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In Search of Monsters to Destroy? On The Liberal American Security Paradox And a Republican Way Out

Abstract: This article explores the dynamics between American modes of self-narration and patterns of foreign policy conduct. Pointing to the continual influence of the Puritan heritage and its notion of an exceptional American purpose, it joins with those who find American national identity a fabric articulated almost exclusively in what a choose to term a liberal and missionary vocabulary. In opposition to conventional assumption however, the article depicts exceptionalism and liberalism as highly contradictory ways of making - and making sense of - the world and America's place within it. Furthermore, it shows how such contradictions have repeatedly defined a set of highly inflexible and ultimately destructive dilemmas in American foreign policy. Yet the article concludes, America need not repeat itself without end. Nor need its escape be found in a refusal of its intellectual legacy: Turning to the decisionalist and pragmatic outlook of the Republic's founders, as well as to the vocabulary of American impulses presently echoing this, America may yeast from its past not only a more sophisticated alternative to rationalist liberalism, but also a way out of the liberal security-paradox.

Introduction: Achieving America I

Gatsby believed in the green light, the great orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter - tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further ... And one fine morning - / So we beat on, boat's against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past

F. Scott Fitzgerald¹

In his response to September 11th President Bush choose to transport an ambiguous signal. On the one hand, he spelled the dimensions of the conflict in the broadest terms possible. Not only was the Manhattan and Pentagon attacks directed at America. It was a strike against civilised life as such. And not only was it expressive of a terrorist organisation gone mad: It was but the latest voice from the choir of malice in the eternal struggle between “freedom and fear” – “the heir” as he put it “of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century”.² Yet against such apocalyptic phrasing, Bush simultaneously denied the hour as one of crisis, refusing to engage with a vocabulary of despair. “Great harm has been done to us,” he naturally lamented on the tragic events, but turning his gaze towards the future, he grasped the moment as one of “unique opportunity”³: “America ha[s] suffered great loss. But in our grief and anger we have found our mission and our moment...the advance of human freedom - the great achievement of our time, and the great hope of every time – now depends on us”.⁴

Such ambiguity and the indecisive oscillating between tragedy and triumph it describes is expressive of a recurring tendency in American politics. How to make sense of it? At a first encounter, one is tempted to adopt Richard Hofstadter’s brilliantly entertaining suggestion that American policy wears the proportions of the

¹ F. Scott Fitzgerald (1926): *The Great Gatsby*.

² President George W. Bush (2001b): *Freedom at War With Fear*. Address to Joint Congress and the American people, delivered at September 20, 2002. www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/print/20010920-8.html.

³ President George W. Bush (2002): *State of the Union Address*, delivered on January 29, 2002.

www.whitehouse.gov/2002/01/print/20020129-11.html.

⁴ Bush (2001b).

paranoid style - “systematized delusion of persecution and of one’s own greatness”⁵ - and indeed, the argument presented here fully supports the claim that central periods of American foreign policy debate has been defined by both “grandiose theories of conspiracy” as well as “righteous...moral indignation”.⁶ Yet, my effort will be to move beyond such ironies and portray a more profound link between the American articulation of national identity and political crisis. Making that move, I do not intend to reduce the Manhattan attacks to a small affair blown out of proportion for deranged or self-interested reasons. Surely, the post-11th of September America *does* suffer severe setbacks from the end of history recently declared. I do not deny that, but I want to suggest that if this is a time of crisis for the American nation, it is also a time where what constitutes American nationhood stands unusually clear. America, it must be remembered, is not a national imaginary defined in traditional territorial or organic terms. Rather, it is a *cultural* myth of consensus, constituted more by the idea of purpose, movement and overcoming – by the idea of being a “culture on an errand”⁷ as Sacvan Bercovitch puts it - than by any concrete notion of what such overcoming might amount to.⁸ As such, it has from its earliest Puritan beginning on relied upon adversity as an essential source of strength.⁹

To put the case pointedly, such dynamics of identity amount to what we might – echoing an image put forward by Richard Rorty –

⁵ Richard Hofstadter (1996 [1952]): *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Sacvan Bercovitch (1978): *The American Jeremiad*. Madison: Wisconsin University Press. p. 69.

⁸ Thus, Hans Morgenthau writes, “The United States was founded upon loyalty not to monarch or a piece of territory, but to purpose”. Hans Morgenthau (1982 [1960]): *The Purpose of American Politics*. Washington: University Press of America. pp. 55-56. David Campbell, observing from the perspective of rhetorics, states that “defined more by absence than by presence, America is peculiarly dependent on representational practices for its being. Arguably, more than any other state, the imprecise process of imagination is what constitutes American identity”. David Campbell (1998 [1992]): *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. p. 91. Likewise, Christopher Looby touches on a similar note when he argues that “the new nation’s self-image was characterised by its difference from a traditional (quasi-natural) conception of the nation”. Christopher Looby (1996): *Voicing America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 4.

⁹ Bercovitch (1978): p. 21.

capture as the American dilemma of *achieving* itself.¹⁰ This is part of all American political life, but nowhere does it appear as forcefully as in the American encounter with the world: How to solve the puzzle of *becoming* what is promised in the very name 'America', yet *remain* what gave rise to this promise in the first place? How to end the quest, yet maintain the identity of a conqueror? How, in short, to make the world over in the American image, yet stay an America unique? Such are the questions that haunts American foreign policy and in the light of these it appears less obvious, whether "the end of the end" of history should, after all, prove such an un-welcomed event in a country "conceived" as Henry Luce famously put it "in adventure and dedicated to the progress of man"¹¹: Dedication to progress implies, after all, a state of *unfulfillment*.

It is not the latest American expression of this dedication that concerns me here. Rather, the article will treat the current American policies against "the axis of evil" as reflective of more general narrative patterns and *it is the origins, effects and possible transformation of such patterns that is the object of study*. The argument made therefore falls in three parts. Initially, a historical ride is undertaken. This takes as its point of departure the rhetorics of the first New England puritans establishing what is arguably *the most fundamental* narrative of American identity: That of exceptionalism. Then, travelling three centuries, I move on to explore how exceptionalism has been wedded in the 20th century to a peculiarly progressivist version of social Darwinism that is most emblematically expressed in what I choose to term the narrative of Wilsonian liberalism.

This is a marriage often portrayed in harmonious terms, but turning the gaze from historical origins to current political consequences, the article proceeds to arrive at an opposite conclusion. "Can the United States be a crusader state and still remain the Promised Land"¹² a recent historiographer of American foreign relations has recently coined the dilemma, and crudely put the effort undertaken in the

¹⁰ Richard Rorty (1998): *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*. Harvard University Press.

¹¹ Henry Luce (1941) in *Life* Vol. 10, no. 7. p.

¹² Walter McDougall (1998): *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter With The World Since 1776*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. p. 5.

second section of the article, is to try and show why the answer to that question must necessarily be a schizoid one: America cannot, but it must. It cannot, because by crusading the world, making it over in the liberal American image, it simultaneously dissolves itself as the Promised Land. Yet it must, because without such crusading, it can no longer author itself as the Promised Land. Hence I suggest- taking a brief glance at the way in which this dilemma plays has played itself in the post-cold war period - America appears trapped to deny the wisdom authored in its oldest foreign policy legacy: That America, in John Adam's famous phrase "does not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy".¹³ Wedded to the Wilsonian creed, it seems bound to pursue new markets, missions and monsters in need of conversion.

Or does it? *Must* it? Is a nation that understands itself first and foremost as a promise, somehow destined to remain prophecy rather than achievement - doomed as Gatsby, the literary symbol of America *par excellence*, to be "born back ceaselessly into the past"? In the third and final section of the article I engage with this question of potential transformation, suggesting that America denounce the crude teleology of 20th century Wilsonianism and recasts instead its liberal ideals in the more temporal and modest vocabulary of its republican tradition. Is there room for such re-articulatory manoeuvres? Echoing recent redeemers of the American republican legacy I argue that there is, and thus that America need not, as David Harlan has put it, remain "a people blinded by birth".¹⁴

Before further proceedings however, a word of clarification: This article employs the concepts of "liberalism" and "republicanism" in highly specific modes, referring not to different political *ideologies*, but rather to social *ontologies*. More specifically, the labels denote contrasting conceptions of time and the notion of progress within it: Liberalism signifying a belief in universal reason and thus in history as teleological progression; republicanism a commitment to history as open-ended process. I acknowledge therefore, that many American liberals may not identify with the "liberalism", but rather with the "republicanism" of what follows. In fact, I find that many an

¹³ Ibid.: p. 36.

¹⁴ David Harlan (1991): "A People Blinded from Birth: American History According to Sacvan Bercovitch" in *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 78, No. 3.

American liberal falls in the latter category. What I am after here however, is not liberalism as the commitment to a specific set of values – indeed, republicanism as a political ideology shares similar inclinations. Rather, I am interested in that specific brand of liberal thought that conceives of the world in a teleological mode, and as a consequence hereof, holds its values in a largely un-reflected and non-negotiable manner. Conversely, republicanism will here be taken to mean that strand of American thought – or: Strand of liberal thought if one likes - that does not put its faith in teleology or universal reason, and hence holds its values in a more pragmatic, modest and ironic way. As such, I am interested in liberalism and republicanism as narratives on history and “America’s” being within it. Hence, before entering the universe of the Puritan settlers, a few comments on the nature and function of narrative is necessary.

Nation and Narrative

“Nations are made, not born. And they are made so ineluctably in language”.¹⁵ By now Christopher Looby’s statement sums up (more than) well-covered theoretical terrain and present purposes considered, the fruitfulness of exploring the link between social identity and political performance as well as the necessity of conveying such inquiry on the anti-essentialist¹⁶ terms of post-structural linguistics¹⁷ will simply be taken for granted.¹⁸ The question that concerns me here is thus not the meta-theoretical one of *whether* social collectives are narrated into being, but rather the

¹⁵ Looby (1996): p. 1.

¹⁶ I use employ this term in line with Richard Rorty’s Davidsonian understanding of it. See for instance Richard Rorty (1989): *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁷ My understanding of such an approach runs broadly along the lines of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s notion of post-structural inquiry as “discourse analysis”. See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985): *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London: Verso.

¹⁸ See for instance Jens Bartelson (1995): *A Genealogy of Sovereignty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Campbell (1998 [1992]); William Connolly (1991): *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*. Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press. Lene Hansen (1997): *Western Villians or Balkan Barbarism: Representations and Responsibility in the Debate over Bosnia*. Ph.d. diss., University of Copenhagen. Iver B. Neuman (1999): *Uses of The Other: The East in European Identity Formation*. Manchester: Manchester University Press; Erik Ringmar (1996): *Identity, Interest and Action: A Cultural Explanation of Sweden’s Intervention in the Thirty Year’s War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Edward Said (1985 [1974]): *Orientalism*. Hamondsworth: Penguin; Tzvetan Todorov (1992): *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*. New York: Harper Perennial.

praxeological one of *how* we may capture the productive forces by which they are so.

Taking a semantic approach to collective identities is to stress their story-like quality; their *narrative* nature.¹⁹ “Social collectives” Williams and Neumann write “are constructed, maintained and transformed through the telling of ‘constitutive stories’”²⁰ and as such they convey not only a set of Self/Other dichotomies, but much more extensively a complete teleology of what they are, where they are going, what kind of an environment they inhabit and how they came to live there in the first place. According to Paul Ricoeur, who has written extensively on the link between narrative and identity²¹, “[t]o be historical...an event must be more than a singular occurrence: it must be defined in terms of its contribution to the development of a plot” and along such lines of reasoning, for identities to be narrative in nature is to be in a sense, narratologies.²² I take this narratological character to have at least two functions. First of all, representations of what lies behind - what we might call *the retrospective function* of narrative - are necessarily teleological in character: When social agents re-tell the yesterdays they articulate themselves as part of a meaningful succession of events installing thereby a notion of time, agency and purpose. Secondly, such teleology is not merely something they construct to make sense of the *past*. They need it to inform choices on what kind of action may be pursued tomorrow. This, we might call *the prospective function* of historiography.

¹⁹ I acknowledge but choose to ignore the complex of authorship raised by the claim that nations are constituted through the telling of constitutive stories. Obviously, taken a narrative approach to collective identity poses a paradoxical dilemma between doer and deed: which of the two has primacy – what is the authoritative voice performing the founding act through which authority is established? However interesting this dilemma though, it does not seem relevant to the present study, since I am not concerned with the original founding but rather with the present interpretation of American identity. Hence, I will not further address it here.

²⁰ Iver B. Neumann & Williams, Michael C. (2000): “From Alliance to Security Community: NATO, Russia, and the Power of Identity” in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2. p. 362.

²¹ See for instance Paul Ricoeur (1988): “Narrative Identity” in David Wood (1991): *On Paul Ricoeur*. London: Routledge.

²² Paul Ricoeur (1981): *Hermeneutics and The Human Science: Essays on language, Action and Interpretation*. Paris: Cambridge University Press. p. 277; emphasis added.

Narratives are thus successive in quality, which is to say that they cumulate events to form a coherent sequel between today, yesterday and tomorrow. In other words, there is a *repetitive* element to narration: Individuals as well social collectives author internal coherence and external difference by rearticulating themselves as part of a successive social drama. Yet, it seems to me that we need to recognise how such repetition may perform two distinguishable although closely interrelated tasks; one concerning the repetition of a specific ritual *structure* (e.g. a specific chronology of events) the other concerning the repetition of a specific *content* (e.g. a specific notion of past and future). Or more pointedly: Perhaps we may distinguish between narratives that aim at constituting a specific *way* of being in time (Christian, liberal, muslim etc.) and narratives that aim only at constituting a particular *state* of being in time (backwards, progressed, ahead). Whereas the former demarcates the identity in question on spatial terms, the latter is a purely temporal way of installing difference. As will hopefully become clear, such a distinction is invaluable if we are to capture the logics at play in American identity constructions: At the most profound level “America” - unlike more organically defined communities - is a signifier differentiated from not by *what* but by *where* (temporally, not geographically) it is. In what follows, I return to the Puritan origins of this pattern, putting forward the argument that to the extent that America is presently defined by a sense of mission – by its duty to prosper and pioneer – Puritan exceptionalism is still the most fundamental narrative speaking America into being.

Narrating Exceptionalism/ Repeating Progress

“The whole destiny of America is contained in the first Puritan who landed on these shores”²³ Toqueville wrote in his classic work in America and if that is to claim exceptionalism as “America’s oldest political tradition”²⁴ it is a claim supported by the argument pursued here: That the New England colonies and their Puritan vision of America as a “City upon a Hill” instituted a mood and mode of

²³ Alexis de Toqueville (1992 [1935-40]): *Democracy in America*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

²⁴ McDougall (1997): p. 16.

narration that would prove productive in the creation of America long after this had lost its rigidly religious impulse.

The vehicle for transmitting this heritage and its restless mode of imagination was the distinctively inducing communicative tradition of the Puritan Jeremiad.²⁵ A ceremonial form named after the lamenting style of the biblical figure of Jeremiah, this served both to persuade and encourage the colonies to progress on the part of humanity, while at the same demarcating an exceptional and unique status of the New World as different from that broad category. As such, it taught a doctrine of *universality*, yet served to establish *particularity*. Facilitating a notion of the colonies as a chosen people, it initiated a story of cultural identity defined not by origins or destinations, but distinctively by the travel itself. Above all though the Jeremiad was a narrative which worked to install a sense of uniqueness through transformation and it is this sense of change - *not* the shifting objects of its attention - that concern us here. To grasp the terms and temper of this narrative and the dispositions it imbued in later conceptions of America we need to extract the *structure* of the exceptionalist narrative from its divergent *applications* and to develop a simple model of rhetorical composition that works across interpretative divisions. This is a task pioneered by Perry Miller in the 1930'ies and more recently expanded upon by Sacvan Bercovitch - a leading figure within current puritan studies - and in what follows I draw extensively on their work to highlight what is arguably the most fundamental aspect of the exceptionalist narrative: That for all its bleak despair the Jeremiad does not narrate either pessimism or regress, but transports in fact a message of

²⁵ Christopher Looby has extended this point to suggest, that the American political tradition is a distinctively *vocal* one: "precisely because the new nation's self-image was characterised by it's difference from a traditional (quasi-natural) conception of the nation, indeed by the conscious recognition of its historical contingency that was produced by the abrupt performativity of its inception, vocal utterances has served in telling instances, as a privileged figure for the making of the United States". Looby (1996): p. 4. That is, self-consciously aware of their own national constructedness, the American People has - since its very conception - longed for and cherished the physical experience of co-existent belonging to a "passionately attached, quasi-somatic nation". Ibid.: p. 5. For this reason, the political speech - or what Bercovitch echoing Puritan terminology names 'the political sermon' - is particularly central in an American context: it physically gathers the crowd, allows it to experience the same feelings and associations, and what is more, it brings to its listeners a sense of unity by giving them *one* common voice to lead, *one* shared vision of action and ideals to take on. Bercovitch (1978): p. xiv.

ultimate progress. Indeed, to the puritan – and later on American – mind, peril and progress are not contradictory but rather mutually reinforcing phenomena.

In terms of academic historiography however, the story of American exceptionalism begins earlier yet with the towering and still influential achievement of the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner and his notion of *The Frontier in American History* (1898).²⁶ Turner's conception of the "frontier" has been enormously influential on 20th century interpretations of American history²⁷ and the terminology he displayed – if cast in a more materialist vocabulary than the one adopted by later and more anthropological approaches - has close affinities with that of Puritan studies. A brief visit to the conceptual universe introduced by him is therefore called for. In Turner's materialist and functionalist launching of the exceptionalist argument, it was the distinct experience of encountering and subduing the uncivilized and partly virgin western continent that, over a span of two hundred years shaped the minds of inherently ordinary men into ones of productivity, courage and entrepreneurship. Becoming American Turner proposed, was a process that started not with exceptional *minds* but with exceptional *material circumstances*: An educational *process* with life at the frontier as a teacher, moulding the foreigner from immigrant into pioneer through the experience of advancing, transforming, civilizing and taming the vast continent towards the west. Hence, "to study this advance, the men who grew up under these conditions, and the political, economic and social results of it" was for Turner "to study the really American part of our history."²⁸

Obviously, such functionalist materialism produced in turn its own 'frontiers' and from the early fifties on American academia so to speak, turned Turner on his head: No longer was it frontier life that created American minds. Rather, it was American minds that imbued frontier life with the symbolics to be viewed as a "frontier" in the first place and exceptionalism thus transformed from being endorsed as a evaluative term "objectively" applied to the object of

27 Frederick Jackson Turner (1953 [1898]): *The Frontier in American History*. New York: Henry Holt & Company.

28 Ibid. p. 4.

study from the outside, to being viewed as a discourse springing from the *inside* of American history – an American *self*-evaluation. In theoretical terms, this meant shifting the focus of attention to the world of symbols and signs. In empirical ones, it meant returning to a historical period when aspects of the American mindset took shape: Alongside Frontier Studies, the discipline of Puritan Studies evolved.

Above all, it has been Perry Miller and his work on the Puritan *Errand into Wilderness*²⁹ (1953) that has set the tone of future inquiries within the field. Though re-invoking Turner's concept of wilderness, combining it with the notion of errand brought to it new dimensions. Through the lens of an exceptional American errand – a duty to mission into the unknown - the notion of wilderness was now transformed from being simply a physical piece of uncultivated territory to being a symbol of the untouched, the still not civilized – in other words, of the future. The significance of this dual connotation cannot be overstated, and Miller's concept of errand thus points to what was arguably the most important intellectual cargo brought to America: The confidence in history as a divinely authored script and the belief that the New World has been granted a unique role to play out within it. Already crossing the Atlantic, John Winthrop, religious leader of the small theocracy, inaugurated the theme, when he stressed the special relationship between God and his Puritan colonies. As he explained, their common enterprise was a figurative as well as a geographical journey, signifying not only their physical uprooting and replanting in American soil, but also – and more importantly - their entry “into covenant with God”³⁰. Of all the peoples of the world there was he declared, “a more near bond of marriage, between Him and us”,³¹ thus paralleling their departure from England to the Jewish exodus of the Old Testament. They were enacting prophecy, heralding paradise on earth by fulfilling the promise of a New Israel and in this lay the defining vision of their community: A dream and duty to agitate, live and fulfil a moral example. Engaging metaphor Winthrop preached to his fellow

²⁹ Miller's title recalls the early Puritan Jeremiad *Brief recognition of New England's Errand into Wilderness* held by Samuel Danforth – a religious leader of the Puritan colonies - in 1670 on an election-day.

³⁰ John Winthrop (1630): *A Model of Christian Charity*.

³¹ *Ibid.*: p. 14.

travellers: "We shall be as a city upon a Hill. The eyes of all people are upon us".³²

According to Perry Miller, Winthrop's dream was one soon to be disappointed. Ingratitude, degeneration, the succumbing to pleasure and profits - these are the sins that he finds the Puritan sermon to lament - and so abundantly that he concludes that "in the whole literature of the world, including the satirist of imperial Rome, there is hardly such another uninhibited and unrelenting documentation of a people's descent into corruption".³³ Yet he insisted, these documentations of descent reflected more than regret and disillusion. As its European counterpart Miller proposed, the American Jeremiad was a narrative of human sin and felony, but in the New England variant a different lesson - one pulling, despite of human limitations, in the direction of progress - was drawn from such imperfections. Rather than confirming - as the European tradition most often did - human history as stasis the colonists managed to take from failure a reason to intensify ones efforts, and from adversity encouragement to persist. Hence, Miller concludes:

"the total effect, curiously enough, is not all that depressing: you come to the paradoxical realization, that they do not bespeak a despairing mind...what ever they may signify in the realm of theology, in that of psychology they are purgations of the soul; they do not discourage but actually encourage the community to persist in its heinous conduct."³⁴

It is this surprising relationship between destitution and confidence that Sacvan Bercovitch, writing a generation later, helps us go somewhat further in understanding³⁵, reconciling what to Miller

³² Quoted from Campbell; 1998: p. 121.

³³ Perry Miller (1958 [1953]): *Errand into the Wilderness*. Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press. p. 13.

³⁴ Perry Miller (1939): *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*. New York: The MacMillan Company. p. 8 ff.

³⁵ To what extent Miller forestalled the conclusions reached by Bercovitch is a matter of some dispute. For his own part, Bercovitch has been keen to reject participation in the "totem feast" following Miller's death, yet implicitly his writings oppose Miller. According to David Harlanwhile Edmund S. Morgan chooses another extreme suggesting that "what Bercovitch has done is to stretch our minds a bit further in the direction that Miller bent them". Edmund S. Morgan (1979): "The Chosen People" in *New York Review of Books*, July 19th. p. 33.

remained a puzzling set of contradicting dualities in one overarching universe of ambiguities. Like Miller, Bercovitch too finds the Jeremiad a ritual of inquiry into the darkness of human depravation. "We never looked for such days in New England" he notes a Jeremiad from 1636 to remark, and moves on to stress its apparently gloomy continuation "are all [God's] kindnesses forgotten? All your promises forgotten?"³⁶ Certainly, "the doctrines of the fall of man, of sin, of salvation, pre-destination, election and conversion were their meat and drink"³⁷ but as Bercovitch points out, this Puritan diet sustained a teleological – not a regressive – narrative of the world. In fact, he asserts, it is confident teleology that is the most profound message transported in all of puritan life:

"Miller rightly called the New England Jeremiad Americas first distinctive literary genre; its distinctiveness, however, lies not in the vehemence of its complaint but in precisely the reverse. The essence of the sermon... is its unshakeable optimism".³⁸

How does Bercovitch reach this seemingly paradoxical conclusion? Starting from the radical assumption that all elements of the Puritan vocabulary is to taken quite literally – that metaphors such as "new Israel" are to the Puritan mind not metaphors but certain truths - Bercovitch suggests a more reading of the Jeremiad more flexible, dynamic and ambiguous terms than we might at a first encounter allow for.³⁹ Rather than thinking in terms *either/or* he asserts, our interpretation of the Puritan errand ought to allow for a *both/and*.⁴⁰ If we interpret the Jeremiad through the European intellectual universe of binary oppositions: Worldly vs. clerical, body vs. spirit, temporality vs. eternity we will oppositions to be *contradiction*. But what if we read the Jeremiad as *transcending* such splits: As a narrative that finds in adversity verification – not rejection – of its divinely authored cause. What if the Puritans did not think in terms of either being successful or being damned? If they firmly and unshakeably believed that they were saved? Might they then not interpret adversity as verification of God's testing, rather than as his rejecting

³⁶ Bercovitch: (1978): p. 6.

³⁷ Daniel J. Boorstein (1958): *The Americans: The Colonial Experience*. New York: Vintage Books. p. 5.

³⁸ Bercovitch (1978): p. 7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*: p. 12.

⁴⁰ Tjalve (1999): p. 15ff.

them? And might their despairing vocabulary then not induce rather than discourage their errand? “Prophesie is Historie antedated; and Historie is Post-dated Prophesie” Bercovitch quotes the Puritan clergy Nicholas Noyes for stating, thus presenting a typical example of how the Puritan outlook – utterly convinced of its own place in divine history – simply rejected the world/heaven divide.⁴¹ To Bercovitch then, the ultimate sound of the Puritan mood is one of optimism: No matter what sins may find their way to the American province, they cannot change the course of what is already decided to be. There is no boundary between God’s world and America’s: In the City upon a Hill it all comes together. Likewise, failure and success are not contradictions but rather phenomena that condition and reciprocally confirm each other.⁴² Hence, where in Europe, the Jeremiad like all traditionalist forms of ritual “used fear and trembling to teach acceptance of fixed social norms” the American Jeremiad went much further madding “anxiety its end as well as its means. Crisis was the social norm it sought to inculcate...denouncing or affirming, [it’s] vision fed on the distance between promise and fact”.⁴³ Accordingly, Bercovitch singles out for us, the American sense of self has “blossomed with every major crisis of seventeenth-century New England...From the very beginning the Puritan Jeremiahs had drawn their inspiration from insecurity; by the 1670’s crisis had become their source of strength”.⁴⁴

What general characteristics of the exceptionalist narrative may we extract from this? With Bercovitch, I believe that we may extend the Jeremiad beyond its religious context and view it as a mode of communication that survived both the Puritan theocracy and the fading away of New England’s national influence. Gradually the Jeremiad was emptied for religious content and by the turn of the 18th century it had become more or less a narrative that constituted identity by authoring “the American present as a movement from promise to fulfilment” and translating “fulfilment from its meaning within the closed system of sacred history, into a metaphor for

⁴¹ Quoted from Bercovitch (1978): p. 15.

⁴² Ibid.: p. 23.

⁴³ Bercovitch (1978): p. 23.

⁴⁴ Ibid.: p. 62.

limitless human progress”.⁴⁵ Two conclusions may then be inferred. First of all, it is important to understand the radical nature of the exceptionalist idea of divine blessing. More than mere rhetorics is at stake to the American – the new World *is* the promised land – and only if we grasp this literalness are we able to comprehend how that which seems to the outsider obviously contradictory is in America’s own self-images a harmonious and meaningful whole: Whatever gaps between promise and fact may exist, these are obstacles to be overcome - conflicts inciting self-improvement - and never a stumbling block feeding hesitance or self-doubt. Secondly, and connected to this, it is central to understand how “empty” the exceptionalist narrative really is. Freed from its Puritan origin, it is a story about “moving on” and nothing more.

This leads us back to Turner and the notion of an American frontier. To claim that voicing America is dependent upon the articulation of obstacles is to claim that America relies upon the invocation of a frontier and in a sense this is Turner’s point exactly. He is halfway there when he writes of the American intellectual trait that “movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise”.⁴⁶ To my mind, this brings Turner very close to capturing the most profound significance of what is stake here. In a capturing image he states that it is “this perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life” that “furnish the forces dominating American character”.⁴⁷ Turner argues that America needs a westward frontier at which it can be “continually beginning over again”.⁴⁸ I argue that in American political narrative a frontier at which America can perennially be reborn must be invented.

⁴⁵ Ibid. Furthermore, this point – that the Jeremiad narrative of progress still informs American self-conceptions today – resonates with Charles Capper & David Hollinger when they stress that the Puritan heritage produced “a complex synthesis of supernatural, rationalistic, and emotional elements that have remained...a powerful influence in American intellectual life down to the 20th century”. Charles Capper & David Hollinger (1989): *The American Intellectual Tradition*. Vol. I. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 3.

⁴⁶ Turner (1953 [1898]): p. 37.

⁴⁷ Ibid.: p. 2.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Returning to my initial proposal of distinguishing between spatial and temporal modes of narratives identity then, we can place the *plot* of the exceptional narrative within the latter: To constitute America as a special entity is stress its otherness in terms of *time* – America is different because it is advanced, ahead - avant-garde. Of what is to be achieved by such advancement however, the secularised Jeremiad has little to say and in the centuries that followed, the exceptionalist narrative therefore lent itself to a plurality of purposes. In the 20th century one voice has seemed to prosper more than others however - that of liberalism – and before grappling further with the political effects and implications exceptionalism then, we need to take a closer look at this. Unlike the exceptionalist narrative namely, this is a storyline not of difference, but of sameness, and not of endless advance but of once and for all transformation. It is, in short, a story of spatial rather than temporal progress and thus ultimately a narrative of the *end* of history.

Narrating Liberalism/Completing History

America was in the words of Alexis de Tocqueville “born free without having to become so”.⁴⁹ Perhaps liberalism then, is as old an American tradition as exceptionalism. Be this true however, it is not a tradition as self-aware and distinct as exceptionalism. American liberalism does not travel by a common vehicle of communication: It has no equivalent to the Jeremiad of exceptionalism. One might say that liberalism is *more a mood than a mode of communication*. Yet, to speak of a liberal mood is to speak of a specific perception of history and America’s place and part within it and it is this narrative and the way that it has been voiced in the 20th century that I am after here. In broad terms this narrative authors an almost Darwinist ontology of social life as cultural competition – the “fittest” ideas survive – and finds the advance and ultimate victory of American culture to be the natural and pre-destined winner of the race: If only informed and unrestrained reason is allowed to rule, surely the liberal agenda will appear the most appealing to everyone, and its universal establishment be guaranteed. As such, the liberal narrative is one of the timeless, the universal and the general.

⁴⁹ Toqueville, Alexis de (1992 [1935-40]): *Democracy in America*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

These are traits that may characterize western liberalism as such, yet they are particularly strong and unequivocal in an American context: Combining laissez-faire rationalism – let ideas float freely on the intellectual market, and progress is bound to prevail - with exceptionalist millennialism, liberal discourse has from its earliest days in the New World taken on a messianist sound exceeding the already extensive parochialism and self-assuredness characteristic of European modernity. Herman Melville, writing in the mid-19th century spirit of manifest destiny,⁵⁰ provides an early example of how puritan and liberal imagination has played out this peculiar blend in the process of American nation-building:

And we are the peculiar, chosen people - the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of liberties of the world...We are the pioneers of the world, the advance guard sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours. And let us always remember with ourselves, almost for the first time in the history of earth, natural selfishness is unbounded philanthropy; for we cannot do a good to America but we give alms to the world.⁵¹

Obviously the mixture of religious and liberal discourse is as old as the republic. Already the founding fathers engaged with it, when they declared as self-evident “that all men are created equal” as well as “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights”.⁵² Still, though millennial trends were always present, the early American mind was one less prone to unhesitant buoyancy and less convinced of the virtues - indeed the reality – of human reason. It

⁵⁰ The term manifest destiny was coined in 1845 by John I. Sullivan when he wrote in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* that the American expansion westwards was the ‘fulfilment of our manifest destiny’. The old classics on this central American foreign policy doctrine counts Albert K. Weinberg (1935): *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History*; Bernard Augustine De Voto (1943/2000): *The Year of Decision: 1846*. St. Martin’s Press; Norman Graebner (1955): *Empire on The Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion* and William H. Goetzmann (1966): *When The Eagle Screamed: The Romantic Horizon in American Diplomacy*. University of Oklahoma Press. Among the major new books are Anders Stephanson (1995): *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and The Empire of Right* and Sam W. Haynes & Christopher Morris (Ed.)(1998): *Manifest Destiny and Empire: American Antebellum Expansionism*. Texas A & M University Press.

⁵¹ Herman Melville (1850): *White-Jacket: Or, The World in War-Of-Man*.

⁵² *The Declaration of Independence of the Thirteen Colonies* (1776): www.law.indiana.edu/uslawdocs/declaration.html

was thus also one less prone to active missionary adventures. During the 19th century a plurality of voices therefore battled to win as the ultimate victors of what America's exceptional destiny to lead might be about and though the voice speaking on behalf of individual freedom and entrepreneurship was always there, not until the early 20th century did it gain the rationalist fervour and almost scientific self-assurance characteristic of later American liberalism. When it did, it did so in through a curious mix of Darwinist and progressivist ideas: in America, the conservative conclusions most naturally drawn from a Darwinist ontology was stretched to fit a more innovative spirit "confusing" as Richard Hofstadter points out "evolution with progress"⁵³ and legitimising American universalism as the natural result of the competition between cultural species. The early 20th century was thus the moment when a self-assured liberalism turned reluctantly international, abandoning the idea of serving as a passive beacon, and taking on itself a more active function as the redeemer of human freedom. Albert J. Beveridge reflected the progressivist mood perfectly when he stated that "It is a glorious future God has bestowed upon his Chosen People...we cannot fly from our world duties; it is ours to execute the purposes of our fate that has driven us to be greater than our small intentions. We cannot retreat from any soil where providence has unfurled our banner".⁵⁴

What has that then meant to a 20th century American liberal mind – to "execute the purposes of our fate"? First of all, it has meant something very literal. From the very first decades of the century freedom – the now absolute ideal of American political discourse - was cast in highly tangible terms and linked to straightforward privileges such as freedom of speech, religion and above prosperity. It is quite telling that the biggest bestseller of the early progressive movement – nicely entitled *The Promise of American life* – dreamt not of the extension of cultural, political or personal joy, but rather reductively of the plenty of coin. "The American" it foretold "conceives the better future which awaits himself and other men in

⁵³ Richard Hofstadter (1971 [1962]): *The American Political Tradition*. London: Jonathan Cape. For a discussion of Darwinism in American intellectual thought see Hofstadter, Richard (1955 [1944]): *Social Darwinism in American Thought*. Boston: Beacon.

⁵⁴ Quoted from George Harmon Knoles (1967): *The Responsibilities of Power: Sources in American History*. New York: The Free Press.

America as fundamentally a future in which economic prosperity will be still more abundant".⁵⁵ What is important about this is not so much the materialism embraced but rather the mindset that such materialism reflects: To the 20th century American liberal freedom can be boiled down to a black and white matter of have or have not, is or is not. It can in short be measured, counted and quantified. Not only did Wilsonian liberalism then deliver substance to the elusive dream of the Jeremiad yearning. Such aspirations also defined an unusually – and as we shall see problematically - clear and finite target for its longings: Liberal, capitalist democracy.

Secondly, and closely related to such reductionism, the progressivists put a strong missionary zeal into the notion of “executing” an American “fate”: After all, if freedom was such an unambiguous matter – the realization simply of a right to vote and a right to property – and if this was how reasonable people everywhere on the globe ought naturally to conceive of it, was active democracy-promotion then not merely a matter of helping on their way, processes already destined to succeed? Obviously, this deeply seated American suspicion towards anything that wears the air of ideology implies that there is an *alternative* to ideology - a platform outside of history upon which we may found our policies. Recall for instance Melville’s statement that one is a “political pagan” if one does not subscribe to “the ark of liberties” - that is, to the liberal values of individual freedom. Such subscription is not political - it is a natural and logical part of being human - of being civilised. Similarly, Wilson, speaking on behalf “liberals and friends of humanity in every nation” argued on American democracy promotion that the principles she demanded were not simply American principles “but the principles and policies of forward-looking men everywhere, of every modern nation, every enlightened community”. To him and to his century American principles has been “the principles of mankind” and as such they “must prevail”.⁵⁶ How can such a social ontology but produce a zealous crusadism and a lack of reflection upon ones own imperfections? After all, “the settlement of the ultimate moral

⁵⁵ Herbert Croly (1909): *The Promise of American Life*. New York: The MacMillan Company.

⁵⁶ Wilson, Woodrow (1917): “Peace without Victory” address to congress, January 22, 1917 in George Harmon Knoles (1967): *The Responsibilities of Power 1900 1929: Sources in American History*. New York: The Free Press. p. 215.

question is” as Hartz points out “the end of speculation upon it”⁵⁷ for “only when you take your ethics for granted that all problems emerge as problems of technique”.⁵⁸ Accordingly the moral question in American political discourse has been lifted out of the political realm and appeared instead as a practical one of *engineering*. Consider for instance Woodrow Wilson’s emblematic definition of what “freedom” – the core value, the end destination and ultimate vision of the liberal narrative – adds up to: “Human freedom consists in *the perfect adjustment* of human interest and human activities and human energies”.⁵⁹

The quote reveals the fundamental and – unsurprisingly – universalist origins of the Wilsonian perspective: If we could just rid ourselves of cultural and historical circumstance we would all want the same thing: Peace, prosperity and autonomy (or the American version would probably sound: A car, a gun and a television). In a roundabout but very telling way the rejection of the very term “liberalism” in America is expressive of such parochial and universalist inclinations. America, as Louis Hartz has argued, may arguably be said to have experienced an “inverted Trotskyite law of combined development”, skipping the stage of feudalism and moving directly to a democratically informed societal structure.⁶⁰ In his view therefore, it was a nation conceived blind – born ignorant to its own particularism. A thoroughly Lockean society it has not developed the political diversity to make it recognize its own values for what they are - values – and thus, it has developed a belief in non-value-based knowledge, politics and progress.⁶¹ Hence,

⁵⁷ Louis Hartz (1955): *The Liberal Tradition in America*. New York: Hartcourt, Brace and Company. p. 10.

⁵⁸ Hartz (1955): 10.

⁵⁹ Woodrow Wilson (1912): “The liberation of a People’s Vital Energies” in George Harmon Knoles (1967): *The Responsibilities of Power 1900 1929: Sources in American History*. New York: The Free Press. p. 157. My italics.

⁶⁰ Hartz (1955): p. 3.

⁶¹ To Hartz, even the Civil War does not shatter this image of consensus. As he explains: ‘The South...has been the part of America closest to Old World Europe, but it has never really *been* Europe. It has been an alien child in a liberal family, tortured and confused, driven to a fantasy life which, instead of disproving the power of Locke in America, portrays more poignantly than anything else the tyranny he has had’. Ibid.: p. 8.

“liberalism” has worn too much the air of leftism⁶², and what is so bad about this is not so much the “leftish” part as it is the ‘ism’. Political ‘isms’ smell of ideology and ideology of something too totalitarian to respect the individual and its rights. Echoing George Orwell, America’s political tradition - from the Jeffersonian dislike of central government to the anarchism of national poet and hero Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) - seems to whisper: “Programs means pogroms”.⁶³ Ironically then, liberalism has been “a stranger in the land of its fullest realization”.⁶⁴

What are the narrative characteristics of this parochialism? I believe the narrative of Wilsonian liberalism to display at least two important aspects. First of all, blinded to its own particularism and hence fallibility it offers merely a spatial notion of progress and as such it proposes the possibility of putting history to an end: To the rationalist liberal progress is but the “unfolding of the millennial seed, rather than a process of historical change”.⁶⁵ Hence, progress can be thought of only along spatial lines of expanding the liberal creed abroad, not in temporal ones of renewing or rethinking it at home, reducing thereby history and America’s task within it to a matter of “resolv[ing] institutional questions” as Bonnie Honig has put it and “get politics over and done with”.⁶⁶ Within this narrative therefore, the day will come where *America no longer proceeds*. One day, the mission of extending liberal ideals will have been completed and nothing but everyday adjustments remains. Wilson – expressive of the teleological temper inherent to rationalist liberalism - explicitly prophesied this development when he claimed that “The end, whether it comes soon or late, is quite certain to be always the same. In one nation in one form, in another in another, but everywhere where conviction is awakened and serious purpose results from it, this at least happens: That the people's leaders will

⁶² In post-World War Two America Anthony Arblaster argues, the term “liberal” has been taken as far as to equate communism. As he parodies the American logic, “a liberal is only a hop, skip and a jump from a Communist. A communist starts as a liberal”. Anthony Arblaster (1984): *The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism*. Blackwell. p. 315.

⁶³ Arblaster (1984): 300.

⁶⁴ Hartz (1955): p. 10-11.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*: p. 23.

⁶⁶ Bonnie Honig (1993): *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. p. 2.

themselves take control of the government”.⁶⁷ Secondly, and as a consequence hereof, the narrative of liberalism is thus also a story of sameness: Of an *America not different from but inherently similar* to every other nation. Or rather, an America not qualitatively but merely quantitatively different from other nations. An America *more* liberal.

Only to a certain extent then, does the narrative of Wilsonian rationalism reify and work *with* the narrative of exceptionalism. Delivering an answer as to where and why America is on its errand, rationalist liberalism succeeds in providing purpose and content to the modern American jeremiad. Doing so almost too successfully however, it simultaneously fails to keep the condition for this – the eternal return of history – alive. Constituting an America among potential equals and a world where history may be put to an end it has thus created a dilemma reflected in most of America’s 20th century policies, but increasingly obvious in its post-cold war approach: How may an America fundamentally dependent on the need to narrate itself as a missionary – as a culture on an errand – perform the acts of its (re)constitution in a universe that views politics is “over and done with” at home, without turning to invent challenges abroad? It is with this dilemma that the following section seeks to engage.

Grasping the Liberal/Exceptionalist Security Paradox

There is an intriguing quality to American notions of history. As both the exceptionalist and the liberalist narrative are expressive of, American identity was imbued at its inception with a specifically dynamic understanding of time and indeed, the liberal re-articulation of exceptionalism only seems to push its progressive aspects even further.⁶⁸ Yet as we have seen, any true sense of progression – of real historicity – is at a closer glance absent in both the exceptionalist and the liberal narrative. In the case of rationalist liberalism, progress is only a once and for all step forward into the future after which no real changes will occur. It is progress only in

⁶⁷ Quoted from Weber (1995): p. 85.

⁶⁸ As Dorothy Ross points out American “liberal history located the American ideal more fully in the future than in the past, and made achievement of the future into the distinctive American task”. Dorothy Ross (1991): *The Origins Of American Social Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 150.

the sense of “quantitative multiplication and elaboration of founding institutions, not a process of qualitative change”.⁶⁹ As for exceptionalism it is not really about progress at all since it forms but an endless series of departures without ever truly arriving. Whereas liberalism views progress as a predefined and definite move from past to future after which history as such will be over, exceptionalism conceives of it as an eternal and hence repetitive effort made in between these. Liberalism wants history to end. Exceptionalism cannot truly make it begin.

As might be clear already then, the liberal and the exceptionalist conception of history are not all that much in harmony. As long as the liberal future is not yet reached though, all is well: Exceptionalism is the tale and liberalism the cause. America is different because it is on an errand for freedom. Once the liberal end is established however, exceptionalism becomes an impossible narrative to voice. To understand this, we need to recall the distinction made earlier about structure and content. Whereas liberalism is a story about going *somewhere*, and a firm belief that we will indeed arrive, exceptionalism is a tale only of movement and not its particular direction. In short: Liberalism narrates *content*. Exceptionalism only reproduces a certain rhetoric *structure*. One might say that liberalism is a story about a certain *way* of being whereas exceptionalism tells of a particular *state* of being. This is fine as long as everyone are not yet liberalised. But once they are, the two narratives moves from cooperation to contradiction. Now which of the two are the stronger? As already indicated, I believe the exceptionalist narrative to play the more constitutive role - not only because of the powerfulness of the exceptionalist narrative, but also because of the shortcomings of the liberal narrative as a demarcator of a national and hence distinct identity. In the long run, liberalism cannot do the differentiating work alone. It may for a while found national *particularity* on a mission to extend oneself into *universality*. But what happens once the relevance of that mission becomes more complicated to narrate? Once the liberal project appears in large part accomplished?

Obviously, there are no decisive answers to such a question, but to judge from ten years of post-cold war history it appears that denying

⁶⁹ Ibid.: p. 26.

the accomplishment – stressing how backward, how uncivilised and in need of redemption this world still is – is a tempting solution to an American mind in need of a future. That an America narrating itself along exceptionalist lines may very well always be inclined to create for itself a certain purpose in the world – and hence to search for and invent battles of good and evil – is one thing. But combining such inclinations with a rationalist liberal belief in the clear-cut nature of such battles as well as an unshakeable faith in the possibility of overcoming such divides – and having already overcome them at home - is another. It seems at least that the latter, with its finite notion of history and its spatial notion of progress, tends to cast the former in the most metaphysic and least self-reflective terms possible. Indeed, it seems to push America towards the logic of what the Copenhagen school would phrase as processes of securitization.⁷⁰ And this is the tragedy: For all its yearning towards progress, accomplishment – fulfilment - the current mix of American narratives does not allow for America to enjoy peace. It may progress from conflict to conflict, but the qualitative leap from conflict to definitive peace its current mode of self-narration does not allow it to make.

Viewed in this light, we may then begin to view the recurring articulation of grand challenges on behalf of humankind characteristic of American 20th century foreign policy in a new light. Clearly, the rhetorical wrapping of America's participation in the first and the second world is an obvious place to look for the identity-logics spelled out here: In both wars, the American identity as the champion of liberty for all was firmly consolidated. The problem is that such rhetorics came back with a vengeance: A war to end all wars may be good news to some, but not to those who live to fight them. As such, the Cold war is also an obvious product of the American urge to voice itself as a redeemer nation: Though clearly not intentionally constructed to create a space for such redemption, once rolling it did nevertheless offer such a space, fuelling both an American sense of self and of destination. It is equally clear then,

⁷⁰ According to the Copenhagen School securitization is a performance whose distinguishing feature is a specific “rhetorical structure”. This structure requires that an “argument of survival” (“this is a threat against our very existence”) is made, lifting the issue above the rules of “normal” politics (therefore, we have no choice but to take extra-ordinary measures in hand’). Ole Wæver (1997): *Concepts of Security*. Copenhagen: Institute of Political Science, University of Copenhagen. p. 16.

that a post-cold war world is not an easy one for the redeemer nation to carve out a space for itself within. In fact, it is one in which it takes considerable political and rhetorical skill to manoeuvre in. On the one hand, the image of potential conflict must be kept alive. On the other, the belief in America's ability – indeed destiny – to overcome such conflict must be kept open.

One recent example of a post-cold war political strategy that has managed to do just that, is the 21st century vision of a futuristic missile defence against vile and wicked opponents. This vision was presented most elaborately in the Bush's 1999 presidential campaign, where – coming from the conservative end of the liberal spectrum – he succeeded in simultaneously narrating the world as both stasis and progress; both conflict and potential peace. Obviously, the starting point in every speech was exceptionalism – America as the culture on an errand for humanity. "This nation" Bush put it "is chosen by God and commissioned by history to be a model to the world of justice and inclusion and diversity without division"⁷¹ thus echoing four centuries of Puritan rhetoric. At a first glance, it seemed that this was all there was to the Bush-worldview – the exceptionalist belief in America's calling and the liberal theme of American values of freedom and diversity as universal. Indeed, Bush explicitly repeated the Wilsonian/Darwinist belief in the spread of freedom as a natural and inevitable survival of the fittest societal model. "We believe with George Washington" his version of this progressivist narrative sounded, "that liberty, when it begins to take root, is a plant of rapid growth. And we firmly believe our nation is on the right side of history - the side of man's dignity and God's justice".⁷² In other words: America is not a particular but a universal – we all want the American way and sooner or later we get it. Alongside this narrative of progress and harmony however, a quite contrary story was voiced – one in which the end of difference and conflict seem less likely. According to this story, the post-cold war world "is a world of hard choices and new tasks. A world of terror and missiles and madmen."⁷³ This is no universe of harmony or

⁷¹ Bush: (2000): Remarks at the Simon Wiesenthal Centre. <http://www.georgebush.com//speeches/>

⁷² Bush: (1999b). "A Distinctly American Internationalism". <http://www.georgebush.com//speeches/>

⁷³ Bush: (1999a): "A Period of Consequences". <http://www.georgebush.com//speeches/>

progress: In this world repetition is the rule. And in this world, harmony or peace does not arrive by necessity. Their establishment takes decision, and effort: “Peace is not ordained, it is earned. It is not a harbour where we rest, it is a voyage we must chart. Even in this time of hope and confidence, we can see the signs of uncertainty”.⁷⁴ How can this possibly be translated into an American Jeremiad of certain victory and definite progress? The republican answer is a clever one: *Technology* will provide the *teleology*. Through technology namely, the step from an insecure present to a secure future may be taken. The possibility of progress is thus re-established and the role of America as the champion of such progress is re-installed. All it takes the republican vision pledges, is that America “move[s] beyond marginal improvements” and “use[s] this window of opportunity to skip a generation of technology”.⁷⁵ That window of course, is the missile defence.

Out of such apparent stasis then, the republican vision of the post-cold war world has been able to create a typical American jeremiad – a promise of things to come, and an America always ahead. Once more, adversity – now the threat from the “rogue” parts of the world – has been used as an occasion for optimism rather than hopelessness. Or to recall Turner: Once more demarcation lines – now between a civilised we and a “mad” other – are used as an opportunity to re-invoke the frontier-mythology and recreate a space, in which America may perennially be reborn.

Moving from the missile defence to the latest expression – the Bush-rhetoric against evil and terrorism - the narrative marriage sketched and the dilemmas stemming becomes equally visible. Here as well, the reality of conflict and evil seems strangely welcomed rather than bemoaned. And here as well, conflict is used as a way to re-open an otherwise sleeping history, re-installing a sense of advance and destination. In fact, all of the official post-11th of September speeches transports - despite the excessive use of terms such as tragedy, adversity, sorrow, war, grief and anger – a message of triumph rather than tragedy: The terrorist attacks do not raise fears, as much thrill expectations. Likewise, the future “war against terrorism” is not one to regret, but rather one to cherish, for it offers

⁷⁴ Bush (1999 a).

⁷⁵ Bush; (1999a).

the nation, a “unique role in history”.⁷⁶ Though naturally lamenting the loss of American lives, the 11th of September is hence portrayed within a self-assured American discourse as “a unique opportunity” to embrace the “privilege to fight freedoms cause”.⁷⁷ Considering the exceptionalist-liberal creed then, it becomes distinctively less puzzling why Bush signals the conflict to be of universal dimensions – nothing less than “a decisive decade in the history of freedom”⁷⁸ - yet takes from this not anxiety, but optimism, not disappointment, but encouragement. Once again the Jeremiad logic is induced: That adversity reveals merely God’s closer standing to the American nation, that it reflects but his continual testing and thus confirms rather than contradicts his closer standing to his chosen people. As in earlier day Jeremiads, the articulation of the City Upon a Hill still feeds on the distance between promise and fact, for as Bush explains: “Even in tragedy – no, particularly in tragedy - God is near”.⁷⁹

And with this we arrive clearly at the dangerous security-logic sketched here. Voicing a belief in human reason and the inevitability of an eventual democratic peace – the “momentum of freedom” as Bush phrases the dynamic – the part rationalist, part messianist America finds that “the course of the conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain”.⁸⁰ “Assured of the rightness of our cause, and confident of the victory to come”⁸¹ Bush propounds “I know we can...lead the world towards values that will bring lasting peace”.⁸² Yet the rigidly rationalist perspective seems to push in another direction – one of absolute difference, irrationality and hence conflict - as well, for what to make of it, when encountering voices – supposedly capable of reason as well - that do not want to join in on the liberal peace? Such voices can only be dealt with as “evil”, and hence the liberal strive to end history, difference, politics – all that does not comply – joins in a dangerous securitizing move with the forces of an exceptionalist need to keep that history open. “Freedom

⁷⁶ Bush (2002).

⁷⁷ Bush (2002).

⁷⁸ Bush (2002).

⁷⁹ Bush (2002).

⁸⁰ Bush (2001b).

⁸¹ Bush (2001b).

⁸² Bush (2002).

and fear have always been at war”⁸³ Bush propounds, and with the historical record in mind, are we not inclined to fear, that from an American perspective they always will be?

In line with the patterns of self-representation suggested here, it is at least little wonder why Bush leaves his audience in doubt. Bush *needs* for history to go on, he *needs* to balance stasis and progression, why his oscillating between an exceptionalist narrative of eternal advance and a liberal one promising finite success comes as no surprise. It remains therefore, uncertain, whether the war against terrorism - indeed, whether the overall spirit of the last century’s American foreign policy, from the Wilson pledge to end all wars, to the Bush promise of eradicating evil - is not a strategy for less, rather than more security. It strikes me at least, that there is a clear drive towards securitization; towards creating in the international realm a space for the recurring extension of an American idea, that cannot conceive of progress in any qualitative sense, and thus has to advance in quantitative ones. Born free? Perhaps. But if God blessed America it appears then that blessing can also be a curse: To a nation defined by its position on a Hill it seems the quest for security may be lost to a recurring drive towards adversity. Whether it *will* relies part on where we come down on the question of human agency and part on its imaginative potential – its reservoir of “available futures” as Steven Toulmin has phrased it.⁸⁴ It is to these questions that I now turn.

From Spatial to Temporal Jeremiads: A Republican Way Out

“Must a liberal community, in addition to all the massive problems of diplomacy that any great nation faces in the modern world, *be saddled forever with the limitations of its own perspective?*”⁸⁵ Thus sounded Louis Hartz’s version of the Jeremiad yearning – when will the promise be fulfilled and America finally achieve itself - and to him, the answer relied on bringing to life a philosophic impulse in a culture where “law has danced on the corpse of philosophy”.⁸⁶ In what follows I echo both question and answer, but unlike Hartz I do not search for such philosophic impulse abroad. In fact, what I want

⁸³ Bush (2001b).

⁸⁴ Stephen Toulmin (1990): *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 2.

⁸⁵ Hartz (1955): p. 287.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*: p.

to suggest now is that America to reject one political inclination of its past needs to revive another: That of republicanism.

To suggest such a recasting of identity as possible however, is to raise the meta-theoretical question of reflexivity in human agency. What is implied in chronicling a drive towards securitization in 20th century self-narration? Is there, implicit in the identification of such a pattern, any sort of necessity suggested? Or does the fact that America has come to narrate itself in an unaccommodating and obstructive way simply mean that it might do well to consider other and more congenial modes of establishing itself in the future? These are questions all too rarely raised in the empirical work of post-structural analysis and the result has been an apparent gap between the conclusions reached in its meta-theory (where the floating and undecideable nature of narrative and identity is stressed) and those arrived at in its empirical work (where patterns of identity and interest are often lamented as fairly irreversible).⁸⁷ A prominent example is David Campbell and his conclusions on the patterns of US foreign policy. Despite the fact that Campbell explicitly states his normative commitment to “pry open the space for alternatives”⁸⁸ his unequivocal statements on the fixity of American identity leaves its reader less convinced of the room for reflective manoeuvres. To Campbell namely, the inclination to securitize is not a historically developed American problem, but rather a logic inherent to identity itself since “security as the absence of movement would result in death via stasis”.⁸⁹ Contrary to such essentialism, I argue that the problem is not one that comes with identity as such, but rather one created by particular modes of self-narration.⁹⁰ True enough, my argument about the qualitatively fixed and thus spatial nature of rationalist liberal expansion and the drive that this creates towards conflict and insecurity runs parallel to Campbell’s claim that in America “the spatial is given priority over the temporal and the historical”.⁹¹ Distinguishing the liberal from the exceptionalist narrative however, I attempt to place that logic in social language –

⁸⁷ Campbell; Weber on US; ?

⁸⁸ Campbell (1998 [1992]): p. 227.

⁸⁹ Ibid.: p. 12.

⁹⁰ For a more thorough critique see Lene Hansen (1998): *Western Villains or Balkan Barbarism? Representations and Responsibility in the Debate over Bosnia*. PhD. diss., University of Copenhagen. p. 55 & Todorov.

⁹¹ Campbell (1998 [1992]): p. 97.

in the way that America has spoken itself into being - and thus to keep open to the possibility of “arguing it away”. This is not only a theoretical but also a political point to be made, since to state that “the constant re-articulation of danger through foreign policy is...not a threat to state’s identity” but rather “its condition of existence”⁹² is to endorse rather than reject the dangerous logic at play. “We have” as Reinold Niebuhr insisted “no right to speak of inevitabilities in history. Men are always agents”⁹³ and to say that nations are *made* is to say that they can be made over.

This forces us in turn, to consider the role of post-structural theory in bringing such re-making about. For a while now, the most common answer on offer has been reflective of a Derriderian commitment to ethics as dissidence, intervention and resistance⁹⁴: Revealing our historicity and the contingent paths through which we got here, the post-structural “ethos is primarily concerned with the temporal process of critique and the positions it makes possible”.⁹⁵ Performing such criticism constitutes an ethical act, with practical implications for future action, for in revealing that we do not need to be what we are, we are set free to imagine alternative modes of existence. There is little point in contesting this: Surely, exposing contingency is a first and necessary precondition for willful change. The question however, is whether it is politically effective to leave ones political interventions at that. However sympathetic to the claim that in the re-historicising a potentially different future is made possible, I am inclined to doubt whether such potentiality constitutes in itself an improvement or if not post-structuralism needs to engage

⁹² Ibid.: p. 12.

⁹³ Reinold Niebuhr (1950): “A Protest Against a Dilemmas Two Horns” in *World Politics*, Vol. II, No. 3. p. 338.

⁹⁴ See for instance Campbell (1998 [1992]), epilogue; David Campbell (1998): “Why Fight: Humanitarianism, Principles and Post-Structuralism” in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*. Vol. 27, No. 3.; Richard Ashley and Rob Walker (1990): “Reading Dissidence, Writing the Discipline: Crisis and the Question of Sovereignty in International Studies” in *International Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 34.

⁹⁵ Campbell (1998 [1992]): p. 227.

more actively in the definition of preferable futures if change is to be for the better.⁹⁶

This is a position already sketched by several authors, and in large part my own response reflects their counsels.⁹⁷ To my mind, one of the strongest arguments made in favour of active engagement has been put forward by Iver Neumann in his questioning of the post-structural endorsement of nomad-identities as a preferable substitute for modern, essentialist ones. As Neumann argues, heeding a politics of non-identity or non-narrativity is to adopt a strategy that it is all too likely to “loose out”,⁹⁸ since it is to ignore the ability of essentialist identities to “order the antagonism that organizes the political”.⁹⁹ Recalling the points made one narratives as tools for establishing agency one might add, it is also to ignore the indispensable nature of some sort of guiding story – however fictitious - about our individual or social selves. “Myth may clothe history as fiction” as Bercovitch notes “but it persuades in proportion to its capacity to help people act in history”.¹⁰⁰ Hence, if post-structuralism wants to counter the closing moves of essentialist politics Neumann contents, it needs to create alternative stories capable of clustering genuine and lasting support; and nomad-identities are - by nature – defined by their incapacity, indeed their unwillingness, to do so. If not, it will remain “guilty of the same inadequacy for which [it] lambasts liberals, namely, powerlessness

⁹⁶ My errand here is to suggest that post-structuralism participate more in moulding the potentially *positive* narratives available in our past - not to side with those who claim that engaging with deconstructive criticism is not in itself an ethical gesture. See for instance Mervyn Frost (1998): “A Turn Not Taken: Ethics in IR at The Turn of the Millennium” in *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 24 No. 5.

⁹⁷ The point that anti-essentialist IR-theory needs to muster a less uniformly dismissive attitude towards actively engaging in positive identity politics can be found in Neumann (1999): chapter 8. Cochran raises a somewhat similar concern, when she notes that post-structural ethics “has...potential to shake the stasis of normative theorizing” but questions “whether it can sufficiently theorize the value people find in community traditions”. Molly Cochran (1999): *Normative Theory in International Relations: A Pragmatic Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 143. Though focused on the case of American historical studies a convincing defence for why we might want to engage not just critically but also constructively with history is offered in Harlan (1991).

⁹⁸ Neumann (1999): p. 214.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*: p. 216.

¹⁰⁰ Bercovitch (1978): xi.

in the face of antagonism”.¹⁰¹ The alternative that Neumann suggests is a thoroughly pragmatic one of combating the politics of identity from its inside: Rather than choosing between a “modern” problem of identity (how to keep identities fixed and stable) and a “post-modern” one (how to keep identities open and transformative) our strategies has to balance the two concurrently.¹⁰² This resonates with present concerns: I too want to suggests a less essentialist, more ironic and more flexible image for Americans to mirror themselves in, rather than discarding altogether any sense of an American self. And I too find that the only viable strategy for doing that, is to seek out what is still there to build upon, what may still be taken from the past to cast more charitable projections of what we would like to be in the future. Only if we “yeast American sensibilities from within”¹⁰³ as David Harlan has put it, may we mould an alternative vision persuasive enough to be followed, for only if those alternative images are ones in which people are able to recognize themselves, will they appear to them appealing. Such advice may strike the post-structural mind as voicing a conservative strategy, but I do not think that a fitting description. To contend that essentialism must be countered by playing *with* rather than *outside* the rules of identity is not sterility but pragmatism: It is not to give up on critique, but to hold that critique must begin from what is and what is at hand, trying to make ones vision plug in with that reality. Serving political rather than sentimental functions then, the fact that such counter-traditions are *traditions* does not in itself recommend them as preferable or call for awe; their usefulness to a present must be a matter for the present to decide. Neither do we owe them any “loyalty” in that most conservative sense of the term: We employ history because it is all we’ve got. As such it is ours to with as we please.

What we’re dealing with is thus plain story telling – what Neumann refers to as our invention of “as if”-stories – and what I should like to suggest is one such possible “as if” in the case of America. Despite the damages done by 20th century rationalism there are alternatives to turn to, and to my mind the strongest and most appealing one is vocabulary of that strand of republican thinking which John

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.: p. 228.

¹⁰³ I borrow this expression from David Harlan (1991): p. 950.

Pocock¹⁰⁴ has been accommodating in rediscovering.¹⁰⁵ As several scholars - implicitly or explicitly writing on from Pocock's findings - have pointed out, the Puritan heritage yielded more than the Messianistic and redemptive narrative on which we have seen the liberal narrative to build. Often in a deliberate assault on the Hartzian (or Bercovitch) thesis of the American mind as a consensual and self-assured one, the recovery of a second and highly different Puritan trajectory has for recent decades been on the agenda of American studies. Against millennial teleology, this counter strand finds history neither given by God or by Reason, but by the contingent results of human *choice*. Accordingly, this republican counter-voice has repelled, America is no "beacon" in any but a mortal sense, and its "purpose" is of a universal nature only insofar as chance and choice may make it so. Americans were to the republican founders as immediate onto God than any other people, for the "the tendency of things will be" as Hamilton soberly commented, "to depart from the republican standard. This is the real disposition of the human nature."¹⁰⁶ Likewise, John Adams coolly reflected that "we humans cannot work miracles; we struggle in vain against the constitution and course of nature"¹⁰⁷ and for him as for his federalist colleagues then, the American project and the democratic purpose was a gamble – not a given.

To put the case pointedly, the republican tradition was a narrative of decision rather than destiny. America was not given to succeed, it was not divinely blessed as better than other nations, it was not even a given as a nation. To become a such it had to make a deliberate choice – to enact not destiny but willful self-founding. Thus, Hamilton wrote to the American people that it had the opportunity "to decide the important question whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice" and it was to him then humans – not God or

¹⁰⁴ J.G.A. Pocock (1975): *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

¹⁰⁵ For a nice overview of the debate on republicanism in America since Pocock's initial launching of his book see Daniel T. Rodgers (1992): "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept" in *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 79, No. 1.

¹⁰⁶ Alexander Hamilton, John Jay & James Madison (1977 [1787]): *The Federalist*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press. p. 3.

¹⁰⁷ John Adams in a letter to Benjamin Rush, September 1808. Quoted from Schlesinger (1977): p. 509.

Reason – that drives the democratic enterprise and the American purpose forward. In a striking contrast to the Wilsonian logic, that holds history a sail that “obeys the great breath out of the heavens”¹⁰⁸, the American purpose to Hamilton takes on a this-worldly nature: In his own words it is an “experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people” – not a divinely authored script.¹⁰⁹

This sense of experiment suggests that the errand can fail and it therefore reflects the more frail and fallible narrative of human life and history inherent to the republican mind. Interestingly, this leads us back to the Puritan and their Augustinian-Calvinist outlook. As David Harlan argues in a convincing attempt to redeem Perry Miller’s more ambiguous approach to the Puritan mind, and revolt against the uni-dimensional and consensus-seeking reading of Bercovitch’ rhetorical perspective, the Puritan heritage originally contained more than missionary arrogance. To some extent, the lamentations were sincerely reflective of a culture, critically aware of its own contingency and limitations. Hence, a second, more modest trajectory travelled from the Puritan mind to later American generations:

“For Perry Miller, American Puritanism was a demanding and uncompromising theology...But it was also a redemptive discipline, a way of thinking against ourselves, even of transcending ourselves. And it was an indispensable guide for sojourners in the wilderness, counselling as it did, perpetual doubt and the good that may come of a broken heart. If it demanded harsh and unrelenting self-interrogation, it also knew the dangerous deceptions of self-reliance; if it reminded us that we are all strangers and pilgrims on the earth, it also made us see those around us as fellow sufferers. It provided a necessary corrective to the pleasing pretensions of American culture, and it gave us our best ideas about what we should value and how we should live.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Woodrow Wilson (1912): “Life comes from the Soil” in George Harmon Knoles (1967): *The Responsibilities of Power 1900 1929: Sources in American History*. New York: The Free Press. p. 157.

¹⁰⁹ In this point and in what follows from it, I am much indebted to Arthur Schlesinger and his suggestion of two American traditions: One who finds America a pre-given destiny and who sees it instead as experiment. Schlesinger (1977).

¹¹⁰ Harlan (1991): p. 949.

It is this clear awareness of “the dangerous deceptions of self-reliance” that the republicans – although obviously in a secularised manner – confirmed. And what is worth mentioning here is that for the republican mindset there is also a clear link between harsh soul-searching and optimism on the part of the future. But this does not take the shape of arrogance: In Miller’s darker reading of the Jeremiad tradition, there is also an inclination to find in anguish advice on how to tread the path ahead as well as a tendency to take from failure insights for the future. But these are not of the “mindless-optimist”¹¹¹ nature of Wilsonian rationalism. They do not bring to the proponents of an American purpose unbounded self-esteem but rather clear and coolheaded self-restriction – a way of “thinking against ourselves”. This is a recurring theme in the republican tradition, where the need for acknowledging “the fault that lies within” – not to discourage but redeem and improve and cut down to size the national ego - is repeatedly stressed. There is in this creed a “pervasive self-doubt...and urgent sense of the precariousness of the national existence”¹¹² quite foreign to the Wilsonian one: Whereas Wilson’s liberal rationalism held the democratic cause of the American people infallible and unflawed – “The heart of this people is pure...is true...I for one believe more profoundly than in anything else human in the purpose of the United States. I believe she has a spiritual energy in her which no other nation can contribute” Wilson once put it – the republican narrative is less self-assured and thus calls for decisive irony and self-moderation. “Have we not seen enough” Hamilton wrote “of the fallacy and extravagance of those idle theories which have amused us with promises of an exemption from the imperfections, weaknesses, and evils incident to society in every shape? Is it not time to awake from the deceitful dream of a golden age, and to adopt as a practical maxim for the direction of our global conduct that we, as well as other inhabitants of the globe, are yet remote from the happy empire of perfect wisdom and perfect virtue?”¹¹³

¹¹¹ I borrow this expression from Judith Shklar who also applies it to the rationalist liberal tradition in America. Judith Shklar (1998): *Redeeming American Political Thought*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. p. 91.

¹¹² Schlesinger (1977): p. 510.

¹¹³ Hamilton, Jay & Madison (1977 [1787]): p. 35.

What is the use of such self-moderation – how might it contribute to the creation of a more flexible and less confrontational American identity? For one thing, it seems to deliver a notion of history that goes better with the exceptionalist notion of being ahead, on the move and in advance: Given her contingent ontology of human time and being, the Republican - unlike the liberal - does not view history as finite. From a republican perspective, the American challenge becomes not a matter of quantitatively expanding an already predefined purpose, but of qualitatively and recurrently to reflect upon on and reinvent, what such purpose might mean to a present time. The republican then, does not run out of challenges at home: Purpose and politics are not something one can get right, over and done with but a continual - indeed an eternal – matter of concern. Secondly, and as already pointed out, it is a mode of self-narration that induces moderation and tolerance, and one not totally absent from 20th century American thought. Echoing both the darker side of the Puritan creed and the mood of the early republican thinkers, an anti-rationalist thinker like Reinold Niebuhr might be heard to voice similar themes of moderation when he warns against the “deep layer of Messianistic consciousness in the mind of America”¹¹⁴ and foresees the “depth of evil to which individuals and communities may sink when they try to play the role of God in history”.¹¹⁵ This is not a call against holding ethical beliefs but rather a call for *how* one might one these. To Niebuhr, as to the Puritans and as to the republican founders such recognition is not an incentive for cynicism. Rather,

“the cure for a pretentious idealism, which claims to know more about the future than it is given mortal man to know, is not egoism. It is a concern for both the self and the other in which the self, whether individual or collective, preserves ‘a descent respect for the opinions of mankind’, derived from a modest awareness of the limits of its own knowledge and power”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Reinold Niebuhr (1952): *The Irony of American History*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. p. 4.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*: p. 69.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*: p. 149. Emphasis added.

A concern for both the self and the other – and a modest awareness of the limits of one's own knowledge and power – to the extent that this indicates tolerance that might almost seem liberal themes, only they are not cloaked in a rationalist narrative. And this is what I mean to suggest with proposing that America adopts a republican attitude towards their sense of nationhood: Not that it discard with everything that it presently is or values, but that relocate such being within a different narratology – a different conception of time, purpose and history. Such a conception would view history as open-ended process rather than teleological unfolding, and it would recognise the situatedness and thus the limits of its own perspective. To endorse that America finds inspiration for such a conception in its republican past can therefore not be to say that it should simply put in the place of Locke a Hamilton or a Niebuhr, replacing the uncritical adherence to one thinker with that of another. The answers offered by the early republicans were no more universal than those we pose today, but specifically meant for their time and being. Endorsing a republican narrative then means the recommendation not of a political programme but of an attitude, a mode of being: It means recommending a specific way of *holding* beliefs, not the beliefs to be held as such.

Returning to McDougall's line of questioning then - can the United States be a crusader state and still remain the promised land? – the initial conclusion reached must be revised. If America narrated itself less in terms of a liberal destiny to work its way to the end of history by spreading the assumed privileges of capitalist democracy abroad and more in terms of a republican experiment whose polis and purpose needs constantly to be renewed, revised and rearticulated at home, it would not find itself worrying about unfulfillment: Viewed as worldly experiment rather than divine destiny America becomes namely a promise never to be won, but eternally to come. Abandoning the spatial logic of the liberal Jeremiad – that progress is the quantitative expansion of an already planted seed – in favour of a temporal republican one where progress is the qualitative and eternal reinvention of such seeds, America's "crusade" might then take on more moderate and self-ironic proportions. There is at least a better chance, that such a nation – even if originally blinded by birth - might come to see itself clearly enough and find the purpose at home so continuously challenging that it would not need to go abroad in search of monsters to destroy.

Conclusion: Achieving America II

"America has not known, as have other nations, the phenomenon of the temporary émigré"¹¹⁷ Hans Morgenthau concludes on what it

¹¹⁷ Hans Morgenthau (1982 [1960]): *The Purpose of American Politics*. Washington: University Press of America. p. 55.

means to identify oneself with an America more purpose than territory. As he explains “the American exile does not leave a household temporarily unpleasant and wait it out abroad for the disturbance to pass. Rather, he leaves a beloved by whom he has been betrayed; there can be no turning back”¹¹⁸ and that image fits perfectly with the notion of America as a dream rather than a piece of geography articulated here: To be American is to place ones trust in a promise and in a sense of progression towards the fulfilment of that promise; it is to long – returning once more to Rorty’s image – for the *achievement* of the dream that is America. Whatever future visions we would like to put in place of current American narratives therefore, these cannot simply discard with the past but needs to feed into that myth. If America is as Morgenthau claims, “a nation...build upon a common loyalty to a certain purpose” then it “stands or falls with its loyalty to that purpose”.¹¹⁹

In an according attempt to avoid the either/or blackmail of deconstructive criticism – *either* we refuse the American purpose and hence the American sense of self, *or* we endorse this - I have sought here to outline a less radical and hopefully more constructive alternative, arguing that America ought not to reject from the outside, but to improve from within its current modes of voicing itself. As I see it – gazing as a worried citizen of a world deeply affected by the moods and moves of an American hegemon – the most important improvement to be made in this regard, has to do not with *what* America narrates, but with *how* it narrates. It is not the fact that America voices a liberal vision, but the fact that it does so in rationalist vocabulary. And it is not the fact that America, as Bush has dramatically put it, “wants to serve purposes larger then the self”¹²⁰ but the fact that it purports to hold a universal answer as to what such purposes might be. In terms of the present conflict then, it is not the fact that America embraces freedom above fear, but rather the fact that it believes to know what freedom is to all people. Accordingly, the article has suggested not that America turn its back on either purpose or freedom, but rather that it re-articulate both in a more modest and pragmatic vocabulary.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.: pp. 55-56.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.: p. 56.

¹²⁰ Bush (2002).

Returning to the link between American modes of self-narration and foreign policy conduct then, I suggest we take a slightly different view of what kind of crisis the 11th of September might represent. It is quite true what Americans after the attacks repeatedly has stated, that America today is challenged; that its purpose is being tested. The nature of that challenge however lies not in America's ability to achieve a supposedly God-granted purpose to fight an "axis of evil" abroad. Rather, the real challenge comes from within, and meeting it means refusing the narrative of pre-destination. If America wants to leave as David Harlan has put it, "that terrible dialectic of national promise and self-betrayal that transformed Jimmy Gatz into Jay Gatsby"¹²¹ – if it does not want to remain as Gatsby "ceaselessly born back into the past" – it should consider to yeast other legacies from within. Be it along the republican lines suggested here or by reviving alternative modes of thought that manage to combine a recognition of both limits and hope, a more this-worldly narrative to go with that of exceptionalism seems the only way for America to actually achieve itself in the sense that Hartz, or Rorty, or Bercovitch long for and overcome the drive towards the construction of monsters. To bring such change about however, will take a good deal of self-irony as well as a clear sense of recognition that it is not (as the Wilsonian creed suggests) "the breath of heaven" that fills the sails of the American purpose. Rather it is that of human will and decision. Perhaps the Jeremiad refrain so often put forward by Morgenthau – and sounding quite a republican note - offers some of the advice that America needs in meeting that challenge:

"These are the tasks that the purpose of America imposes upon our government and our people. Shall we achieve them? That question will be answered by what Machiavelli called *virtu* and *fortuna*. The one, the quality of our wills and minds, is in our hands; the other, the benevolence of fate, is beyond our reach."¹²²

¹²¹ Harlan (1991): 951.

¹²² Morgenthau (1982 [1960]): p. 323.

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