American Exceptionalism and Its Consequences

Let me begin with an observation that I think is obvious even if it is rarely noted. It is this: There is no separating politics and psychology. This seems to me an especially useful truth as we explore our topic this evening, and I go to Fromm and Jung to explain it. People, individuals, make societies, but societies, just as truly, make individuals.

This evening I will look to the latter side of this matter more than the former. Americans have made America, true enough, but I am more interested for now in how America has made Americans—how it has shaped the psychology that defines Americans—the consciousness that marks them out, indeed, so distinctly from others.

Being an American and seeing things from the inside out, so to say, I have thought for a very long time, and certainly since the events of September 11, 2001, that my country's conduct and altogether its direction, which I would say has been consistently downward these past two and some decades, is to be understood primarily as a case of collective psychology—social psychology might be the best term here. There are many events to be considered, but it is the underlying psychology that drives Americans in these events, and I urge we look to this so as to understand them. Since 2001 we have been a wounded, uncertain people. This psychological state simply cannot be left out of any consideration of American policies and politics so far in this century.

So I come to our topic this evening, and it extends vastly beyond the consequences of the 2001 attacks in New York and Washington. What America has been the whole of its existence, what the United States has been even before it was called the United States, has got to be understood first in terms of its

psychology. I am talking now about the shared presumption we commonly call American exceptionalism.

Richard Hofstadter, a noted and very fine historian during the postwar decades, once observed that America was less a nation than an ideology. It goes directly to my point. What has given America its distinct character for four centuries now has been what I call its exceptionalist consciousness, although we can do just as well following Hofstadter and call exceptionalism America's ideology.

Little that America has done, from the earliest settlements and the Quaker hangings in the late seventeenth century to its nineteenth century wars, expansions, and annexations, to its anti–Communist crusades in the last century, to Vietnam, and all the coups and interventions in the post–1945 decades: To grasp all of this fully we must see the underlying, driving psychology. I do not say this—and I must emphasize this point strongly—to discount the importance and force of politics and history, as one must never do. I say it because all of these events, disparate as they are as historical phenomena, arise from the same consciousness: They are all part of the same root phenomenon.

And all of this goes, it hardly bears mentioning, for all that we witness now: The cruelly inhumane proxy war in Ukraine, the dangerously provocative encirclement of China, America's unruly conduct in the Middle East, in Latin America—America's claim to exceptionalism lies behind all of this.

So we must remember our starting point: There are the politics of these events and there is the underlying psychology these events reflect.

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If there is a difference between our time and times previous on this question, I think it lies in this: Let's talk in terms of pre–2001 time and post–2001 time.

Since 2001 Americans have nursed a profound doubt, a subliminal, never-spoken-of suspicion that they actually have no claim to exceptionalism. This is

something new in the American story. As I have mentioned among you previously, those two attacks on American soil brought Americans face to face with the realities that they are as vulnerable to the might of others as anyone else, that they are not as previously assumed immune from the force of history, that they are as defenseless as anyone else against the ravages of time.

These doubts are unprecedented in American history and run very deep. They have their roots in the Vietnam era, and I will come to this shortly. For now I must quickly add that the effects of these doubts have not been as one might expect. Americans have not said to themselves since 2001, "We must think again. We must find a new idea of ourselves and our place in the world, a new idea of what we are supposed to do." No, Americans have done just the opposite: They have attempted to deny their doubts, to suffocate them as if under a pillow, by becoming more shrill and insistent in proclaiming their exceptionalism—and ever-bolder in their assertions of it in their conduct abroad.

The result is the dreadful mess we see when we look out our windows. One event at a time, we have been living through an ever-increasing global disorder, the source of which is none other than the nation that proclaims itself at every turn the advocate of what it calls "the rules-based order." I do not read confidence in this conduct so much as I read insecurity.

Considering the common American reaction to the 2001 tragedies, we are required to ask a very large question. Can America do without its exceptionalist consciousness? Or is this consciousness what is in fact indispensable to America? In other words, can there be an America without its idea of its exceptional status, or if we subtract it will America no longer cohere, no longer know itself, and so no longer be America?

If Hofstadter had it right when he said America is an ideology more than it is a nation, what happens when that ideology fails the people who invest in it?

It is a little unnerving to ask such questions, as I have an idea the answer could turn out to be the depressing one: No more exceptionalism, no more America in one or another fashion. But with this question in mind I would like to explore the matter of American exceptionalism with you this evening.

And then I propose to leap ahead of myself and my pessimistic view to consider briefly what an America without its exceptionalism, a post-exceptionalist America, this is to say, might be like on the assumption such an entity may be at all possible.

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We commonly locate the origins of America's self-image in the earliest settlers coming across the Atlantic from England. It was Winthrop, in his famous 1630 sermon, who gave us our "City on a Hill" and who proclaimed "the eyes of all people are upon us." But we have to look to the 18th and 19th centuries, as America made itself a nation, to grasp the exceptionalist notion in full. And immediately we find a confusion of meanings. To some, exceptionalism referred to the new nation's revolutionary history, its institutions, and its democratic ideals. But in the nation's early years, it was also counted exceptional simply for its abundant land and resources, with no ideational aspect to the idea.

De Tocqueville is often credited as the first to describe Americans as exceptional. But he was talking about, and I'll quote here, "their strictly Puritanical origin, their exclusively commercial habits, the fixedness of their minds upon purely practical objects." So it is a long journey from de Tocqueville's time to ours, exceptionalism having gone from simple material 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.

Here I will share a few historical curiosities on our way to understanding American exceptionalism as we have it today.

It was none other than Stalin who brought the term “American exceptionalism” into common use. This was in the late–1920s, when a faction of the American Communist Party advised Moscow that America’s abundance and the absence of clearly drawn class distinctions made it immune to the contradictions Marx saw in capitalism. Stalin was incensed: How dare those Americans stray from the orthodoxy by declaring their nation an exception to it? But amid the Soviet leader’s indignation, many American intellectuals considered his coinage an inspired summation of America’s history to date.

At the same time, W.E.B. Du Bois, the celebrated black historian and intellectual, emerged 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. His biographer called him one of “exceptionalism’s exceptions.”

Du Bois found the source of our modern idea of exceptionalism in the post-bellum decades leading up to the Spanish–American War, 1865 to 1898. He asserted that two visions of America emerged during that thirty-odd year period. In one, 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. Empire abroad, democracy at home: 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. There is never any combining empire and democracy, as we Americans now discover rather painfully. Du Bois considered the thought of the two together “the cant of exceptionalism,” in his biographer’s phrase, intended primarily to deflect the bitter realities of the Gilded Age and then the Great Depression.

In 1941, six years after Du Bois published these thoughts, Henry Luce declared the twentieth “the American century” in a now-famous *LIFE* magazine editorial.

Now we are getting to American exceptionalism as we have it today. America was, I will quote here, "the most powerful and vital nation in the world," the celebrated publisher crowed. 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."

Luce, without using the phrase, had neatly defined American exceptionalism in its 20th century version. And from his day to ours, that aspect of it we can consider religious or ideological has grown only more evident among many of its apostles.

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The American defeat in Vietnam in 1975 marks the moment when the character of American exceptionalism changed fundamentally. To put a complex matter simply, professions of American exceptionalism had theretofore been expressions of confidence, often obnoxious as in the case of Luce. After the rise of Saigon, as I like to put it, self-doubt began to supplant the old self-confidence. It was as if the floorboards were trembling beneath Americans' feet, and the idea of exceptionalism took on another complexion.

Ronald Reagan understood this. He had a very keen sense of the collective psychology. He understood that the injury would have to be salved if America was to carry on defending and extending its empire. If American exceptionalism had not previously been something between an ideology and a faith, or, I would say, a combination of both, Reagan set about making it one. So did he breathe extraordinary new life into the old credenda—notably in his famous references to Winthrop's "City on a Hill." He quoted the phrase many times, always incorrectly, from the eve of his victory over Jimmy Carter in 1980 to his farewell address nine years later.

I recall those years vividly. I detected a desperate insistence in the exaggerated, flag-waving patriotism that overcame Americans during the first decade after the

defeat in Southeast Asia. To me this turn in national sentiment demonstrated precisely what it was intended to refute: America was suddenly a nervous, uncertain nation.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of what Reagan did to counter this 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 most of it, that it was all right to pretend: All was affect and imagery. He licensed Americans to avoid facing the truth of defeat and failure and of 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.

This is the exceptionalism whose many destructive consequences we now witness. It is an ideology whose most peculiar feature is that it is subliminally understood to be exhausted and that it rests in large measure on denial. No American political figure would dare now to speak sensibly against the exceptionalist orthodoxy. This is ever more the case as the orthodoxy becomes more obviously hollow, more detached from perfectly discernible realities. The only alternative case here is Donald Trump. He is the first president in our modern history simply to shrug off the notion and survive the judgment. "I don't like the term," Trump said at a Texas campaign rally 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.

Trump's remark prompted a curious reaction among the liberal elites now in power. Jake Sullivan, a prominent adviser in the Obama administration and now Joe Biden's national security adviser, published an essay in 2019 that stands as indeed exceptional, if only for its ignorance. "This," meaning Trump's remark and a general decline in pubic faith in the creed, "calls for rescuing the idea of

American exceptionalism," Sullivan wrote, "from both its chest-thumping proponents and its cynical critics, and renewing it for the present time." He then unfurled, and I quote, "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."

I find this thought stunningly ill-considered. Exceptionalism is not an idea: It is a belief, and this cannot be resuscitated by way of rational thought no matter how acute the thinking. What I read in Sullivan's assertions is little more than cynicism of the same kind we saw in Reagan. He proposed to manipulate ideological belief as a means of controlling public opinion to revive domestic support for the conduct of the imperium abroad.

This is what exceptionalism has come to: It is nothing more than an instrument to be deployed as part of the larger propaganda apparatus. This is not to say it can be in any way dismissed. As I suggested earlier, exceptionalism when manipulated in these conditions—conditions of uncertainty and national self-doubt—is more dangerous and destructive than it would be otherwise for the simple reason the attendant desperation of the nation's leaders removes all limits on acceptable conduct.

I will assume we are all capable of making lists of the many appalling cases of American misconduct, taking whatever starting point one may choose. Here I want to turn briefly to another consequence of my country's exceptionalist consciousness.

Hannah Arendt published an essay in 1953 titled "Ideology and Terror," and it bears upon our concerns this evening. Ideologies, she wrote, "explain everything and every occurrence by deducing from it a single premise." She then picks apart the etymology of the term: "An ideology is quite literally what its name indicates: It is the *logic* of an *idea*." She later explains that she means the

internal logic of an idea that may not be at all logical outside of its own self-reference.

Arendt goes on to note the various effects of ideologies on their adherents. One of these is they replace thought with belief, so obviating the need for ideological believers to indulge in the act of thinking—to respond with rational judgment to events and circumstances. Another is the effect of isolation. Ideologies are in one dimension boundaries, and one stands on either side of these. Those inside these boundaries share a bond made of allegiances of which no one else can partake. Those outside these boundaries are simply excluded: They are Others. The implied separation is sometimes much more than psychological, but it is psychological before it is anything else.

I suppose in the middle we have to allow for "fellow travelers," as the old expression goes: Those who do not share the ideology but stand with those who do. And here I must be bluntly honest in saying I think of Europeans in this way. Setting this aside, it is easy to see what ideologues share with members of pre-modern tribes. In both cases there is the inside and the outside.

I mention Arendt's long essay and these few points in it to explain one of the more enduring consequences of the exceptionalist ideology for Americans. No one much talks or writes about it, but we have made ourselves a profoundly isolated people, a lonely people. This is perfectly evident on the ground, so to say, when we consider the extent to which America's foreign policies now raise objections around the world. A large majority of nations and most of the global population object to Washington's proxy war in Ukraine, to take a ready example.

But I have used the word "lonely" with intent. Americans are also isolated from others psychologically, and I would say this is also in direct consequence of their claim to be exceptional. Like all ideologues, and here I will make a generality I am prepared to defend, Americans, by and large, would much rather

believe than think. This in itself tends to leave American isolated, because he who believes but cannot think is incapable of relating to the world with what Fromm calls “spontaneity.” He is instead in the way of an automaton, and I take this term from Fromm, too. Anyone who has met an American of this kind, and it is not hard to do so, knows well that it is difficult to communicate with people who prefer belief to thought.

Our exceptionalism also serves as a confinement: We trap ourselves within a fantasy of eternal superiority and triumph. So we cannot hope to speak the same language as the rest of the world, and we don’t. We do not see events the same way. We do not react to events in the same way. We do not calculate the same paths forward.

In short, we neither understand nor are understood. This is what I mean when I say Americans are a lonely people. Luigi Barzini, the Italian journalist who was a careful student of the United States, published a book in 1953, the same year Arendt wrote her essay, called *Americans Are Alone in the World*. Barzini’s reference was to the singular responsibility that fell to Americans in consequence of the 1945 victories. But I read a certain prescience into Barzini’s book. He saw ahead of his time that we were destined—because of the position we suddenly occupied and the way we occupied it—to be off by ourselves in the postwar world—isolated, and as I say, lonely.

My point here is that if America’s claim to exceptionalism imposes burdens on the rest of the world, it imposes burdens on Americans, too.

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This brings me to the question I posed at the outset: Can America live without its claim to exceptionalism? What kind of nation would it be in such a case? Can we speak of a “post-exceptionalist America,” in other words? I do not think it is too soon to consider these questions, although I allow for those who can see no chance of such an eventuality.

Let me spend a few concluding moments explaining my views in this connection. In keeping with all I have said so far, any transformation into a post-exceptionalist America would have to begin with ordinary Americans—a critical mass, let us say—opening themselves to a break with history and so to the idea of another kind of nation. Our political thinkers, scholars, and policy planners—altogether our intellectual class—must similarly open themselves. I am saying here only what I said at the outset: If societies make individuals, the inverse is also true. Exceptionalism, while it invokes the providential hand—"the Great Œconomist," as they used to say in the 18th century—it is as much a manmade ideology as any other. What we have made we can unmake.

How given are Americans to this leap forward? Despite appearances from a distance, I think a good many Americans appear eager, if not desperate, for a transformation of this kind. For these many, it is a question not of repudiating national aspirations but of abandoning the mistaken course they have set us upon.

To return to Du Bois' thesis, this constituency now comes to understand that the exceptionalist notion of a virtuous empire and a thriving domestic polity has proven a disastrous delusion. Dominance abroad, in other words, must give way to democracy at home. Our political scene suggests very strongly that there is a mounting desire to accomplish this shift in national priorities.

America is now a house divided, if this is not evident even from an ocean away. What we need are leaders capable of bringing the nation along in a new direction. At present, there is much to suggest that seven decades of preeminence have left too many of our leaders incapable of anything that might pass as a reconstituted vision of the nation's future. They persist, instead, in the long-bankrupted pursuit of democracy and empire—the old, impossible dream.

We do not, in short have the leadership we need. But I do not think we are too far from seeing the kind of leaders we need appear. The time this will require

will prove agonizing, 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 former congresswoman from Hawaii, is but one example of this emergent cohort. One may not care for Donald Trump or for Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., but that is not my concern here. Whatever one thinks of them, they are trying to speak in a new political language—the post-exceptionalist language all American must learn. The common theme is plain: To remake American democracy and to abandon imperial aspirations are two halves of the same project.

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This is where we are now with regard to our exceptionalism, it seems to me. It is difficult to argue that we as a society are prepared for this moment. But it is nonetheless time—if, indeed, we are not already late—to make our leap into a post-exceptionalist awareness of ourselves and ourselves among others. It is time to leave something large and defining behind, to put the point another way.

There are sound reasons to assign our moment 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 us in the twenty-first. The near-chaos we are responsible for since the events of September 11, 2001—notably but not only in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria—is of an order the community of nations comes to find unacceptable.

I have argued for many years that parity between West and non–West is a twenty-first century imperative, as is the emergence of a multipolar world order. At the moment, American leaders are in denial of these realities. This can go on a very long time, being realistic, but it cannot go on forever: Sooner or later our purported leaders will have to accept these things.

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 such thinking.

And here I come to the essential motivation for Americans to make the leap into the future I urge, the *sine qua non* of it: It must first dawn on us that it is greatly, immeasurably to our advantage to embrace a post-exceptionalist idea of ourselves. This truth has not yet come to us; no leader has said this to us. 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?

Some years ago Bernd Ulrich, the noted German commentator, asked the most excellent question from my point of view. "Can America save itself?" Ulrich wondered in *Die Zeit*. It is precisely my question as I look toward a post-exceptionalist idea of America. This idea, indeed, was Ulrich's unstated topic.

"In principle, absolutely," he replied to his own question. "But certainly not with gradual changes," he then wrote, and I resume the quotation: "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."

I will leave the matter here this evening, but as I do I will share two concerns I have as I think about this large transformation. One, given the velocity with which America now ravages destructively around the world, will there be enough time to accomplish such a project before it is too late, too much damage done? Two, will others have enough patience to wait should we Americans determine to make such a transformation?

I wish I was not so uncertain of these things as I am. And it would be good to hear from you about these two worries of mine if you are inclined to share your thoughts.

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