

After Exceptionalism

PATRICK LAWRENCE

AT FOUR-THIRTY in the afternoon of Saturday, 4 April 2009, Barack Obama stood before a throng of correspondents in the Palais de la Musique et des Congrès, a high-Modernist convention center on the place de Bordeaux in Strasbourg. It was his seventy-fourth day as president. He had earlier attended his first Group of 20 meeting, in London, and had just emerged from his first NATO summit, a two-day affair that featured sessions on both sides of the Franco–German border. The world was still intently curious as to who America’s first black president was and what, exactly, he stood for.

Confident, easeful, entirely in command, Obama spoke extemporaneously for several minutes. He spoke of “careful cooperation and collective action” within the Atlantic alliance. He noted “a sense of common purpose” among its leaders. He was there “to listen, to learn, and to lead,” Obama said, “because all of us have a responsibility to do our parts.”

Then came the questions.

There was one about the global financial crisis Obama had walked into as soon as he walked into the White House. (“All of us have to take important steps to deal with economic growth.”) There was one about NATO troops in Afghanistan, and another about whether any would be deployed in Pakistan. There was an awkward question about a new law passed in Kabul that restricted women’s rights in public places and effectively condoned child marriages. “What, about the character of this law,” an American television correspondent wanted to know, “ought to motivate US forces to fight and possibly die in Afghanistan?” Obama parried the question with impressively presidential aplomb: the law is abhorrent, he said, but American troops are highly motivated to protect the United States.

Another question came from the Washington correspondent of the *Financial Times*. It was a little long-winded and is reproduced in the transcript thus: “In the context of all the multilateral activity this week—the G-20, here at NATO—and your evident enthusiasm for multilateral frameworks, could I ask you whether you subscribe, as many of your predecessors have, to the school of American exceptionalism that sees America as uniquely qualified to lead the world, or do you have a slightly different philosophy? And if so, would you be able to elaborate on it?”

This is known in the trade as a softball, the kind of gently lobbed query that sets up a public figure to dilate safely and at length on a favored theme. And so did Obama field it. From the transcript, one half wonders whether the president and the correspondent had rehearsed the moment beforehand—as if Obama were keen to take on the matter in a cosmopolitan setting.

“I believe in American exceptionalism,” the new president said spryly, “just as I suspect the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.” Obama waxed on in this vein for a moment or two before praising, yet again, alliances and many-sided modes of cooperation. “We create partnerships,” he concluded, “because we can’t solve these problems alone.”

Like an incoming tide flowing over rocks, the questions from the press returned to troop counts, NATO contributions, and Albania’s accession as the alliance’s newest member. No one seemed to take much note of either the *FT* man’s inquiry or Obama’s reply to it. And no one, not even America’s new president, seemed to grasp what had just happened to *exceptionalism*, that peculiarly awkward term with its peculiarly ideological load. Something broke at that moment. It was as if Obama had dropped a precious relic, some centuries-old crystal chalice, and no one present heard the noise when it shattered.

The noise came soon enough and echoed for the remainder of Obama’s eight years in office. The stars of right-wing media were among the first to start in. Sean Hannity pounced within a couple of days of the Strasbourg remark. Obama, the Fox News presenter

declared, “marginalized his own country by saying our sense of exceptionalism is no different than that of the British and the Greeks.” An upstart assistant editor at the *New Republic* took a swing a few days later. “If all countries are ‘exceptional,’ then none are,” James Kirchick wrote, “and to claim otherwise robs the word, and the idea of American exceptionalism, of any meaning.”

It went on from there, an ever-available suggestion that Obama’s patriotism must be held in doubt, that he was not truly “one of us.” It was not difficult to hear the worst of these recurring remarks as racism at a single remove.

“Our president,” Mitt Romney asserted as he sought the Republican presidential nomination in 2012, “doesn’t have the same feeling about American exceptionalism that we do.” Three years later, another conservative presidential aspirant, the mercifully forgettable Bobby Jindal, swung his mallet to make the bell ring: “This is a president who won’t proudly proclaim American exceptionalism,” the Louisiana governor charged, “maybe the first president ever who truly doesn’t believe in that.”

Obama seemed haunted after that afternoon in Strasbourg. It was as if he had strayed beyond the fence posts defining what an American leader can and cannot say—and then hastened to return to the fold. Thenceforth, he missed few chances to counter his critics. “My entire career has been a testimony to American exceptionalism,” he said in direct reply to Romney. On another occasion: “I’m a firm believer in American exceptionalism.” And another—this time in a commencement address at West Point: “I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being.” He pursued the theme until the very end of his presidency, a point to which I will return.

None of this—the president’s critics, the president’s ripostes—did much good, if any, for the abiding notion of American exceptionalism, whichever of its numerous meanings one may subscribe to. These past years have been peculiar in this way. Others may read the matter differently, but to me that afternoon in Strasbourg was a point of departure long in coming. Since then it has made no difference, none at all, whether one faults Obama or anyone else for failing to believe in

our exceptional standing or whether one professes belief to the bottom of one's soul. All that is said now comes to the same thing, making for a devastating dialectic. However the question is addressed, it reiterates the same lapse, the same telling self-consciousness, the same self-doubt, the same collective anxiety long evident to anyone able to discern with detachment the sentiments common to many Americans.

Obama had it right, of course, that day in Strasbourg. Having lived among the Chinese, the Japanese, and others given to pronounced variants of chosen-people consciousness, I conclude he had settled on the only logical way at the matter. All nations are exceptional, but none, not even America, is exceptionally exceptional. The irate young editor at the *New Republic* had it right, too, though he seemed not to have known it: whatever Obama's intent (a question I will also take up later), he had indeed stripped bare America's customary claim to exceptionalist standing, exposing it at last as empty of all but the most mythical meanings.

This was an immensely constructive thing to do. Is it too much to suggest that shattering the glass chalice might in the long run rank among our forty-fourth president's most consequential accomplishments? I do not think so. History, the kind Obama made in Strasbourg, sometimes resembles what Auden wrote of suffering in "Musée des Beaux Arts": it occurs in the most ordinary circumstances such that very few of us even take note.

To risk a generality, Americans had been an uncertain people—nervous, defensive, given to overcompensation for never-to-be-mentioned failures and weaknesses—for a long time before Obama spoke in Alsace in the spring of 2009. I trace this shared-by-many attribute to another April, this one thirty-four years earlier, that wrenchingly poignant season when Americans sat in frozen silence as news footage showed them helicopters hovering above the embassy in Saigon—the frenzy of a final retreat. For now, it is enough to note that Obama's observation—a touch offhand and as simple as it was obvious—marked the moment Americans would have to begin rotating their gaze, in a gesture not short of historic for its import, if they were to do at all well in the new century. They would have to turn from a

past decorated with many enchanting ornaments toward a future that has no ribbons or laurels for those who claim them by virtue of some providentially conferred right.

Obama left Americans with questions on the day I describe. They require us—and I think by design—to begin talking of what I will call postexceptionalism. A set of questions we must pose to ourselves for the first time: this was Obama's true legacy, in my view. In the best of outcomes, we will learn to answer them in a new language, as the best answers will require. What will be the nature of a postexceptionalist America? Who will these postexceptionalist Americans be? How will they understand themselves and themselves among others?

It may be that the questions Obama so fleetingly raised will turn out to run deeper still. What will remain of Americans once the belief that they are chosen is subtracted—as inevitably it will be. What will be left with which they can describe themselves to themselves? *Can* a postexceptionalist America come to be? Given the chasm in their consciousness that must be crossed, is such a thing even conceivable? Will Americans accept another idea of themselves and of others?

Or will they continue to pretend against all evidence that the chalice remains intact, unshattered, still to be held high above the heads of others atop our city on a hill, even as the rest of the world has somewhere to get to and proceeds on, calmly or otherwise, as best it can?



It is common enough to locate the origins of America's self-image in the thoughts of the earliest settlers coming across the Atlantic from England. It was John Winthrop, in his famous 1630 sermon, who gave us our hilltop city, he who proclaimed "the eyes of all people are upon us." Even in this seminal occasion we detect a claim—maybe the earliest—to exceptional status. But it is to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as America made itself a nation, that we have to look for the grist of the exceptionalist notion. And instantly we find a confusion of meanings. To some it referred to the new nation's revolutionary history, its institutions, and its democratic ideals: it had

ideational connotations. This line of thinking has since been stenciled onto history such that other readings can be somewhat obscured. In his *Letters from an American Farmer*, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur cast the American as a “new man,” exceptional for his stoic self-reliance and autonomy. In its early years, the nation was also counted exceptional for its abundant land and resources. And we should not forget the influence on the founding generation of the French physiocrats, who considered farming the fundament of all wealth, as we consider the case for this interpretation. New and evolving meanings attaching to the term have tumbled down the decades and centuries ever since, often with claims to providential dispensation, often (as the *FT* correspondent suggested) asserting a divinely assigned mission to lead all others.

Alexis de Tocqueville is commonly credited as the first to describe Americans as exceptional. This is fine, but let us not miss what he meant:

The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one. Their strictly Puritanical origin, their exclusively commercial habits, even the country they inhabit, which seems to divert their minds from the pursuit of science, literature, and the arts, the proximity of Europe, which allows them to neglect these pursuits without relapsing into barbarism, a thousand special causes . . . have singularly concurred to fix the mind of the Americans upon purely practical objects.

It is a rather less elevated description of our exceptionalism than is customarily assumed. Long has been the journey, then, from Tocqueville’s time to ours, exceptionalism having gone from observation to thought to article of faith, ideological imperative, a presumption of eternal success, and a claim to stand above the law that governs all other nations.

Historians note the odd irony that it was Stalin who brought the term “American exceptionalism” into common use. This was in the late 1920s, when a faction of American Communists advised Moscow that the nation’s abundance and the absence of clearly drawn class

distinctions rendered it immune to the contradictions Marx saw in capitalism. Stalin was incensed: how dare those Americans stray from orthodoxy by declaring their nation an exception to it? While the Soviet leader flung the term back indignantly, many American intellectuals considered it “an inspired encapsulation of 160 years of impeccable national history.” This phrase belongs to David Levering Lewis, the biographer of W. E. B. Du Bois, who was among the first prominent critics of the notion that America and its people were in any way singular or in any way not subject to the turning of history’s wheel.

Du Bois found the source of our modern idea of exceptionalism in the postbellum decades leading up to the Spanish-American War. Two visions of the American future emerged after the Civil War, he observed in *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860–1880*, his 1935 history of African American contributions to the postwar period—and a purposeful challenge to white-supremacist orthodoxies. In one of these renderings, America would at last achieve the democracy expressed in its founding ideals. The other pictured an advanced industrial nation whose distinctions were its wealth and potency. Democracy at home, empire abroad: when combined, these two versions of America’s destiny were to be something new under the sun, and this amalgam would make America history’s truly great exception. This was never more than an impossible dream. Du Bois considered it “the cant of exceptionalism,” in his biographer’s phrase, intended primarily to deflect the realities of the Great Depression.

It was a mere six years after Du Bois brought out his book when Henry Luce declared the twentieth “the American century” in a noted *Life* magazine editorial. America was “the most powerful and vital nation in the world,” the celebrated publisher announced. It is “our duty and our opportunity to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit.” Maybe only the offspring of missionaries could write with such righteous confidence of dominance and purity of intent in combination. But Luce, without using the phrase, had neatly defined American exceptionalism in its twentieth-century rendering. And from his day to ours, that aspect of it we can consider religious has grown only more evident among its apostles.



Jimmy Carter caught the post-Vietnam mood perfectly (perfectly to a fault, as it turned out) when he delivered his noted “malaise” speech in mid-July 1979. Carter never used the wounding word. His actual title was “A Crisis of Confidence,” and he made his point in vivid terms. “It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will,” Carter explained on America’s television screens. He spoke of “the growing doubt about the meaning of our lives.” He spoke of “years filled with shock and tragedy,” and of “paralysis, stagnation, and drift.”

This was a presentation of remarkable candor by any measure. Carter told Americans, in so many words, that they could not count on any preordained destiny or that they were always assured of success simply because of who they were. “First of all, we must face the truth,” Carter said, “and then we can change our course.” To change our course: this phrase alone warrants considerable thought. Among the fundamental conceits of the exceptionalist creed is that America has always had it right and has no need to change anything. The national task is simply to carry on as it has from its beginning. Carter’s challenge to such assumptions could hardly have been bolder, although he seems to have been careful to avoid explicit reference to exceptionalism. This would have to wait for Obama.

If the courage of Carter’s honesty lies beyond question, so does the mistake he made when we judge the malaise speech in purely political terms. The public initially received it positively. But four years after America’s humiliating defeat in Vietnam, Americans could not but suspect that there was nothing exceptional about them or their nation. It was as if the floorboards were trembling beneath their feet. And as it turned out, Americans did not much want to hear their president confirm these suspicions and sensations so plainly.

Ronald Reagan understood this. If the project was the rehabilitation of America’s exceptionalist status, his first task after taking office in 1981 was to transform the Vietnam War into “an American tragedy.” So did Reagan proceed. In a matter of a few years, he recast Americans as Vietnam’s victims, its aggressors no longer. His “Vietnam,” quotation

marks required, was a place where valorous Americans fought and sacrificed on freedom's front lines. This inversion must be counted an extraordinary feat, one requiring a manipulation of past events not short of astonishing for its wholesale distortions. Christian Appy, the historian of Vietnam as it evolved in the American consciousness, put it this way in a note sent some years ago: "Reagan gave Americans psychological permission to forget or mangle history to feel better about the country."

If American exceptionalism had not previously been a faith, Reagan set about making it one. As president he breathed extraordinary new life into the old credenda—notably in his famous references to Winthrop's "city on a hill," each one a misuse of the phrase. He quoted it coming and going—on the eve of his 1980 victory over Carter, in his farewell address nine years later, and on near-countless occasions in between.

I recall those years vividly, oddly enough because I was abroad during almost all of them. On each visit back there seemed to be more American flags in evidence—above front doors, on people's lapels, in the rear windows of cars, in television advertisements. By the mid-1980s the nation seemed enraptured in a spell of hyperpatriotism Reagan had conjured with the skill of the performer he never ceased to be. The stunningly rude conduct of American spectators at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles made plain to me that Reagan had set the nation on a path that was bound to deliver it into isolation and decline. "Patriotism" has ever since been a polite synonym for nationalism of a pernicious kind.

To me this turn in national sentiment reiterated precisely what it was intended to refute: America was still the nervous nation Carter had described. It is difficult nonetheless to overstate the import of what Reagan did by way of all his images and poses. He did not restore America's confidence in itself after Vietnam; in my estimation no American leader from Reagan's day to ours has accomplished this. Reagan's feat was to persuade an entire nation, or at least most of the electorate, that it was all right to pretend: all was affect and imagery. As if to counter Carter's very words, he licensed Americans to

avoid facing the truth of defeat and failure and professed principle betrayed. He demonstrated in his words and demeanor that greatness could be acted out even after it was lost as spectacularly as it had been in Indochina. Beyond his face-off with “the evil empire,” “Star Wars,” “the magic of the marketplace,” and so on, Reagan’s importance as our fortieth president lay in his intuitive grasp of social psychology. He understood: many Americans, enough to elect a president, prefer to feel and believe more than they like to think. It was “morning in America,” and all one had to do was have faith in the man who said so.

“One of the most important casualties of the Vietnam tragedy,” Henry Kissinger reflected on the twenty-fifth anniversary of our defeat, “was the tradition of American exceptionalism.” Kissinger erred in his estimation: the tradition had many years of life left after 1975, as should now be plain. He did not understand either what exceptionalism is or its purpose. Du Bois did, by contrast: he saw in the 1930s that American exceptionalism was sheer artifice, invoked most vigorously when contradicting realities threatened to intrude upon the national mythology. Reagan made use of it in precisely this fashion.

We still live, roughly speaking, with the version of exceptionalism Reagan crafted to evade the verities of our Vietnam debacle. This is an immense pity, the consequences of which are hardly calculable. Defeat is the mulch of renewal—provided one has the strength of character to acknowledge it. Was this not Carter’s implicit point? Defeat gives the vanquished an occasion to reflect, to draw lessons, to reimagine themselves, to pursue a new way forward. There are numerous examples of this in history. The twentieth-century fates of Germany and Japan are of an order all their own, but they serve well enough to illustrate the point: after downfall comes regeneration. Fail to “face the truth”—Carter’s well-chosen phrase—and one must count defeat evaded a lost opportunity of fateful magnitude.

In the American case one must look backward and forward from the defeat in Vietnam to grasp the full measure of Reagan’s destructive happy talk. April 1975 was a moment Americans could have begun to look squarely at their many betrayals in history—of others and of themselves—in the name of exceptionalism. Illusions nursed for three

centuries could have been abandoned in favor of a new past more fully and honestly understood. Looking forward, there would have been no more coups and interventions—no Angola, no Nicaragua, no Iraq, no Libya, no Syria, no Ukraine, no Venezuela—the list is as long as it is shameful. Americans could have “changed course.” The defeat in Vietnam, to make this point another way, could have launched us into our postexceptionalist era—which, I am convinced, was Carter’s intent in 1979 as much as it was Obama’s thirty years later.



Jimmy Carter, fair to say, was voted out of office in part for his never-quite-stated suggestion that Americans reconsider their claim to exceptional status among nations. He left the White House with a reputation as a muddle-headed weakling (and now awaits his revisionist historian, in my view). Obama had better luck managing his predicament after his remark in Strasbourg. He simply retreated into incessant professions of belief. This, too, marks an opportunity foregone. When he endorsed Hillary Clinton at the Democratic convention in 2016, Obama went straight back to Reagan, believe it or not, invoking Winthrop by way of the Great Communicator’s “shining city on a hill.”

Plus ça change, one might conclude. But this would not be quite right. If Carter and Obama discovered the hard way that exceptionalism remains a precious relic in American politics, they also left a mark on it. We can now speak of hard exceptionalism and a soft alternative. Carter did the spadework, but prior to Obama’s presidency, any such distinction was incipient at best. After Strasbourg, Obama proceeded as if Humpty Dumpty could be put back together again. We all know how the old nursery rhyme turns out.

The hard variety derives from Reagan, who drew on Henry Luce’s do-what-we-want, where-we-want, how-we-want notion of American preeminence and power. It is subject neither to international law nor, when all the varnish is scraped away, ordinary standards of morality. This is the version of the creed advanced in *Exceptional: Why the World Needs a Powerful America*, the 2015 book by Dick Cheney

and Liz Cheney, the former vice-president's daughter. The historical record is unblemished, in their telling. Vietnam was wise, Iraq in 2003 was wise, the use of torture after 2001 was just.

Against this we find counterposed the more humane (if finally more cynical) version of exceptionalism put forward by Obama and many others on what passes, remarkably enough, for "the Left" in American politics. Gone is the Reaganesque jingoism and the whiff of Old Testament righteousness characteristic of conservative renderings. In their place we find "plain and humble people . . . coming together to shape their country's course," as Obama put it at the Philadelphia convention. On the foreign policy side, this is a nation that admits its mistakes while leading the world in pursuit of "shared interests and values"—a key phrase in the lexicon—by way of those partnerships Obama mentioned in Strasbourg. America's conduct abroad must be rooted in the same humility characteristic of its people—the people ever busy shaping the nation's course.

Taken together, these two versions of America as it looks in the mirror are nothing if not reiterations of the post-Civil War binary Du Bois astutely identified—empire and democracy. In the middle of them sits Donald Trump. Having no use at all for exceptionalism, he is the first president in our modern history simply to shrug it off and survive the judgment. "I don't like the term," Trump said at a fundraising event in 2015. "I don't think it's a very nice term. 'We're exceptional, you're not.'" Whatever else one may think of him, Trump is to be credited on this point. Implicit in his position is the reality that Americans are as subject to history as any other people.

Jake Sullivan, a prominent adviser in the Obama administration and Hillary Clinton's deputy chief of staff at State, voiced a view on the soft side in the January 2019 edition of the *Atlantic*. "This calls for rescuing the idea of American exceptionalism," Sullivan wrote two years into the Trump presidency, "from both its chest-thumping proponents and its cynical critics, and renewing it for the present time." He then unfurled "a case for a new American exceptionalism as the answer to Donald Trump's 'America First'—and as the basis for American leadership in the twenty-first century."

Like Kissinger, Sullivan does not seem to understand. Exceptionalism as it has evolved is no longer an idea: it is a belief, and as such it cannot be resuscitated by way of rational thought, no matter how deep its roots in history and how acute the rational thinking. I question, indeed, the efficacy of any foundational creed in need of a salvage job of the sort Sullivan proposes. This is not how religions—civil, in this case—work. Nonetheless, soft exceptionalism is now the frontline defense of the notion among Washington’s thinking elites. And we can count Sullivan’s carefully reasoned essay its most thorough treatise to date.

Sullivan’s case is multiply flawed. Soft exceptionalism is finally little different from the hard kind, given the two meet at the horizon. They both rest on the old belief that, uniquely in human history, America manages to combine virtue and power without the former’s corruption by the latter. Hegemon or “benevolent hegemon”—a phrase from the triumphalist 1990s I have always found risibly preposterous—both versions place America at the pinnacle of the global order, sequestered from others by dint of its “goodness” and “greatness.” (Even the Cheneys, *père et fille*, had the nerve to use these terms.) Hard or soft, they both treat scores of coups, interventions, subterfuge operations, and countless other breaches of international law as deviations from the golden mean, the norm—even as more than a century’s evidence indicates these supposed irregularities have been the norm.

There is a point to be made here that I count more significant than any just listed. Whatever variety of exceptionalism someone may endorse, it will not open us to the rich benefits to be derived from defeat or retreat; as we all know, exceptional America never lost anything and never will. This is one of the creed’s two essential purposes. On one hand it is a declaration of permanent victory. On the other it is an amulet marshaled to ward away the doubt and uncertainty that lie at the core of the American character. The contradiction one might find here is merely apparent.

Exceptionalism in any form, then, comes to a confinement. It encloses those who profess it within the fantasy of eternal triumph,

the hubris attaching to the presumption of never-ending invincibility. Most of all, exceptionalism traps us in the logic of victors: it renders us certain that we need only to continue as we have, altering nothing. It thus prevents the emancipation of our minds such that we know at last our past as it truly was and can think altogether anew of another kind of future.

In *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*, Wolfgang Schivelbusch is eloquent in describing the fertility of loss against the barrenness of victory. It is an exceptional (truly so) work. In it he quotes Reinhart Koselleck, the late German historian, to this effect:

There is something to the hypothesis that being forced to draw new and difficult lessons from history yields insights of longer validity and thus greater explanatory power. History may in the short term be written by the victors, but historical wisdom is in the long run enriched more by the vanquished.

America's leaders are rarely long on historical wisdom. Among Dick Cheney and Barack Obama and Jake Sullivan and many other noted names, at issue today is one or another form of restoration, nothing more. This arises from the doctrine of exceptionalism itself. It amounts to a cage within which we choose to confine ourselves and wherein we learn nothing—the conceit being we have nothing to learn. We are the jailer and the jailed, then. And if the twenty-first century has one thing to tell us above any other, it is that we must turn the key, escape our narrow cell, and begin to think and live in ways our claim to exceptionalism has too long rendered inaccessible to us.

♦ ♦ ♦

In the spring of 1932, Henri Bergson published his final book. He called it *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, “morality” to be taken here to mean (approximately) a society's ethos, how it lives. A quarter century had passed since the French thinker brought out his celebrated *Creative Evolution*. This last work amounts to an elaboration on the earlier volume's themes.

Once again, Bergson takes up the binaries running through much of his work: “repose” and movement, the closed society and the open, the stable and the dynamic—the latter in each case driven by his famous *élan vital*, the natural impulse within us to create and evolve. As in the earlier work, Bergson posits the what could or will be against the what-is.

The distinguishing mark of *The Two Sources* is its exploration of the “how” of change—how a society advances from an established state to one newly realized. His answer is surprising, at least to me. Progress is achieved not systematically but creatively. It does not occur as a result of careful bureaucratic planning, one measured step succeeding another. It entails, rather, “a forward thrust, a demand for movement.” This requires “at a certain epoch a sudden leap,” and there is nothing gingerly about it. Bergson calls this a *saltus*, an abrupt breach resulting in transformation.

Here is an essential passage in the argument Bergson constructs in *The Two Sources*:

It is a leap forward, which can take place only if a society has decided to try the experiment; and the experiment will not be tried unless a society has allowed itself to be won over, or at least stirred. . . . It is no use maintaining that this leap forward does not imply a creative effort behind it, and that we do not have to do here with an invention comparable with that of the artist. That would be to forget that most great reforms appeared at first sight impracticable, as in fact they were.

There are a couple of things to note in these lines as we consider the prospect of a postexceptionalist America. One, ordinary Americans—a critical mass, let us say—must be open to making the required leap and to the measure of flux—an interim of instability, even—this implies. So must our political thinkers, scholars, and policy planners—altogether our intellectual class. Two, creative advances require creative individuals—in a phrase, imaginative leaders who can see beyond the closed circle of assumptions that any given society forms. So it is with dynamic leadership. What at first throws

us because it appears to be wholly impractical is later on accepted as a new norm. The Declaration's drafters in the summer of 1776—Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, and others—serve perfectly well as a case in point. American history gives us numerous other examples.

Bergson's thinking is of great use, it seems to me, in any effort to change course—to redirect American power, in simple terms. But he immediately faces us with questions, two more atop those posed at the start of this essay.

How given are Americans to the “forward movement” Bergson writes of? A good many appear eager, if not desperate, for holistic change, a saltus of our own. For these many, it is a question not of repudiating national aspirations but of abandoning the mistaken course poor interpretations have set us upon. To return to Du Bois's thesis, this constituency now comes to understand that the exceptionalist notion of a virtuous empire and a thriving polity has proven disastrous. Dominance abroad, in other words, must give way to democracy at home (and all the work this implies, some of it restorative, some taken up for the first time). Such a transformation would constitute a truly forward movement.

But America is now a house divided, to note the self-evident. Many of us appear to have lost touch with all that might pass for creative drives. There is much to suggest that seven decades of preeminence have left too many of our leaders incapable of cultivating a reconstituted vision of the nation's future. They persist, instead, in the long-bankrupted pursuit of democracy and empire—the old, impossible dream. They tend to cling to illusions of moral clarity consolidated during the Reagan years and now proffered by such figures as Dick Cheney and, closer to our moment, John Bolton, until mid-September Trump's astonishingly dangerous national security adviser. Their prominence is not to be overlooked. Their influence continues to keep us from changing anything about our ways of seeing and thinking—our “morality,” the ethos by which we live. Ours seems a closed society, in Bergson's terminology. It is costly indeed to stray beyond the fence posts.

Whether America is any longer capable of authentic change depends in large measure on how we answer the other question a

reading of Bergson imposes upon us. Do we Americans have the leaders to inspire us forward, to cut our moorings, to “win us over” to the condition of postexceptionalism? Bergson’s thought as to the necessity of gifted leadership (a term he does not actually use) is especially pertinent in the American case, it seems to me. It is perfectly sensible to suggest, as many do, that a fundamental transformation in Americans’ understanding of themselves is beyond reach, or that a tremendous shock—a catastrophic defeat, a deep and sustained depression—will be required to bring it about. But these are the replies one will always hear within the confines of a static political culture. They admit of no prospect of transcending the what-is. They leave no ground for imagining what a committed leader might accomplish by way of showing America new paths forward. Anyone who doubts this potential should consider the tragic turn the nation took after the three assassinations of the 1960s—the two Kennedys and Martin Luther King, Jr. They were leaders of the kind Bergson compares with artists. It would be difficult to overstate the impact their deaths have had on the nation’s direction.

For the moment we do not seem to have such leaders. But it is worthwhile considering figures such as Obama (or Carter, for that matter) with this question at one’s elbow. I do not wish to overfreight Obama’s appearance in Strasbourg very early in his first term, but in that fateful sentence concerning Americans, “Brits,” and Greeks lies a hint, surely, of a leader’s alternative vision of America’s way into the twenty-first century. An attempt was made, suggesting imminence. We are now face-to-face with the pity of Obama’s retreat. With it he deprived himself of all chance of greatness—and Americans of a chance to move beyond their state of “repose.” But we also find among us an incipient generation of leaders who stand squarely against our condition of inertia. Tulsi Gabbard, the vigorously anti-imperialist congresswoman from Hawaii, is but one example of this emergent cohort. The common theme is plain: to remake American democracy and to abandon imperial aspirations are two halves of the same project.

This is where we are now with regard to our exceptionalism, in my reading of our time. We arrive at a crucial moment, and there is

no place in it for pieties as to the “can do” of the American character. It is difficult to argue that we as a society are prepared for this. But it is nonetheless time—if, indeed, we are not already late—to make our leap into a postexceptionalist awareness of ourselves and ourselves among others. It is time to leave something large and defining behind, to put the point another way. We can think of this as shattering the crystal chalice or as simply finding a place for it in museums and in our history texts. It does not matter so long as we determine, by way of a leadership class awakened from its slumber, to live without it. The only plausible alternative is failure—once again, among ourselves as well as among others.

There are sound reasons to assign our time this magnitude of importance. Abroad, the world tells us nearly in unison that the place the old American faith found in the twentieth century is not open to it in the twenty-first. The near chaos we are responsible for since the events of 11 September 2001—notably, but not only, in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria—is of an order the community of nations has come to find unacceptable. While this is increasingly evident—as is a rising contempt for our gaudy displays of righteousness—let us avoid a certain mistake here: the message is not “Go home,” but its opposite, “Join us—be among us truly, authentically, entirely.” In my experience abroad, most others still detect the good that resides in Americans despite all that is at this point plainly otherwise when judged by the nation’s conduct toward others.

At home the intellectual confinements exceptionalist beliefs impose have debilitated us for decades. We are now greatly in need of genuinely new thinking in any number of political and social spheres, even as we deny ourselves permission to do any. Clever restorations, as already noted, will not do. To honor tradition one must add to it. This is done by breaking with it, just as Bergson implied with his artist. Merely to carry tradition forward in imitation is to entomb it, while trivializing ourselves and our agency.

What does “postexceptionalism” mean? How would it manifest? Who would postexceptionalist Americans be? How would Americans understand themselves and account for themselves among others?

Would anything be left of us were the mythologies to be scraped away?

I began with these questions. They are no simpler than the two just considered. If one has breathed fetid air the whole of one's life, it is not so easy to describe a spring breeze. But there is a long tradition of dissent and dissenters in America—"exceptionalism's exceptions," as Levering Lewis once termed them. Much of what is pushed to the margins in American history is by no means marginal—a point our best historians have made many times. In the supposedly far corners of our past we find paths to a future beyond exceptionalism. The lively anti-imperialist movement that arose in the nineteenth century's last years is a relevant case in point. There is also the experience of other nations that have passed through that cycle of trauma and recovery Wolfgang Schivelbusch explored so insightfully. These things are available to us. Fresh air is not so inaccessible as we may be inclined to assume. One draws encouragement, indeed, from the discourses of the Cheneys and, on the other side of the ledger, the Obamas and Sullivans: any question so self-consciously considered is by definition in play.

Among my starting points when considering the idea of postexceptionalism is an imperative that came to me after living and working many years abroad, primarily in Asia. It is simply stated: parity between the West and non-West will be an inevitable feature of our new century. This is already evident providing one knows where to look. To take but one example, one reads little in the American press about the network of alliances now forming among non-Western nations in the middle-income category: between Russia and China, Russia and Iran, China and Iran, India and all of these. Beijing's audaciously ambitious Belt and Road Initiative will multiply such relations many times; they are already a considerable source of influence. American exceptionalism, let us not forget, was born and raised during half a millennium of Western preeminence (taking my date from da Gama's arrival at Calicut in 1498). This era now draws to a close before our eyes. No one's antiquated claim to exceptionalism can survive its passing.

As a corollary, the same point holds within the Atlantic world itself. Europe now struggles for a healthy distance from America after

the suffocating embrace of the Cold War decades. If success has so far proven limited, the direction is clear. One of the truths I learned when reporting in Indonesia during the first post-Suharto years, a time when various provinces were demanding autonomy, was that to stay together the Indonesian republic would have to come partially apart. The same will prove so of the West and all who identify as belonging to it. As in Indonesia, there is difference amid similarity, and both must be served.

It will be a postexceptionalist American leadership that accepts these immense dramas with the thought and imagination needed to find opportunities—as against an almost fantastic variety of “threats”—in the soil of new landscapes. In the best of outcomes, nostalgia for lost preeminence, our postwar pursuit of totalized security—these will no longer interest postexceptionalist American leaders. Theirs will be a nation braced to advance into a new time because it is confident of its competence to do so. It will be cognizant of the perspectives of others, a capacity Americans have heretofore found of little use. It will be game, in a word—aware of its past but never its prisoner. The language of dominance will give way to the necessary language of parity. International law will be our law as it is everyone else’s.

And here we come to the essential motivation for us to make our leap—the *sine qua non* of it: it must first dawn on us that it is greatly, immeasurably to our advantage to attempt it. This truth has not yet come to us; no leader has led us to it. How little do most of us understand, in consequence, that to abandon our claims to exceptional status will first of all come as an immense unburdening and a relief from our long aloneness in the world?

“The American of the future will bear but little resemblance to the American of the past.” I have long admired this observation, even as I wonder whether it is anything more than a wishful thought. It dates to 1902 and belongs to Edwin Seligman, a prominent Progressive Era thinker. Seligman’s time was very different from ours, of course, but we can draw connections. He wrote at the first flowering of America’s imperial ambition; today we watch as the sun sets. His concern was an

evolution in consciousness among Americans. So should we concern ourselves as the future rushes toward us. This is where the path to postexceptionalism must begin—in our minds.

All of what I have just noted in pencil sketch lies within our reach. None of it is a matter of law or mere policy. It comes to a question of will and of vision, of who we wish to be, of our capacity to reimagine ourselves. But let us not make one of the very errors we would do best to leave behind: what Americans *can* do and what they *will* do are two different things. There is no certainty Americans will reach for any of what is available to them. To abandon our claims to exceptionalism is to give up our customary assumption of assured American success. It requires us to accept the difference between destiny and possibility. One does not find abundant signs Americans are yet ready to do this—not among our leaders, in any case. There seems to be little awareness that the only alternative to the change of course Jimmy Carter favored forty years ago this past summer is decline—decline not as a fate but as a choice, one made even as we do not know we are making it.

“Can America save itself?” Bernd Ulrich, a noted German commentator, wondered in *Die Zeit* not long ago. It is precisely our question as we look toward a postexceptionalist idea of ourselves. This idea, indeed, was Ulrich’s unstated topic. “In principal, absolutely,” he replied to his own question. “But certainly not with gradual changes. In terms of global politics and history, it must get off the high horse it has so long ridden. It needs a moderate self-esteem, beyond superlatives and supremacy.”