institutions, in ‘transnational’ human rights and environmental groups, in the arts, academia, and the media. They constitute a cosmopolitan elite, stronger than anything that has existed in any past chapter of history. Even though official Washington tends to be opposed to global institutions that threaten the system of state sovereignty, or at least America’s sovereignty, many prominent Americans, like Al Gore on the issue of climate change, already function as global people, as post-Americans in an After America world. And a rising generation of young people is being taught to think globally by prestigious universities like Harvard, which has migrated from a national to a global identity. For subscribers to the vision of Henry Luce, who died in 1967, there can be no more painful irony than the fact that the After America world is a project that Americans and American institutions are helping to build.

The bottom line is that America needs to reflect on and mentally prepare for a world in which it is no longer preeminent. The concluding, Part Four, of the book, returns the story to my conversation with James Schlesinger. The transition to an After America world entails a monumental paradigm shift. For segments of the political class based in Washington, in particular, the end of the American ascendancy augurs nothing short of a

crisis of identity. It is possible that America, following the example of the waning British empire, will experience a Suez-like disaster, from a failed attempt to flex its muscles. An After America nation could drip nostalgia into the stream of politics like a poison. But there are also much brighter possibilities. California, America's most plastic, most future-oriented, and most-successful place, is *already* starting to exit the American Century and remake itself as a global actor in a world that does not revolve around the American sun. The relatively cosmopolitan, Euro-friendly Democratic Party is showing signs of a more graceful adaptation to the After America world than is the relatively provincial Republican Party, with its attachment to the notion that it is always morning in America. And there are steps that individual Americans can take, practically speaking, to prepare for the After America world.

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This, then, is the arc of the book: The rise of America as the world's preeminent civilization; the passing of the American Century, evident in the here and now; and, at the heart of the exploration, the question of what life will be like for the planet and for Americans as their dominance continues to ebb. The first part of the book is a narrative drawn from history, the rest of the tale is shaped by the materials I gathered and impressions I formed in my travels around various reaches of the world, from the Pacific shores of California and Chile to the Arabian seacoast of India, with stops in between in places like Moscow and Dubai and the Anatolian plain of Turkey.

The book is informed by what I am fond of calling an organic interpretation of how change happens. By organic, I mean from the ground up, from the soil of global political, cultural and economic life. Americans in particular, but not only Americans, like to read their history as a tale of great men and great deeds. The ‘larger-than-life’ personality can make for an easy or at least an enticing way of spinning a narrative. Hence the bookstores of America are piled with best-selling biographies of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt, Harry Truman and Ronald Reagan. Much as I enjoy such books myself, my own sense of how history works, as bottom up and contingent, comes more from the likes of Fernand Braudel and Leo Tolstoy. Braudel, born in Lorraine and educated in 1920s Paris, was a historian of civilizations whose main focus was on the evolution of the modern world from “the enormous mass of history barely conscious of itself.” Tolstoy, a classic autodidact, outlined his conception of history in the philosophy-oriented epilogue of *War and Peace*. He described history as an “ocean” in which grand personages, like Napoleon and Tsar Alexander, may appear to be masters of the currents but in truth are mastered by them. We often see modern renditions of this dynamic. It was Tolstoy’s masses that flooded *Lubyanka ploshad* in August, 1991 and gave the Moscow city government essentially no choice but to haul down Iron Felix, thus drawing the curtain on the Soviet era in history.

I don’t mean to say that leadership or vision has no role in determining what comes after the American ascendancy—even Tolstoy had an idea of the heroic, in the anti-Napoleon figure of General Kutuzov, the unglamorous Russian commander who sometimes fell asleep at briefings by his aides and was fond of sayings like, “when in doubt, my dear



fellow, do nothing.” The closest American parallel to Kutuzov is the stolid but unyielding General Ulysses S. Grant, whose portrait, by the Civil War photographer Alexander Gardner, hangs on my office wall. My point is to suggest a corrective to the conventional view of events that assigns too large a role to big-idea leaders and central governments.

Americans both individually and collectively will shape their After America futures—but within certain boundaries. Or to put it another way, just as scientists are now discovering with respect to their exploration of the human brain, “free will” may be as much an illusion for a nation and for a civilization as it appears to be for an individual person. Maybe the best answer to why Americans act as they do is because it is in their character to do so. And it would be helpful for Americans to grasp that, because the illusion of free will can itself be a cause of damage: Both human beings and civilizations can be less dangerous with a sensible realization of their limits. In the affairs of human kind, there is no such thing as a pure actor, as a driver of events: Even the biggest of actors is acted upon. Subject and object dissolve into an unfolding tale whose conclusion is elusive, a matter of probabilities rather than certainties.

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It is impossible to approach a project like this one without some aspect of the personal creeping into the tale. My perspective is as a child of the American Century. I was born in 1957 in a hospital on an U.S. Air Force Base, in Bangor, Maine, used as a refueling depot for the B-52 bombers of the Strategic Air Command. My father worked as a doctor at the base, which is now a commercial airport. In the early 1980s, when I left my native New

England to attend graduate school in London, I felt that I had a passport to see the world and would be welcome nearly everywhere. And so I was, sleeping undisturbed on a blanket next to a Bedouin camp on the shores of the Red Sea on the Sinai Peninsula. As a journalist, I have spent much of my career in Washington, D.C. writing about stewards of American might from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush. **[TK next president.]** I have also lived and worked on the margins of America's influence, in the lands of the post-Soviet Russian empire. In 2007, nine years after I married my wife in her native Tashkent, I watched her raise her right hand and take an oath to become an American citizen. She was joined by fifty other new citizens in a ceremony at a government office building not far from our home in northern Virginia. The After America world will be mine, hers, and most of all, our two young children's.

## **Part One: The Ascendancy**

Like the story of any civilization, the tale of America's can be told as a series of what ifs. A primal reality of life in the new world was the lethal contact between the settlers from Europe and the Native American population. The greatest threat came not from the settler's musket, although that was a threat, but from their germs, like the smallpox, influenza and measles that the colonists carried to 17<sup>th</sup> century Virginia, to which the Indians had no immunity. American civilization would have acquired a different character had the Indians, quite literally, proved more resistant to the arriving Europeans. And it would have been different if Jesuit missionaries from France, rather than Puritans from the British Isles, had established a foothold in the land that became known as New England. While the British monarchs had an interest in exporting "unruly members of Protestant sects" across "the herring pond," the French authorities, as a French historian noted, mistakenly "feared that France might be depopulated" and so had no interest in "peopling" North America.

Then, too, the American colonists might not have succeeded in their rebellion against King George III without the forceful intervention of France, Britain's great imperial rival of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. And what if, nearly a century later, the South had achieved its bid for independence in the Civil War? It is only the distance of time, and the illusion that distance affords, that makes the South's defeat look inevitable. The conventional wisdom at the outset of the conflict ran quite in the other direction. "Just as England during the revolution had to give up conquering the colonies, so the North will have to give up conquering the South," the military analyst for *The Times* of London wrote in mid-1862. And consider one

last ‘what if.’ What if Hitler had not invaded Stalin’s Soviet Union in 1941, a fateful error that led to the smashing of the German war machine? The Second World War probably still would have been won by America and its Western allies, but at a considerably greater cost in blood resulting in a very different geopolitical environment at war’s end.

With the what ifs all breaking in favor of America, with the misfortune of others sometimes amounting to the good fortune of the new civilization, the arc of America’s rise to global preeminence from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> is an almost unbroken one. There are no defeats of great consequence, no hard lessons that America had to learn from a crushing failure. Part One of the book charts the American ascendancy. Chapter One delineates the essential character traits of American civilization—a mix of qualities, both borrowed from the Old World and more or less invented by the new society, crowned by the founding myth of American Exceptionalism, the notion that America was a unique creation in world history. Chapter Two traces the circumstances that led to America’s economic and cultural preeminence, crowned by Henry Luce’s call for an American Century. And Chapter Three shows how the new superpower operated as an Accidental Empire, a role for which it had no preparation and only one approximate role model, the British. The empire gained, the American ascendancy attained its peak with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the Cold War. From Captain John Smith’s arrival in Jamestown in May of 1607 to the hauling down of Iron Felix on *Lubyanka Ploshad* in Moscow in August of 1991, nearly four centuries—three hundred and eighty four years, to be precise—had passed.

## Chapter One.

### **‘Never Imitate’: A Civilization is Born.**

*And why need we copy the Doric or the Gothic model? Beauty, convenience, grandeur of thought, and quaint expression are as near to us as to any, and if the American artist will study with hope and love the precise thing to be done by him, considering the climate, the soil, the length of the day, the wants of the people, the habit and form of the government, he will create a house in which all these will find themselves fitted, and taste and sentiment will be satisfied also.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 1841

Times were hard in the southeastern counties of early 17<sup>th</sup> century England; hard enough, one inhabitant reported, that “there are many thousands in these parts who have sold all they have even to their bed straw, and can not get work to earn any money. Dog’s flesh is a dainty dish.” The jails were filled with petty thieves, the alms houses were overcrowded with beggars, and even those in the upper classes were feeling the pain brought on by European wars that drove down the value of money and took from England her cloth markets. “This England grows weary of her inhabitants, so as Man is here of less price amongst us than a horse or a sheep,” complained John Winthrop, a country squire of Suffolk, who tended a small estate. Like so many others, Winthrop thought of emigration: “I wish oft God would open a way to settle me in Ireland, if it might be for his glory.”

But it was not nearby Ireland that was to receive John Winthrop but the remote shores of the “New World,” where he was to become the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and its dominant presence for nearly two decades. John Winthrop is best known in American history for the sermon that he delivered to his fellow émigrés in

Southampton in March of 1630, shortly before the departure of their ship, the *Arbella*, on its trans-Atlantic passage. He reminded them of their covenant with God and their vows to each other, and beyond that, of their example for posterity, “for we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.” His sermon conforms to a strict biblical interpretation of the planned colony as a New Jerusalem, an understanding to which some Christians in America subscribe to this day. Winthrop’s words also have been handed down as a secular creed describing America’s earthly purpose, often invoked by America’s leaders to remind their fellow Americans of their “great responsibilities” to act wisely with the understanding that “at some future date the high court of history sits in judgment on each one of us,” as president-elect John F. Kennedy said in a speech at the Massachusetts state house in January, 1961. Or as President Ronald Reagan said in his farewell address to the nation from the Oval Office in January 1989, Americans must keep the portals of their ‘city’ “open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here.” Winthrop’s words resonate as one of the earliest briefs on behalf of a missionary purpose, religious or secular or both, for the settlers of America.

It is on these terms that America is often apprehended—as a mission, as the template for an idea, as an experiment for working out certain convictions about what the world on earth is or can or should be. America was a mission. But it was not only a mission. And to see America only from the standpoint of a mission—of an “errand into the wilderness,” in the phrase of the historian Perry Miller—is to miss quite a bit. And a lot is missed, too, when America is viewed, as it often is, simply as a nation-state. The school child who pledges allegiance to the flag “and to the Republic for which it stands, one

nation...” is of course not wrong to see America in these terms. But the broader framework of a civilization is more useful because it offers the widest possible perspective on the American experience. A civilization is an intricate, complicated multi-faceted thing—a messier construct than an experiment in ideas, embodied by a republic, which suggests a neat elegance. A civilization typically has both lofty and earthy dimensions; it tends to be guided by mythic quests but also by the pursuits of wealth and power. A civilization is powerfully shaped by its natural environment, settlement patterns and frontiers. A civilization in certain respects is akin to a living thing, say an animal, which can prosper through guile but also through the misfortune of others. Accident can shape a civilization as much as genius or vision. A civilization develops habits and reflexes of which it is sometimes only dimly aware, like the man who forgets his tendency to pull on his earlobe when he’s nervous. Buried traditions, likewise, can shape a civilization long after their origins are forgotten. A civilization tends to have a prevailing mindset—not a single way of thinking, but a set of mental attributes towards which it is disposed. Civilizations become distinctive according to how they differ from others based on this package of qualities. Great civilizations tend to acquire empires, which become the political and military expressions of their personalities.

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The study of civilizations acquired a bad name from the likes of Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee. Writing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, at a time when European civilization seemed to be collapsing, they developed sweeping, highly schematized theories of development that attempted to make civilizations confirm to certain basic laws and

propositions. It was Toynbee who famously wrote, in typically dramatic fashion, “civilizations die from suicide, not by murder.” This effort to make the rhythms of civilizations conform to a general theory proved a sterile exercise. But in the hands of a historian like Fernand Braudel, who made no claims to being a scientist and did not try to fit his facts into any particular ideological cubbyhole, the framework of a civilization is useful and indeed invaluable.

Braudel likened civilizations to organic “cultural zones” with permeable borders: “Every civilization imports and exports aspects of its culture.” He was not especially given to metaphor, which can distance a thing from its real properties and yield the generalizations he tended to dislike, but he did once say that “at first sight, indeed, every civilization looks rather like a railway goods yard, constantly receiving and dispatching miscellaneous deliveries.” In this conception, the signature mark of a civilization lies in what it has rejected or refused from others. For Braudel, America was a distinct civilization, and that is itself an important notion. Spengler and Toynbee, and decades after them, Samuel P. Huntington, author of the famous 1996 treatise on *The Clash of Civilizations*, all viewed “the West”—a rather grandiose term in itself--as a single civilization of which America was but a part. With more attention to everyday habits, beliefs and styles of living, Braudel more sensibly, if less poetically, divided what he called “European civilizations” into the “American civilization” of the United States and the civilizations of Latin America, Russia and Europe itself. He did not believe that American civilization was unique—he did not believe that of any civilization—but he did acknowledge that, “as a civilization, it was for a long time a traveler without baggage,



convinced that the future would forever grow brighter and that seizing it was simply a matter of willpower.”

In the beginning, in the day of John Winthrop and the Puritans, America was not yet a distinct civilization in Braudel’s terms, but the properties of the civilization that it was to become could already be seen. Indeed, nearly all of these properties could be discerned in the life and person of John Winthrop. He might have gone to Ireland but, to the good fortune of the New World, which needed men of his caliber, he did not. He was a man of God but also a man of ordinary needs and desires. It was not only his thirst for a more authentic and less constrained spiritual life that led him to Massachusetts but also the severity of his financial circumstances: “My means here are so shortened (now my three eldest sons are come to age) as I shall not be able to continue in this place and employment,” he informed his friends. The Massachusetts Bay Colony over which he presided was not only a religious proposition but also a business one, with origins in a small group of investors from Dorchester whose interest was in financial profit. The wind in the sails of the *Arbella* and her many sister ships of this era was the wind of modern global capitalism, which grew out of the Protestant Reformation in 16<sup>th</sup> century northern Europe and came into its own in 17<sup>th</sup> century England with a proliferation of joint stock companies of small investors pooling their stakes. The glory of such enterprises was not only to God but also to the British Crown, which typically granted the joint stock companies the right to a monopoly over certain regions or commodities.

This is not really a contradictory picture. There is a single thread that connects the motives of John Winthrop as he made way for America—the thread of optimism. Whether the spur was mostly spiritual or mostly practical, he believed he was leaving England for a better destination. Optimism stands out as a signature trait of the American mindset. American optimism can be seen as a temperament disposed towards buoyancy or alternatively as the absence of a tragic sense of life. The European temperament was notably a tragic one and understandably so. The Puritans left behind an England on the brink of civil wars engulfing the religious communities of the Stuart Kingdom, a set of conflicts that were part of a broader bloody struggle involving dynasties, Protestants and Catholics on the European continent. German agriculture and industry were devastated; in the recovery after these wars, starting in the 1680s, large numbers of Germans began migrating to America, at first to New York and Pennsylvania. As for the shiploads of Scots-Irish that entered the ports of Boston and Philadelphia early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, these migrants were removing themselves from oppressive rents, lengthy droughts and laws banning the export of their wool and cloth products. In the face of these known miseries, optimism about an unknown America made sense.

Optimism also made sense as the arrivals to the “New World” gazed westward at the marvelous expanse of land available for settlement. The frontier, and its potential for development, also separated America from Europe; only Russia, which in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century was still not much more than a collection of city-states west of the Urals, faced a similar stretch of undeveloped land. As Frederick Jackson Turner observed, the frontier became central to the American mindset. It gratified the restless pioneer possessed of a

“love of adventure” and offered a sweet economic reward: “Year by year the farmers who lived on soil whose returns were diminished by unrotated crops were offered the virgin soil of the frontier at nominal prices.” In political terms, the frontier was an incubator of a libertarian spirit—it offered an opportunity to escape governmental controls. Like the Russian pioneers who made their way eastward across Siberia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, some at the Tsar’s command but many others on their own initiative, the settlers of America were determined to move westward across the North American continent with or without the sponsorship of their leaders.

A third quality setting apart life in the New World from life in Old Europe was the emergence of what became known as the Melting Pot. This was the rising civilization’s most significant *conscious* rejection of European traditions. Early on, before America separated itself from Britain and became a republic, American society sought to distinguish itself from Europe with an emphasis on the melting away of ethnic identities as a mark of a new American identity. This concept was new; America can fairly be said to be the inventor of the Melting Pot, perhaps its greatest invention ever. It was J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, an immigrant from France to the American colonies in the 1750s, who eyed his fellow settlers, a mix of English, Dutch, Swedes, Germans and others, and noted, “Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men.” Crevecoeur, a farmer in Orange County, New York, was not talking about “multiculturalism,” a looser mix of ethnic and national groups within a society. He was talking quite specifically about Americans as a “promiscuous breed” dedicated to or unable to resist a mixing of blood. One of his models was a family with an English grandfather who took a Dutch

bride, with their son in turn marrying a French woman. The Melting Pot philosophy embraced gross hypocrisies—American Indians were excluded, and so were plantation slaves from Africa, although their blood mixed with the rest of America's as a result of the rape of female slaves by their white owners. And yet the ethos, as time went on, strengthened itself and surmounted whatever legal barriers and rank prejudices stood in its path.

Other distinguishing features of American civilization are better thought of as modifications of the spiritual or mental baggage—the imports--brought to the new land by the settlers. This is a lengthy list of attributes—some positive, some not—which collectively cast the new America as a place with more of a foot in the 'Old World' than is generally conceded by interpreters of American history, with their emphasis on the novel aspects. In particular, America's founding religious tradition was just that, an ingrained set of customs and beliefs imbibed directly from Protestant dissenting communities scattered throughout Europe. America proved fertile ground for such communities—without doubt more fertile than Europe, with its cruel monarchs bent on enforcing orthodox practices. But the religious beliefs and customs themselves, the faith in Jesus Christ the Lord and sectarian practices of groups like the Calvinists, were products of a longstanding period of European incubation. Quite different spiritual beliefs, of a pagan sort, were practiced by the Native Americans, the “heathen” Indian tribes, but these beliefs had very little impact on the spiritual psyche of the settlers. The periodic Great Awakenings, the first of which swept the American colonies in the 1730s with sermons by John Edwards on topics like “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,”

were revivalist events firmly grounded in the European Christian tradition. The new American evangelicals, who spread their mission to the frontier of Appalachia and the lands stretching towards Mississippi, were latter-day proselytizers in the tradition of Paul bringing his gospel to his native Anatolia in what is now Turkey. This was the old world encroaching itself on the new, and it was precisely because the settlers had brought their religion with them, from ‘over there,’ that the religious domain proved the ripest point of cultural conflict in the Huntington-like “clash of civilizations” that played out between the settlers and the Indians over several hundred years, until Indian civilization was at last vanquished.

Likewise, the European settlers—some of them, anyway—brought slavery to the American colonies. As Condoleeza Rice has said, “Africans and Europeans came here and founded this country together—Europeans by choice and Africans in chains.” But America’s “birth defect,” as Rice called slavery, was not a specifically American invention—the slave system was borrowed in its entirety from standard European imperial and commercial methods, with only practical adjustments made for the particular features of American land and climate. The early Southern plantation owners were comically imitative creatures—as W.J. Cash noted in *The Mind of the South*, they were desperately eager to fashion themselves as European-style country gentlemen in the cavalier tradition of the novels of Sir Walter Scott. And just as the slave system’s cultural overlay was of a borrowed sort, so was the economic engine at the core of American slavery. Slavery came to America not because European settlers were especially racist and cruel beings, compared to others in Europe, but because the slave trade was

embraced by its practitioners as a “modern and economically successful system,” as historian David Brion Davis has noted. Although Africans were doled out the cruelest treatment, the capitalist barons who exported slavery to America cast their eyes to the European labor pool as well. For the Virginia Company, determined to wring profits from its investment in Jamestown, a form of indentured servitude, snaring English boys typically as young as fourteen, was an element of the business plan.

Likewise, the settlers brought with them war-making skills and technology. The musket was as familiar to the Puritan as his bible; John Winthrop was a commander of a militia regiment of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The Colony engaged veterans of European wars to wage attacks on Pequot Indian tribes in response to killings of English colonists; Indian lands were laid waste—wigwams burnt, canoes destroyed, corn fields razed—in tactics reminiscent of England’s wars in Ireland. In one engagement, as many as seven hundred Pequot were killed, including women, children and the elderly. A historian of the Colony likened the savagery of such events to the Peasants’ War of the German States in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. These first wars anticipated the later series of “French and Indian” wars, targeting despised French Catholics and native American tribes. To keep their guard, the colonists formed the likes of “Rogers’ Rangers,” a counter-insurgency unit in New Hampshire under the leadership of Captain Robert Rogers. The Rangers “equaled the Indians in stealth, skill with canoe and bateau, scouting, taking prisoners, and killing sentries—and Rogers was not above a little scalping, too,” a sympathetic chronicler later wrote. American civilization’s capacity for war was considerably strengthened with the arrivals in large numbers of the Scots-Irish, who had a fierce war-making tradition of

their own, a clannish, backwoods-type style, honed over the centuries in their native land. The Scots-Irish tradition had an important influence of the U.S. Marines. But the Scots-Irish American who was “born fighting,” as James Webb, the Scots-Irish, Senator-soldier, has described him in his book of that title, was a European inheritance only modified by American terrain.

If this seems like an unsavory list of America’s borrowings, consider the most ennobling and important borrowing of all, the Enlightenment tradition. The Enlightenment was a movement hatched in the 17<sup>th</sup> century on the British Isles and the European continent. The giants were men like Sir Isaac Newton, for whom the scientific quest was part of a liberal and quite radical, intellectual creed intended as a deliberate break with superstition and unexamined religious faith. “He saw, and made people see; but he didn’t put his fancies in place of truth,” Voltaire said of Newton, whose funeral he attended in 1727. Newton’s example was a thrilling one for the great pioneers of American science, like the kite-flying Benjamin Franklin with his path breaking experiments on the properties of electricity. Franklin was enormously proud to be honored for his discoveries by the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge, founded in 1660. The European model in education was likewise a source of American imitation: The first great universities, such as Harvard, founded in 1636 by a vote of John Winthrop’s Massachusetts Bay Colony, were based on the English university types of Oxford and Cambridge, both of which had been created hundreds of years earlier. Perhaps no one among the Founding Fathers was a fuller-fledged subscriber to the Enlightenment tradition than Thomas Jefferson, an unabashed Francophile with more than a streak of

Voltaire in his makeup. Asked by a young man why science should be studied, Thomas Jefferson briskly replied in a letter in 1799 that “the idea that the human mind is incapable of further advances” is “cowardly,” for “it is impossible for a man who takes a survey of what is already known, not to see what an immensity in every branch of science yet remains to be discovered.” Jefferson pronounced himself confident, though, that America would avoid the ‘cowardly’ path: “Thank heaven the American mind is already too much opened, to listen to these impostures.”

The Enlightenment advanced not just modern science and education but also that project known as modern “Western” democracy. Is the American democratic tradition, in this sense, a borrowed one? Yes and no—American democracy is a mixed bag of the borrowed and the invented, with the accent, as time has passed, on the invented. Well before the “American democratic idea” received its muscular expressions in the colonists’ rebellion against King George, the virtues of democracy were amongst the philosophical speculations of Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke in England and Montesquieu in France. (The former died in 1704, the latter in 1755.) Jefferson in particular was intimately acquainted with such thinking. His radical ideas about liberty, set forth in his first draft of the Declaration of Independence in June of 1776—the notion that “all men are created equal” and thereby “derive rights inherent & inalienable”—started to become common currency in the streets of France in the summer of 1773. (The French phrase was *droits de l’homme* or rights of man.) That said, with the break from the British crown and the intensified effort to settle the American frontier, American civilization molded the democratic idea taken from Europe into a more distinctive,



populist form. The decisive break with European-style politics came not in the age of the Founders, when the likes of Jefferson and John Adams were at the helm, but in the age that followed them, the age of Andrew Jackson.

Andrew Jackson was a frontiersman from the Carolinas who fought the Indians and fought the British and when he entered the White House as President, in 1829, he let the people, clad in their muddy boots, have the run of the joint. Eastern Establishment sorts despised his type and his example: His predecessor, John Quincy Adams, the son of John Adams, called him “a barbarian who could not write a sentence of grammar.” Anger and resentment from this quarter was understandable, because the Founding Fathers and their brood had imagined and hoped for a national leadership class closer to their own Old Worldish, aristocratic ways. But with American civilization developing as it was, into a raucous frontier society, the ascension of a figure like Andrew Jackson was ordained. “Old Hickory,” as he was known, was indeed a crude specimen of American democracy, but he also was an authentic one, an early representative of the future direction of things.

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These, then, were the signature traits of American civilization, and they had all come together by the age of Jackson. As in all civilizations, there were seeming contradictions, in this instance between the religious disposition, especially in its evangelical form, and the secular-oriented Enlightenment disposition. True Voltarians scorned religion. But for European travelers to Jacksonian America, the combined package invariably struck them as something quite novel. One particular visitor, Alexis de Tocqueville, a young French

aristocrat who arrived in America in 1831 in order to make a survey of the country's prisons, immortalized the new civilization as a sharp departure from Old Europe. On a journey lasting nine months, Tocqueville wound his way from New York City to Buffalo by way of Albany, saw something of "lower Canada," and managed to get in parts of New England as well as Philadelphia and Baltimore, Cincinnati and New Orleans. In volumes that he later published, known as *Democracy in America* (part one came out in 1835 and part two in 1840), he latched onto features of American society that seemed to define America as so very different from his own land. The most important such trait, in his mind, was set forth in the very first sentence of the first volume: "Among the novel objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of conditions among the people," Tocqueville wrote.

Tocqueville overdid it. Not even Jacksonian America, more different from Old Europe than the young America had ever been, was a total break. "Equality of condition," as painstaking research of tax records and other archives by modern historians of Jacksonian America has demonstrated, was not a universal characteristic of this society. In fact, as one such historian, Edward Pessen, has authoritatively presented the findings, there was a somewhat Old World, European-style pattern to the distribution of wealth in Jacksonian America—and what is more, this distribution became even more unequal as the era progressed. "In the great cities of the northeast, the top 1 percent of wealthholders owned about one fourth of the wealth in the mid-1820s and about half the property by midcentury," Pessen found, and for the smaller cities and rural parts of Jacksonian

America, “the proportions were not very much different.” These facts do not reveal any bad faith on Tocqueville’s part; they simply underscore, as Pessen concluded, that “his interest was not in facts but in their meaning. America was to him a kind of generalized case study of *democratie*, the civilization of the future.” America, as has been its lot, was again being interpreted as the platform for an idea.

Ideas, of course, can have great consequence, especially when they are interwoven with emotion to form the fabric of a myth. And Jacksonian America proved to be the creator—or at least the completer—of America’s most cherished myth, the myth of American Exceptionalism. This myth almost had to be born, because the sad fact—sad, that is, to influential members of America’s nascent intellectual class—was that American society was *not* as different from the Old World as they wished it to be. This was a great point of anxiety to a new class of thinkers and writers in America who were determined to wrench the civilization from its European roots. Among them was Ralph Waldo Emerson, a graduate of the Harvard Divinity School and a former minister of the Second Church of Boston who was establishing himself as an original poet-essayist on the American proposition. In “Self-Reliance,” which he published in 1841, at the age of 38, Emerson produced a Biblical-style lamentation on America’s woes, which he attributed, in a tone of disgust, to a shallow propensity for imitation. “Our houses are built with foreign taste; our shelves are garnished with foreign ornaments; our opinions, our tastes, our whole minds, leans, and follow the Past and the Distant, as the eyes of a maid follow her mistress,” Emerson wrote. “As our Religion, our Education, our Art look abroad, so does our spirit of society. All men plume themselves on the improvement of society, and no

man improves,” he continued. How best to combat such vanity, such foolishness? “Insist on yourself; never imitate,” Emerson advised.

Emerson’s dictum can be read as an imperative to the individual—any individual—to cultivate “that which each can do best,” a command that came from his faith that “every great man is a unique,” as he put it. (“Where is the master who could have instructed Franklin, or Washington, or Bacon, or Newton?” he asked rhetorically.) It can also be read as an imperative to a collective “we”—a message to all Americans to be participants in the creation of something unique. He made a special appeal, in this vein, to the American artist, whom he asked to create a new kind of house, not yet another copy “of the Doric or Gothic model.” He was asking, in effect, for all aspects of American society, from its arts to its form of government, to fit a test of uniqueness. The great task of American civilization was not necessarily to be the best or the biggest but to strive to be original. The point was for America not to out-Europe Europe but to create a standard of its own.

“Self-Reliance” was a powerful and inspiring appeal, and Emerson was just getting started. Three years later, in the essay “The Poet,” he complained of searching “in vain” for the bard who could do justice to America as “a poem” whose “ample geography dazzles the imagination.” He finally found his man in Walt Whitman. In 1855, Whitman sent Emerson a copy of a first collection of poems, *Leaves of Grass*. It was undoubtedly enough for Emerson to read the long first poem, which came to be known as “Song of

Myself,” to see the fulfillment of his plea for an original American composition. About a third of the way into the poem, Whitman warbled:

*Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion,  
A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker,  
Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.*

*I resist any thing better than my own diversity.  
Breathe the air but leave plenty after me  
And am not stuck up, and am in my place.*

At the heart of the American Exceptionalism myth was Emerson’s notion of leaving behind “the Past and the Distant.” This was a vision that an earlier generation of like-minded Americans had similarly extolled: “We have it in our power to begin the world over again,” the pamphleteer Thomas Paine had proclaimed in 1776, adding that “the birth day of a new world is at hand.” But the Jacksonian period gave much fuller amplification to these ideas—as noted earlier, Founding Fathers like Jefferson and Franklin were happily Europhilic in many of their attitudes and ideas and were eager to see European transplants set root in America. Now the Paine-Emerson-Whitman *leitmotif* seeped into the mainstream of a post-aristocratic, populist democratic culture. And the myth was hitched to some of the great political causes of the day, namely the annexation of Mexico as part of the “Manifest Destiny” of the United States to unfurl its settlements all the way to the Pacific Ocean. The coiner of the Manifest Destiny phrase, John O’Sullivan, a founder of *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, took his cue almost word for word from Paine in his editorial refrains. Of America, he wrote that “We have, in reality, but little connection with the past history of any [nation] and still less with all antiquity, its glories or its crimes. On the contrary, our national birth was the

beginning of a new history.” As a result, “We may confidently assume that our country is destined to be *the great nation* of futurity.”

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century was drawing to a close, the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. vigorously attacked the “use of history as therapy,” having in mind the left-liberal re-telling of America’s birthright story to make it sound like an unrelieved bloody tale of multicultural victims from the Native Americans onward. But this, too, was history as therapy—aimed at uplifting and empowering American spirits. O’Sullivan was going well beyond Emerson, who sometimes wrote for the *Democratic Review*. Emerson had not said, as O’Sullivan asserted, that America had *already* accomplished this magnificent feat of cognitive separateness from Europe—it was indeed Emerson’s great worry that an intellectually lazy and slavishly imitative civilization had failed to do so. But as the myth of American Exceptionalism evolved, as it perhaps had to evolve, there was an insistence on a virgin birth conception of America as an infant dropped from heaven. Part of the appeal of the myth was that, like John Winthrop’s vision of “a City upon a Hill,” it could be subscribed to in literal religious terms—America as the creation of providence—or in strictly secular ones—America as a blank canvas in a new era of Enlightenment. This notion of America as a blank slate was a classically utopian idea—it is the essence of utopian thinking to see the entire universe as a blank slate. Founding Fathers like the worldly Alexander Hamilton, who prided himself on his realist thinking, on his appreciation of the inherent wickedness of mankind, had no such reading on the new America as a departure from the laws of human nature.

But there was no stopping the idea of an immaculate birth, which found its most resonant expression not in lyrical poetry or beseeching prose but in the pleasing pictorial images of a new type of allegorical landscape painting, typified by Thomas Cole, a founder of the Hudson River school of artists. The Cole movement cropped up at the start of the Jacksonian era and came to dominate American art. In Cole's "Sunrise in the Catskills" (1826), "Hudson River school artists invested the land with a sense of national identity, the promise of prosperity, and the presence of God," as an art historian later noted. A later example, John Gast's famous "American Progress" painting of 1872, is even more mythically explicit. An allegorical young maiden, in long blonde hair, pale skin, and wispy white robe, a book and a string of telegraph wire in hand, is shown floating high over a landscape of pioneers, covered wagons and a railroad train, all pushing westward.

The American Exceptionalism myth was a supple one, accommodating itself to nationalistic and somewhat jingoistic sentiments as it became evident that, contrary to John O'Sullivan's own initial hopes, tasks like the annexation of Mexico were unlikely to be accomplished without military action. The spilling of blood, when it came, was interpreted in some quarters not as a notice that God was out of sorts with the American project but as a sign that the project must go on, without fail. "God has predestinated, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls. The rest of the nations must soon be in our rear," Herman Melville proclaimed in his novel *White-Jacket*, published in 1849, three years after the outbreak of the Mexican-American war. (Emerson, along with his New England writing mate, Henry David Thoreau, opposed the war out of concerns that newly acquired territories would come into the

union as slave states.) America of course won the Mexican-American war and annexed the territories of Texas and California; both of these successes could indeed be seen as confirmation, providential or otherwise, of the exceptional qualities of America. In such winning circumstances, doubters were paid little heed.

As in all effective myths, there was plenty of truth in this one. American Exceptionalism, in its varieties, covered the bases in its homage to the new civilization—its democratic spirit, its sense of a religious quest, its economic and ethnic diversity, its unspoiled frontier wilderness, its optimistic outlook. And yet, none of these attributes added up to the audacious proposition that America was a gift from God or an experiment liberated from history. No matter. Myths are deliberately selective and their whole point is to inculcate belief. This one did, with the aid of confirming events. A civilization had been born, and so had its presiding myth.