Exceptionalism's Exceptions: The Changing American Narrative

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Abstract: Seven years after 9/11, the American way of life was again shaken to its foundation by the Great Recession of 2008. The logic of an unregulated market economy produced its predetermined result. The American middle class, the historic protagonist of the American narrative, became an endangered species. Against a bleak backdrop of indebtedness, unemployment, and rapid decline in traditional jobs and in the affordability of the essentials of health and education stands the stark wealth of the top 1 percent of Americans. With the vital center no longer holding and consensus fraying, 53 percent of the electorate wagered in 2008 that it could deny race by affirming its non-importance and thereby audaciously re-invigorate the exceptionalist narrative. The choice before us, however, is still much the same as that posited by W.E.B. Du Bois when he described two antithetical versions of the American narrative: one was based on "freedom, intelligence and power for all men; the other was industry for private profit directed by an autocracy determined at any price to amass wealth and power."

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When Ronald Reagan bade farewell from the Oval Office on January 11, 1989, the fortieth American president catechized his people with scriptural imagery of a shining City Upon a Hill, "God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds and living in harmony," that resonated positively with all but the most culturally and politically disaffected.[1] For reasons that have had as much to do with America's twentieth-century wealth and power as with the intrinsic uniqueness of its national experience, America's leadership presumptions were largely conceded by the rest of the world until the catastrophe of 9/11 and rarely questioned by Americans themselves before the closing years of the last century.

Twenty-two years after the Reagan presidency ended only months before the Berlin Wall crumbled, the disaffected have been joined by a growing number of Americans sobered by how suddenly the prospect of a *Pax Americana* has vanished. Dismayed by the steady immiseration of the vaunted middle class, the billions squandered on two decades of op-

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tional military adventures, and the competition from new economic powerhouses in Asia and South America, they find unmistakable signs that our exceptionalist presumptions, distilled less than two generations ago into a conceptual concentrate called *American exceptionalism*, require a twenty-first-century reset. The truth seems to be that the "redeemer nation" needs redemption and that the 350-year-old narrative of special nationhood will sustain itself only if revised to parse honestly its own history and myths, and assimilate dissonant domestic and global realities emerging from the shadows cast by the declining brilliance of its triumphal worldview.[2]

To be sure, before the term *American exceptionalism* emerged, a myriad of ideational precursors expressed themselves in one era of American history to the next. The predestinarian sermons of the Puritans embodied the providential dispensation of the nation and its people. The founders' documents were impregnated with Enlightenment ideas – Montesquieu, Smith, and Rousseau Americanized. Works by Emerson and Thoreau, as well as the fiction and poetry of Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman, channeled the democratic ethos. Lincoln enshrined the ideal at Gettysburg. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 "Frontier Thesis," complemented sixteen years later by editor and public intellectual Herbert Croly's *The Promise of American Life* (1909), were perhaps two of the ideal's most significant post-Civil War iterations. Turner's marching frontier and Croly's progressive capitalism were magnets drawing Emma Lazarus's "huddled masses" in numbers unimagined.[3]

Surprisingly, the term itself – *American exceptionalism* – is of relatively recent vintage. From its origins in the mid-1930s as high-flown political science theory to its appropriation during the Cold War as ideological boilerplate, American exceptionalism became the ready cliché of politicians, public intellectuals, journalists, and media opinion-molders after Reagan's 1980 election. As a composite of antecedents, the term sometimes displays its historical comprehensiveness with self-conscious didacticism inflected by chauvinism. Yet this most American concept derives much of its interpretive substance from the enduring observations of two French counts, Alexis de Tocqueville and Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur. Equally fitting is the problematically acknowledged contribution of an African American intellectual, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, whose citizenship rights the U.S. Supreme Court had reinterpreted and diminished at the end of the nineteenth century.

Of the three, de Crèvecoeur's contribution to the making of the American narrative was biographically the most interesting. Present at the creation of the United States, de Crèvecoeur introduced European society to what he limned as a "new people melted into one" in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). He survived the French Revolution during a visit home and died a naturalized American (known as Hector St. John) in 1813. *Democracy in America* (1835) was less romantic in its appreciation of the natives than de Crèvecoeur's influential memoir, but Tocqueville certainly thought Jacksonian-era Americans were off to a very special future. According to him, Americans' distinguishing characteristics were individualism, faith in popular sovereignty, mistrust of government, and, above all, their certainty of living in a land unbounded by the fetters of history. Still, he detected two viruses in the body politic whose potential for harm might be permanent: an egalitarian insistence on social conformity and a majoritarian prejudice against people from Africa.[4]

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As the visiting aristocrat well knew, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, speaking for most of their founding peers, had deplored the African presence in their hard-won new republic as an aesthetic and cultural blemish. Blemishes were acknowledged at three-fifths per capita for taxation and representation, but the men at Philadelphia intended to preclude in perpetuity the possibility of citizenship for blemishes. Tocqueville fretted, nevertheless, that the tensions inherent in the institution of slavery would eventually tax the American political system beyond its capacity to compromise. "From whatever point one departs, one almost always arrives at this first fact," he noted.[5] Indeed, he predicted that this "first fact" would be a permanent feature of democracy in America. Tocqueville died two years before Americans' capacity for viable compromise finally exhausted itself.

One hundred years after the publication of *Democracy in America*, Du Bois anticipated the neologism *American exceptionalism* a score of years before it entered academic usage to become a canonical metaphor of the national experience. Writing in *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860–1880* of the failure of racial democracy in the South after the Civil War, Du Bois coined the phrase "the American Assumption" to explain what he saw as the fatal downside of government at the command of unrestrained capitalism. In this 1935 howitzer of a book demolishing seventy-five years of historical consensus, Du Bois insisted that biracial accommodation based on the ballot box and the schoolhouse had prospered in the defeated Confederacy for a half-decade until unlikely success gave way to everlasting greed. As the uplift idealism of the war succumbed to the political economy of triumphant plutocracy, "two theories of the future of America" clashed, according to Du Bois. One theory was based on "freedom, intelligence and power for all men; the other was industry for private profit directed by an autocracy determined at any price to amass wealth and power."[6]

Du Bois's American Assumption was a binary paradigm. It honored John Winthrop's providential parable, Jefferson's Arcadian nostrums, Tocqueville's exceptionalist insights, and Henry Clay's "American System" as the building blocks of the national edifice at its best, then proceeded to expose the widening cracks of class and race in the façade. The best of times had been the period from 1820 to 1860, when, according to Du Bois, the theory of compensated democracy converged more closely than ever before or since with reality of opportunity for ordinary citizens. It was during the Manifest Destiny decades of freedom from government interference, freedom of economic opportunity, and the "ever possible increase of industrial income" that the American Assumption of wealth as "mainly the result of its owner's effort and that any average worker can by thrift become a capitalist" seemed to be nearly true for white men, Du Bois conceded. Although this realization of democracy for white people was seemingly true in one half of the nation, the paradigm of equality faltered badly in the Cotton Kingdom, the nation's other half, where the racialized social order presented the American Assumption's "most sinister contradiction."[7]

The conflict between the republic's two halves resolved the institutional contradiction of slavery in a democracy, but its outcome fatally undermined private enterprise as a system uncorrupted by oligopoly and left the problem of genuine citizenship for black people to be resolved by future generations. For as Du Bois insisted in "Looking Forward," his book's trenchant seventh chapter, the incorpo-

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ration of ex-slaves was the central question confronting the republic. As a good progressive historian steeped in Marx, Du Bois pronounced the captains of unregulated wealth as winners in the contest between the "two theories" of the American future. The validity of the American Assumption "ceased with the Civil War," Du Bois declared, even though its mystique would inform a simulacrum of broadly based economic opportunity until the Great Depression, when, he said, "it died with a great wail of despair."[8]

Du Bois's American Assumption neologism and American exceptionalism were synonymous terms derived, ironically, from Joseph Stalin's then-recent denunciation of the American Communist Party's ideological heterodoxy that American capitalism's special resiliency justified exceptional adversarial tactics. The irony was especially incongruous because its Soviet originators defined American exceptionalism as a colossal historical fallacy that imagined itself exempt from the iron laws of economic determinism, whereas most American academics and public intellectuals, with Du Bois, John Dewey, and Charles Beard being the notable exceptions, avidly embraced a phrase they regarded as an inspired encapsulation of 160 years of impeccable national history. To Du Bois and like-minded American socialists and engaged progressives determined to lift the fig leaf of liberty from exploitative wealth and power, the cant of exceptionalism served merely to keep the Moloch of laissez-faire on life support even as its vital signs failed in the wake of the Great Crash of 1929. Dewey, Du Bois's NAACP colleague and fellow progressive, scoffed at disingenuous invocations of liberty "by the managers and beneficiaries of the existing economic system." Questions about liberty, Dewey declared in his aptly named *Individualism Old and New* (1930), were simply "questions about the *distribution* of power."[9]

Marxist historians insisted that serious students of the national experience must distinguish between the persistent myth of a putatively benign private enterprise system and the present reality of a rapacious, cartelized market economy. Du Bois served up a characteristically withering indictment of unregulated capitalism in a land forgone of equal opportunity seven decades after Appomattox: "It went with ruthless indifference towards waste, death, ugliness and disaster, and yet reared the most stupendous machine for efficient organization of work which the world has ever seen."[10] Thirteen years after Du Bois's Marxist hyperbole, the consensus historian Richard Hofstadter expressed a similar judgment even as he began distancing himself from progressive colleagues. With far less spleen, Hofstadter opined in *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (1948) that, despite its "strong bias in favor of egalitarian democracy," America "has been a democracy in cupidity rather than a democracy of fraternity."[11]

The neo-orthodox theologian Reinhold Niebuhr also lamented the loss of a simpler era when the national destiny was understood as "God's effort to make a new beginning in the history of mankind."[12] But where Du Bois saw unregulated wealth and race prejudice as exceptionalism's prime corrupters, Niebuhr deplored the sin of hubris and a religion of materialism that offered "the management of history" – state-sponsored panaceas – as the antidote for human frailty. Reaction to both thinkers' philippics has sometimes been profoundly unwelcome, as with the adverse response to Niebuhrian elements present in Jimmy Carter's memorable "malaise" meditation or the electorate's ultimate alienation from the Du Boisian precepts of Lyndon B. Johnson's Great

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Society. Most Americans lived their lives in ways that allowed them the luxury of high disregard for well-informed criticisms of their society. The mantra addressed to foreigners was "Love it or leave it!" Intellectual or political nonconformity by fellow citizens risked the label "un-American." The distinctive feature of the American narrative at all times and in every iteration was a serene, even sunny, belief in a teleology of better days.

Until the most recent period in the nation's history, that curious serenity and optimism were proof against crippling doubt, disunity, or despair. Only twice has the narrative come close to failure – nearly irreparably in 1861, traumatically after 1929. The "wail of despair" Du Bois heard with the onset of the Great Depression was sharp enough to embolden all those who decided that capitalism had fatally malfunctioned and was too serious a system to be left to the ministrations of capitalists. For the first time in history, a majority of Americans embraced the novel premise – cutting straight across the grain of laissez-faire self-reliance and rugged individualism – that government should guarantee its citizens a minimum of health, housing, education, and retirement income. Unions won collective bargaining rights and unemployment insurance for unskilled workers, black and white. Federal rural electrification began the radical transformation of the Deep South. Impressive as many of these accomplishments were, the New Deal's alphabetically innovative programs to jumpstart the economy faltered badly, especially after the 1936 election.

World War II saved the New Deal, enabling it to save American capitalism, which in turn equipped America's "greatest generation" (together with Russia's) to defeat fascism, put the world economy on the dollar at Bretton Woods, and rebuild Western Europe on the condition that it marginalize its communist parties and join NATO. In his final address to the nation, Franklin D. Roosevelt had spoken movingly of the New Deal's unfinished egalitarian goals, summoning Americans to make them their first order of business after the imminent restoration of peace.[13] Four years later, their 1948 per capita incomes four times larger than those of the British, French, Germans, and Italians combined, Americans overwhelmingly, and mostly without much reflection, embraced prosperity in lieu of progressivism. The social democrats and their politically maladroit communist allies found themselves drowning in a rising tide of unprecedented prosperity that promised to lift every American into the middle class. The "wail of despair" was barely a whisper by the time the first generation of college-educated, suburbanite consumers created by the G.I. Bill voted any ticket but Henry Wallace's Progressive Party in the pivotal 1948 presidential election.

The post–World War II land of liberty assumed global obligations with an evangelizing confidence that would have astonished Woodrow Wilson. Publisher of *Time* and *Life*, Henry Luce, had already given the world its peacetime marching orders in "The American Century," a signature 1941 editorial in *Life*. The Truman Doctrine's throwing down the military gauntlet to the Soviet Union in March 1947 caught most Americans by surprise. Many had still not quite assimilated the ominousness of Churchill's "iron curtain" speech. The writ of the Monroe Doctrine, reinterpreted by George Kennan, Dean Acheson, and John Foster Dulles, ran to three continents. A new national security state (secretly authorized in April 1950) sprang from an increasingly potent post-war military-industrial-financial complex, insinuating itself into congressional independence, civil liberties, public

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schools, and higher education. CIA-programmed artistic and cultural initiatives spanned much of the planet.[14]

The speed with which the obligation came to shape world history would have been understood by the Pilgrims as a divine commandment. Some thirty years before his turn at the helm of leadership, Ronald Reagan recognized that Americans had not been able to escape destiny, "nor should we try to do so," he enjoined. "The leadership of the free world was thrust upon us two centuries ago in that little hall at Philadelphia."[15] Isolationists faithful to George Washington's advice to remain unentangled by foreign commitments went almost entirely unheard.

Translated as realpolitik, however, making the world safe for democracy meant saving it from communism, which entailed as often as not supporting undemocratic regimes and corrupt incompetency around the world. American exceptionalism abroad professed a high-minded innocence of motives that was unique in the annals of empire-building. Nor was the profession of it explainable merely as the rank hypocrisy of power. It was not surprising that the nation's people wished blindly "to preserve innocency [*sic*] by disavowing the responsibilities of power," as Niebuhr insisted in *The Irony of American History* (1952).[16] True, outright military seizures of territory have generally been fairly brief, with the exception of Hawaii, Haiti, and the Philippines, until the decade following 9/11. The citizenry has been inculcated with the gospel of anti-imperialism by its politicians, diplomatic historians, and columnists, not to mention generations of elementary and high school teachers. A nation conceived in revolt against the tyranny of an empire does not perpetrate imperialism, we have been taught.

Indeed, empire has been the love that dared not acknowledge itself in the more than two hundred years since the ratification of the U.S. Constitution (*pace* Canadians in the early nineteenth century and Mexicans in Texas and California). Nearly sixty years have elapsed since the overthrow of Iran's democracy, an act of Niebuhrian "innocency" whose ongoing consequences for the United States have been almost as dire as for Iran: Jimmy Carter's election defeat and a decade of Reaganomics and New Deal dismantlement; compounded by a decade of Alan Greenspan's regulatory insouciance; and the present nuclearized complexities of the Middle East. The story we have told ourselves depicts us as history's 911 emergency rescuers, responding to distress appeals, saving lives and liberty, providing technical assistance and matériel, and departing the moment the patient's democratic life signs are stabilized. The narrative was splendidly validated after Pearl Harbor, but sixty years later, the national leadership misappropriated the exceptionalist narrative written by its "greatest generation" in order to justify actions in the September 11 aftermath, the consequences of which have been, mostly, demonstrably lamentable. By 1980, when the revisionist diplomatic historian William Appleman Williams's incisive summing up appeared under the title *Empire as a Way of Life*, a good many erstwhile critics virtually conceded the truth of chronic foreign adventurism.[17]

Looking back from the seventies, economists would speak of the "golden era of American capitalism," a quarter-century from 1945 to 1971, the year the United States ended international convertibility of the dollar into gold and one year after the country's domestic oil production peaked. It was the greatest story of productive and financial transformation yet told until the rise of modern China. The United States had more than one-half of

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the world's manufacturing capacity, supplied a third of the world's exports, and produced the greatest amount of oil, steel, automobiles, and electronics. The GDP rose from $294 billion in 1950 to $526 billion by 1960, and all classes of white citizens more or less evenly benefited from this prodigious growth.[18]

A national narrative figuratively scripted by Midas and, literally, by Madison Avenue and Detroit inspired a qualitatively mixed run of celebratory appreciations of exceptionalism by leading academics, such as historians Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., David Potter, and Daniel Boorstin; literary scholars Henry Nash Smith and R.W.B. Lewis; and political scientist Louis Hartz. A redoubled self-consciousness about the essence of the national character informed their writings, the best of which melded admiration and perspicacity. In revisiting Turner's marching frontier, Potter enlarged its scope to embrace the full sweep of the American economy and the opportunities it was supposed to be able to bestow on everybody.[19] Appropriately, writer Shepherd Mead's book *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying* enjoyed great popularity when it was published in 1952. As a Broadway musical ten years later, it reconfirmed the sanguine upward-mobility ideology of Dale Carnegie in song and dance.[20]

The "golden era" played predictable favorites among the intelligentsia. The traction once exercised in the profession by the progressive historians of the Beard/Beale/Du Bois/Parrington/Turner persuasion was sadly diminished in a time of self-congratulatory consensus. Not only were the progressives' themes of machinations and exploitation by the powerful called interpretive exaggerations, their implicit solutions of political activism and government oversight were deemed divisive and dangerously wrongheaded. With the Soviet Union as an obscene example of social engineering gone awry on their far left, and Senator Joseph McCarthy's subcommittee ready with subpoena on their far right, professors and liberals huddled on the safe middle ground staked out by Americans for Democratic Action.[21]

Moreover, many wanted to know, what was so flawed about American capitalism? Many thoughtful people embraced Niebuhr's judgment that the problem with capitalism was not the system itself but the people who corrupted it.[22] Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., snapped that pejorative denotations of capitalism "belonged to the vocabulary of demagoguery, not the vocabulary of analysis."[23] Skeptics of the prodigious excellence of the system were soon warned to enlighten themselves by reading *Strategy and Structure* (1962), Harvard Business School economist Alfred Chandler's authoritative demonstration that Adam Smith's invisible hand no longer ruled the marketplace. The market, Chandler posited, was now expertly and rationally guided by capitalism's new managerial class.[24]

In contrast, Eisenhower-era novelists served up nuanced critiques of materialistic conformity and its sometimes unappealing existential outcomes. Journalist William Hollingsworth Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1953) and novelist Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) toyed in mildly subversive ways with anomie, risk-aversion, and conformity in a bland decade centered on the television show *Father Knows Best* (1954–1960) and the GE kitchen commercial. Social scientists of the period kept a safe distance from Marx, but the subsisting influences of Veblen and Weber, combined with an acceptable Freud, pushed at least a few to unmask some distressful socioeconomic realities. Sociologists David Riesman and Nathan Glazer's "other-directed" Americans took their significant cues from a "Lonely Crowd,"

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a mass of pliable people, respectful of corporate authority and devoid of existential gyroscopes. The outlier in the group was the neo-Marxist-Weberian sociologist C. Wright Mills, whose schematic *The Power Elite* (1956) should have alarmed its large mainstream readership.[25] Instead, many readers admired the elite's power and envied its lifestyles without gauging the meaning of Mills's data, which showed American society hardening into strata of self-perpetuating, interlocked privilege increasingly unaccountable to the citizenry.

To be sure, although the average American would remain innocent of the conceptual convenience of the exceptionalist tagline well into the 1970s, she or he could have offered a ready enumeration of its essential components, without needing to read Tocqueville, Bryce, Wells, Du Bois, or even Hofstadter and Schlesinger, both of whose classic interpretations of the nation's defining political and social characteristics (*The American Political Tradition* and *The Vital Center*) had appeared within months of each other at the end of the 1940s. For many, it was simply a matter of birthright that to be an American was to be exceptional.[26] Almost surely, Hofstadter's unsurpassed exceptionalist aphorism that "it has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies, but to be one" would have fully satisfied the average man or woman in the 1950s.[27] Yet if America's ideology was being American, then Hofstadter's maxim, like any syllogism, was more clever than instructive.

From the beginning, whole categories of Americans had been excluded from the vital center or enjoyed no meaningful role in the political tradition (namely, the ethnically cleansed American Indian). It was the categories missing from the exceptionalism paradigm that finally began to break the *bien-pensant* mold: the four unacknowledged or suppressed categories of race, gender, class, and empire. Race would be at the forefront, shattering the mold for the second time and permanently altering the sociosexual shape of things as never before.

Tocqueville worried that color prejudice might become American democracy's greatest failure – even observing that the prejudice "rejecting Negroes seems to increase in proportion to their emancipation."[28] Du Bois certified racism's intractability more than a hundred years ago with a prophecy many Americans can still recite from memory. "The problem of the twentieth century," he stipulated in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), his great African American manifesto, "is the problem of the color-line – the relation of the darker and lighter races of men."[29] Eighty-five years later, historian Eric Foner confirmed Du Bois's once-controversial counternarrative: that the too-brief interval of interracial reform after the Civil War was followed by Redemption, almost two decades of hard-fought political realignment ending in the defeat of the interracially promising People's Party, the final elimination of the African American franchise in the South, and the imposition of Jim Crow.[30]

People of color all but disappeared from the American narrative in 1896 after the Supreme Court's seven-to-one decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* dismissed, with appalling legal casuistry, the application of the Fourteenth Amendment to a Louisiana law regulating seating accommodations on trains. The enforced separation of the races imposed no badge of inferiority, Chief Justice Henry Billings Brown ruled: "But if this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it."[31] Ten percent of the country's population was rendered "separate but equal," a condition it was enjoined not to view as a disability, even

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as it saw itself legally barred from street cars, Pullmans, theaters, movie houses, parks, public schools, municipal libraries, drinking fountains, public toilets, sports stadiums, and hospitals reserved for white citizens.

With that decision, people of color lived in a world that paralleled the larger white world. Occasionally, some superstar captured the admiration of the majority, thereby reaffirming the nation's opportunity creed: Joe Louis, decking the Nazi prizefighter Max Schmelling in 1938; Marian Anderson's soaring contralto shaming bigotry from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday in 1939; Charles Drew, honored by the American Board of Surgery for organizing the Red Cross Blood Bank in 1943; Jackie Robinson joining the Dodgers in 1947; Ralph Bunche receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950. To be fair to the record, there were African American leaders, such as Booker Washington and Robert R. Moton, and a considerable number of black professionals who, as Jim Crow's beneficiaries, defended *Plessy*.

Plessy's effects on the nation's melting-pot leitmotif were immense in their power simultaneously to obscure and sustain the mythos of cultural harmony, ideological conformity, and middle-class contentment. By judicial sleight of hand, *e pluribus unum* became *e pluribus duo*, in historian Matthew Jacobson's sardonic paraphrase. *Plessy*'s elimination of blacks solved a problem of even greater complexity and exigency: the assimilation of quasi-whites. Hysteria over the insufficient "whiteness" of European immigrants peaked in the North and Northeast about a decade after the white supremacist South invented its "one drop" identity rule to solve a well-grounded fear of extensive racial admixture. The two challenges were symmetrically reinforcing: the "whitening up" of immigrants complemented the Southern agenda of reinforced "blackness," stigmatized and ostracized.[32]

The color dichotomy imposed by *Plessy* and rationalized with the excision of "Mulatto" from the U.S. Census after 1920 relieved the immigrant, once he departed from Ellis Island, of confusion about the most desirable American phenotypes. People of color, now called a race, served as reverse examples of appropriate citizenship. Most newcomers quickly figured out who were the people they should take care not to imitate or respect – a mudsill population below a rising tide of generally optimistic immigrants. To be sure, the new race was a beehive with an economy supporting financial institutions, large religious establishments, newspaper and cosmetics empires, liberal arts colleges, and a fairly diversified professional class: all separate, but in a few cases equal.

Meanwhile, elites North and South succumbed to hysteria over pseudo-eugenics and supposedly well-sourced predictions of an unassimilable surge of millions immigrating after World War I on top of the twenty million who arrived between 1880 and 1910. As more southern and eastern Europeans stood poised to disembark, old-stock Americans lamented the Protestant republic vanishing in a "non-white" sea of unmeltable languages, religions, and cultures. The "menacing" influx finally ended when Congress enacted the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act.

By 1954, the covert dynamic of race, class, and economics had succeeded so well in assimilating ethnic Europeans as to make possible, even necessary, the national reconsideration of the biracial solution ordained by *Plessy v. Ferguson*. If American ideals had meaning, their guardians realized that the defeat of fascism and the containment of communism in Europe, the unfolding horrors of genocide, anti-

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colonial unrest in Asia and Africa, FDR's Four Freedoms, and Eleanor Roosevelt's Universal Declaration of Human Rights demanded much more than recycled pieties. This time, the ideology of liberty and democracy had to matter. The official count of Nazi Germany's six million murdered Jews, Gypsies, and Slavs sent public avowal of genetic differences into the closet. The shameful resemblance of the Jim Crow South's laws and practices to the defeated Third Reich's Nuremberg laws put the United States at a major and growing disadvantage with the Soviet Union in winning the hearts and minds of the planet's dark-skinned majority.

Brown v. Board of Education, released on May 17, 1954, surprised the public with a unanimous decision nullifying *Plessy*. However, a Gallup poll found that while 54 percent of Americans approved, 41 percent did not.[33] Ten years after the publication of Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal's two-volume *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944), the nine justices reified what had become the ruling paradigm of Myrdalian liberalism. Recruited by the Carnegie Corporation in 1938 to conduct a massive social science study of the "problem," the Scandinavian became the American Negro's Tocqueville. In Myrdal's formulation, racism was an imperfection in the social order, a moral insult to the nation's founding ideals and thus a paradox in the "American Creed" that becomes ever more intolerable. Myrdal's introduction to *An American Dilemma* described the American Negro as "a problem in the heart of the American.... This is the central viewpoint of this treatise. Though our study includes economics, social, and political race relations, at bottom our problem is the moral dilemma of the American – the conflict between his moral valuations on various levels of consciousness and generality."[34]

The *Brown* decision was unanimous and unambiguous – at first. In a key footnote, the decision referenced psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark's poignant findings that black children expressed a preference for white dolls over black. After a fifty-eight-year detour, the United States was back at the starting point for racial equality only months after Ralph Ellison's runaway best seller, *Invisible Man*, won the National Book Award for fiction. Black Americans were elated. Even Du Bois, by then a caustic Marxist critic of his country's every action, wondered how the "miracle" had happened.[35] A year later, elation would give way to apprehension, to be followed by a decade of presidential neutrality and organized Southern resistance to integration. Whether it was ingenuous confidence in Myrdal's American Creed or, more pragmatically, the price paid for their unanimity, the justices departed from established practice by deferring an enforcement decree by a full calendar year. When they reconvened on May 31, 1955, it was not to order an immediate end of public school segregation, but to declare *Brown* enforced "with all deliberate speed." *Brown I* restored the full force of the Fourteenth Amendment. *Brown II* accommodated the casuistry of Chief Justice Brown in the *Plessy* case.

That the American Creed has failed to resolve the American dilemma as mediated fifty-seven years ago through *Brown* is in meaningful measure due to the ironic fact that one of Europe's leading economists eschewed economics as central to the problem that he and an army of social scientists were charged to explain. Guided by the Carnegie-Myrdal findings, the Court's decision addressed the problem in terms of interracial psychology, whereas its origins and substantive amelioration were in reality economic. By logical extension to the full range of Ameri-

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can public life, *Brown* was a prescription for enlightened national self-interest based on an anticipated upwelling of progress resulting from intimate and educated group contact.[36]

Ten years after *Brown* and nearly a century after the Civil War, the third major revision of the national narrative came as African Americans' rising frustrations over non-enforcement of "all deliberate speed" boiled over.[37] The 1964 Civil Rights Act was enacted in a climate of ferocious racial confrontations pressed nightly on national television by Martin Luther King, Jr.'s nonviolent campaign in Birmingham, Alabama, and black student activism gone viral in the Deep South after its lunch-counter and freedom-rides phases. For better and worse, most Americans took it for granted that civil rights meant racial rights; sexual rights seemed only incidental until the black freedom struggle stimulated gender rights activism. In the interim between *Brown*'s checkered implementation and the temporary consolidation of the Great Society, the women's movement caught the high winds of social change generated by the black civil rights movement.

The familiar story of race and gender finally cohabiting the exceptionalist narrative is literally one of black humor. No federal law made it a crime to discriminate on the basis of sex. The U.S. Senate had failed to approve the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) with the required two-thirds majority the year before *Brown*. When Howard Smith, courtly Virginia racist and chairman of the House Rules Committee, amused his male colleagues by inserting the word *sex* into the markup of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the maneuver panicked members of the civil rights establishment and organized labor. ERA advocates (mostly affluent white women) were immediately confronted with Frederick Douglass's Fifteenth Amendment admonitions.[38] Still, a combination of sympathy from the civil rights establishment and sexist underestimation of the gender issue's significance led to the 1964 Civil Rights Act becoming law with discrimination prohibited on grounds of "race, color, religion, sex, or national origin."[39] In *When Everything Changed* (2010), one of author Gail Collins's interviewees recalls never once having seen a female professor while a student at the University of California, Berkeley. "Worse yet," she says of 1960, "I didn't even notice."[40]

In 1964, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, often referred to as Snick) organized the Mississippi Freedom Summer, recruiting student volunteers to register African Americans to vote. The ideas and experiences that a pivotal cohort of college women took away from the extraordinary interracial group catharsis they experienced that summer helped ground American feminism's so-called second wave. The Freedom Summer brought together college-age black and white women as equals in a black-run organization for the first time in the history of the women's movement. Feminism's future cadres of leading professionals, writers, academics, and journalists emerged from this experience sobered and somewhat embittered by what they saw as institutionalized hypocrisy and gendered hierarchy in a movement supposedly pledged to the broadest possible inculcation of democracy. Writer Anne Moody and the women who came of age in Mississippi admiring civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer and reading Betty Friedan ended their Freedom Summer committed to an "NAACP for women," a "fully equal partnership of the sexes" that became the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966, two years later.[41]

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Lyndon Johnson, with his Texas populist understanding that an ideal is worth only what you can pay for it, had committed billions in seed-money to make Great Society projects economically feasible. Johnson's actions repeatedly commended themselves to an Aeschylus. Six months after his remarkable "We Shall Overcome" speech to Congress, the president signed the 1965 Voting Rights Act with King and Rosa Parks looking on, then proceeded to send 144,000 troops to Vietnam.[42] Whether the socioeconomic momentum of the Great Society could have repositioned a sizable mass of black people and survived the genuinely experienced, but also politically instigated, egalitarian consternation of many white people is moot. The president who could have been the nation's greatest since Lincoln destroyed himself in a war against godless communism that his imperturbable defense secretary eventually discovered to have been based on a false conception. At the end of the 1960s, the country began to suffer from narrative indigestion. Myrdal's American Creed was dismissed as a liberal illusion. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy's American dream went up in flames after Memphis.

As imperial and domestic events (the 1965 Watts race riots in Los Angeles appalled most Americans, black and white) eroded the solid closure in income disparities between middle-class black and white families, the national narrative sounded themes of zero-sum injustice. Conservative media broadcast the Great Society as financed by white working-class tax dollars. Catholic philosopher Michael Novak's unmeltable ethnics reappeared, mobilized against school busing, permissive lifestyles, disrespect for the flag, law and order breakdown, and an emerging gay liberation movement launched by the Stonewall riots in June 1969. Middle-class blacks and liberal Jews, historic civil rights allies, divided over educational quotas and community control of urban public schools, black power, and Israel. Woodstock was a parallel universe of free love, pot, and protest music for the boomer generation. Women had gained their civil rights with Title VII; feminists were pushing hard for reproductive rights. Historian Allen Matusow entitled his history of a fractious decade of race, reform, and reaction *The Unraveling of America*.[43]

When Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act and the Voting Rights Act, both in 1965, he predicted, as did the legislation's congressional and pressure-group sponsors, that the societal impact of the first would be relatively small, but that the political consequences of the second civil rights legislation would be seismic. Prescient about the Voting Rights Act, Johnson would be stupefied forty-five years later to see the demographic momentum unleashed after repeal of the racialist 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Act and dramatically recorded in the 2010 U.S. Census. In a burst of melting-pot euphoria, LBJ and the 89th Congress enriched and complicated the original narrative of an American racial dyad of white and black. The 2030 U.S. Census is almost certain to be complexly multiracial and multicultural. Johnson's prediction, that with the 1965 Voting Rights Act he had signed away indefinitely his party's historic command of the South's white electorate, proved accurate.

African Americans remember the symbolism of Ronald Reagan kicking off his 1980 presidential campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where mention was made not of Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner, the slaughtered young civil rights workers, but of Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee. When Reagan captured the South in 1980 (Jimmy Carter's Georgia excepted) and again in the 1984 landslide, with George H.W. Bush following in 1988,

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pollsters and pundits proclaimed a historic and fundamental realignment in national politics.[44] Still, it took much more than the GOP's winning of the South to win the hearts and minds of much of the rest of America. The beginnings of neoconservative, or Radical Right, political success antedated the Reagan Revolution by some three decades, however; it dated back to the beginnings of the Cold War and the origins of a group of intellectuals cultivated and promoted by the CIA, back to the 1964 Goldwater presidential run. A British observer tracked its history in a book whose title is its argument: *The World Turned Right Side Up*.[45]

Reagan was the smiling face and good-cheer voice of an ideology that seemed to erupt with dumbfounding suddenness to mock the narratives of Hofstadter consensus and Schlesinger vital centrism. After years of false starts around the conservative publications the *National Review* and *The American Spectator*, after years spent brooding in a handful of conservative, second-tier think tanks and foundations and the moneyed purlieus of Orange County, after devising an emotive political language (coded for race and gender) aimed at working-class whites and their struggling suburban cousins, the new neoconservatism, or Radical Right, emerged as a powerful, vote-getting synthesis of antitheses and a major shift in the American narrative: populism bonded to plutocracy. Yet it seamlessly wove together two long threads of that narrative in order to swear by a Jeffersonian wariness of government and a Jacksonian resentment of old money and elite culture.

The Radical Right made it possible for the employees of industries that were being merged, downsized, or outsourced, or had completely disappeared, to vote for politicians beholden to the very people who were forcing these employees to work for lower wages and fewer benefits, and increasingly not to be able to work at all. *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, indeed, asked journalist Thomas Frank of people ready to vote against their own self-interests.[46] The Radical Right tapped into those ancient underground veins of American nativism, fundamentalism, and anti-intellectualism, into paranoia, violence, and gender consternation, to produce an alloy combining, as seldom before, the politics of resentment with that of economic royalism. This squaring of political and cultural circles amounted to an epic achievement that was meant to spell the death of government in the life of the market, the end of the regulated market economy and of the social services dependent on tax revenues derived from it. The rightward shift in market deregulation, the financialization of the economy, and debt-financed consumption continued under the Democratic version of Reagan, William Jefferson Clinton.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, American exceptionalism experienced its greatest trauma since Pearl Harbor. Nineteen anonymous young Muslim men in hijacked airplanes inflicted a mortification upon the world's colossus, a nation whose military-industrial complex stood ready to fight three simultaneous campaigns, even though the implosion of the Soviet Union deprived the U.S. Pentagon of any credible menace that justified the arsenal at its disposal. Niebuhr might have invoked our besetting imperial "innocency" in helpful, partial explanation of what Americans almost universally regarded as an unjustified act of madness. Few had seen or remembered CNN reporter Peter Arnett's revealing interview with Osama bin Laden in the mountains of Jalalabad four years before 9/11. Bin Laden spoke then of his hatred for the United States with little display of passion: "It wants to occupy our countries, steal our resources,

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impose on us agents to rule us . . . and wants us to agree to all these. If we refuse to do so, it will say, 'You are terrorists.'"[47] A decade of imperial overreach has proved to have been a counterproductive response to a perversion of Islam.

Seven years after 9/11, the American way of life was again shaken to its foundation by the Great Recession of 2008. The logic of an unregulated market economy produced its predetermined result. Wall Street shuddered and well over $7 trillion evaporated in the housing bubble. Homeowners lost 55 percent of their housing wealth, for many their major asset and symbol of success. The American middle class, the historic protagonist of the American narrative, became an endangered species. Against a bleak backdrop of indebtedness, unemployment, and rapid decline in traditional jobs and the affordability of the essentials of health and education stands the stark wealth of the top 1 percent of Americans – current owners of 42 percent of the nation's financial wealth, up from 34.6 percent four years ago.[48]

All else seeming to fail, the vital center no longer holding and consensus fraying, 53 percent of the electorate wagered in 2008 that it could deny race by affirming its non-importance, and thereby audaciously transform the exceptionalist narrative. The choice before us, however, is still much the same as that posited by Du Bois when he described two antithetical versions of the American narrative: one based on "freedom, intelligence and power for all men; the other was industry for private profit directed by an autocracy determined at any price to amass wealth and power."

ENDNOTES

[1] "Farewell Speech – President Reagan's Farewell Speech from the Oval Office," January 11, 1989, Reagan Foundation; available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKVsq2daR8Q.

[2] The following are but a few of the recent books conveying an end-of-days prognosis: Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Holt, 2008); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987); and Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

[3] Aaron Gutfeld, *American Exceptionalism: The Effects of Plenty on the American Experience* (Brighton, U.K.: Sussex Academic Press, 2002), 26; Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 2, 10, 36; Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), chap. 1.

[4] Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782; Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2005); Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (1835; London: The Folio Society, 2002); David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography* (New York: Holt, 2009).

[5] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 326.

[6] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860 – 1880*, with an introduction by David Levering Lewis (1935; New York: Atheneum, 1992), 182.

[7] Ibid., 183.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 435.

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[10] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 182.

[11] Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (1948; New York: Vintage, 1989), xxxvii.

[12] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner, 1952), chap. 1.

[13] Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Farewell Address to the Nation, quoted in Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 484.

[14] David Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

[15] Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*, 176.

[16] Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, quoted in Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*, 4.

[17] See William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1959); and William Appleman Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life: An Essay on the Causes and Character of America's Present Predicament, Also a Few Thoughts About an Alternative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). By contrast, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*, a Bush-era meditation by historian Niall Ferguson in the spirit of Rudyard Kipling's advice to his Atlantic cousins, would appear to settle the debate, whether or not one commends Ferguson's applause for empire. See Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

[18] Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*, 25.

[19] Cf. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s combative *The Vital Center*, David Potter's nuanced *People of Plenty*, Daniel Boorstin's effusive trilogy, *The Americans*, Henry Nash Smith's discerning *Virgin Land*, R.W.B. Lewis's rich *The American Adam*, and Louis Hartz's Panglossian *The Liberal Tradition in America*; Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949); David Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955); Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans*, 3 vols. (New York: Random House, 1958–1973); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950); R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955); Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).

[20] Cf. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

[21] That Du Bois narrowly escaped federal prison in 1951 for his published opinions while Columbia University's prolific Allan Nevins absolved John D. Rockefeller of robber-baron taint in two volumes the previous year could be read only as Cold War paradox.

[22] Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, ix.

[23] Quoted in Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 300.

[24] Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the American Industrial Enterprise* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1962).

[25] David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denny, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1953); C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).

[26] Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*; Schlesinger, *The Vital Center*; Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 19.

[27] Hofstadter, quoted in Byron Shafer, ed., *Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 16.

[28] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 330.

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[29] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson Ltd., 1973), 13.

[30] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). Howard University historian and Du Bois acolyte, Rayford W. Logan, called the period after 1890 the "nadir" for black people in his seminal book, originally titled *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877–1901*. See Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (1954; New York: Da Capo Press, 1997).

[31] Quoted in Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 80; Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Knopf, 1979).

[32] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 109; Matthew Guterl, *The Color of Race in America: 1900–1940* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[33] Gallup Poll data are taken from "Snapshots In Time: The Public in the Civil Rights Era," http://www.publicagenda.org/civilrights/civilrights.htm.

[34] Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper, 1944), 1, lxxi. See David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963* (New York: Holt, 2000), esp. chap. 12; David W. Southern, *Gunnar Myrdal and Black-White Relations: The Use and Abuse of "An American Dilemma," 1944–1969* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); Walter A. Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience: Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938–1987* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

[35] Quoted in Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois*, II, 557.

[36] Legal scholar Charles J. Ogletree, Jr., found the expectation sadly wanting fifty years later; see Charles J. Ogletree, Jr., *All Deliberate Speed: Reflections on the First Half Century of Brown v. Board of Education* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004).

[37] Eisenhower had barely concealed his antipathy for *Brown*, and the Kennedy assassination terminated tentative civil rights responses. On Eisenhower's hostility to *Brown*, see Stephen Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President: The Renowned One-Volume Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 367–368.

[38] Congresswoman Edith Green lectured ERA advocates that, however badly women have been treated, "there has been ten times as much discrimination against the Negro"; quoted in Gail Collins, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from the 1960s to the Present* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009), 78.

[39] When the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission timidly took seriously Title VII's sexual nondiscrimination mandate, the arbitral *New Republic* demanded to know why "a mischievous joke perpetrated on the floor of the House [should] be treated by a responsible administrative body with this kind of seriousness?"; quoted in Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 73.

[40] Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 12.

[41] Quoted in Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 131. See also Rosen, *The World Split Open*.

[42] Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965–1978* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); reviewed by David Levering Lewis, "The Mission," *The New Yorker*, January 23 and 30, 2006, 86–91.

[43] Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).

[44] Earl Black and Merle Black, *The Rise of Southern Republicans* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

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45 Godfrey Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up: A History of the Conservative Ascendancy in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996); Justin Vaisse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

46 Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (New York: Holt, 2004); Thomas Frank, *The Wrecking Crew: How Conservatives Rule* (New York: Holt, 2008).

47 Quoted in Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 247.

48 Rex Nutting, "How the Bubble Destroyed the Middle Class," Marketwatch, July 8, 2011.

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