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The American Manifesto

By John Waters & Adam Ellwanger

America's story is true myth.

For 250 years, we have attacked the earth, sky, sea, and space, not to conquer or control but to improve the conditions of human life. We blazed trails and broke the plains. We were first in flight and first to the Moon. We were first to electrify our cities, which powered our mighty industries. And on the evening of July 5, 1954, during a recording session at Sun Studio in Memphis, Tennessee, we were first to play rock and roll. As John Lennon said: "Before Elvis, there was nothing."

The essential nature of America is discovery, and our greatest discovery is freedom. We are the first and only nation founded on the natural rights of man. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are the reason our country exists. Where Old-World governments constrained the energy of human life, our Declaration of Independence and Constitution unleashed that energy

across a Great American Desert. Our myth is not rooted in the soil of Athens, Rome, or Jerusalem, but in the spirit of exiles, tramps, and risk-takers who fled those ancient cities for the New World. They transformed this rock into a pool of water.

The taproot of our triumph is a belief that something great will be achieved. The 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence gambled their lives and sacred honor on their belief that human beings possess natural rights, that government exists only by consent to secure those rights, that Britain had violated this trust, and that independence was necessary. Our Founding Fathers turned abstract principles into concrete action. When they signed that famous piece of paper, they might have been signing their own death warrants. They took an irreversible risk – and won.

Since July 4, 1776, belief in America has emboldened the spirit of our people. It galvanized the scientists and engineers who worked on the Manhattan Project, and the Marines who stormed the beaches of Iwo Jima and raised the American flag on Mount Suribachi. Belief in our exceptionalism – the idea that America itself is the pinnacle of human achievement – has given courage to generations of heroes in their battles against drought, disease, depression, and totalitarian regimes.

After months traveling across America, Chinese Professor Wang Huning wrote in his 1988 travelogue that Americans believe there is nothing they can't do, and they don't stop until they've won.

"So, they see future presidents and millionaires in every barefoot boy, care for and love children, work for them, and let them grow," wrote Huning, who has since become a leader in the Chinese Communist Party. For 250 years, our belief in America has made us the envy of the world.

The unifying power of myth derives from its repetition and adaptation, and our American myths have a power that the myths of past civilizations did not. America's great story unfolded in recent history – living memory attests to it. Perhaps our secret is that America's myths are objectively true: Our heroes go where others are afraid to go, do what others cannot do, and return to tell us that the future will be better than the past.

The ancient Greeks idealized warriors as the foremost heroes: from swift-footed Achilles in Homer's "Iliad" to his real-life counterpart, Alexander the Great, who conquered much of the known world before dying at the age of 32. This impulse endures. On our shores, it was embodied by presidents George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Ulysses Grant, William McKinley, Dwight Eisenhower, and John F. Kennedy. The battlefield is the ultimate arena of heroism. Even the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word hero as an "illustrious warrior" and "a person who shows great courage."

We named cities, counties, and states after the founding heroes of the Revolutionary War. We raised statues and memorials to soldiers on both sides of the Civil War. And we made countless books, plays, and films honoring the veterans of World War II, and consecrating everyone of that

era as the “greatest” of all generations. For most of our history, we minted heroes out of young Americans who did not yearn for battle but performed their duty with honor and courage.

Then we burned them down.

The Vietnam War was a watershed in the decline of the American hero. More than 58,000 Americans died in a war of questionable purpose that prompted the anti-war movement and suspicion of political leaders. Young Americans burned the American flag, refused to say the pledge of allegiance, and denounced free-market capitalism. There were acts of domestic terrorism against the government, including nearly-forgotten bombings of the U.S. Capitol, Pentagon, and State Department buildings.

The country did not welcome home its warriors with ticker-tape parades or public celebrations. Their service in Southeast Asia had been a stain on the national character, according to activists who claimed the American soldier was a killer of innocents. Instead of patriotic “fighting heroes” like Sergeant Alvin York and Lieutenant Audie Murphy, our new “victim heroes” were the prisoners of war who came home physically and emotionally damaged by torture.

As the culture moved beyond the triumphalism of post-World War II, anti-heroes became our new icons: the disillusioned Vietnam War veteran; the shell-shocked survivor; society’s violent outcast. In films such as “Apocalypse Now,” “Platoon,” and “Rambo,” the heroes were cynical, suspicious of authority, and morally ambiguous, molded by our broken and relativistic world. “Born on the Fourth of July” presented a Marine and Vietnam veteran whom the film portrayed as swallowing a “toxic” brew of masculinity, but found his true call to heroism when he renounced patriotism and his country.

Journalists and academics used the anti-hero to deconstruct what they argued was the “myth” of American exceptionalism. The anti-hero’s flaws reflected a flawed country and failed institutions, critics claimed. When leftist professor Howard Zinn traveled to Hanoi in 1968, he opened a line of communication between the American anti-war movement and the Communist government of North Vietnam, and called it “radical diplomacy.”

In 1980, Zinn published “A People’s History of the United States,” which describes U.S. foreign policy as exploitative and driven by greed. He popularized notions that recast our triumphs as exploitation and our Founders as mere opportunists. He replaced victory with class struggle. Zinn was criticized for poor scholarship, but even now, his book remains in the curricula of as many as one in four high schools.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 should have proved to the naysayers that America truly is the “Shining City upon a Hill.” But we failed to impress upon our children that politicized atheism and hollow socialism are anathema and inferior to our values. Today, the word myth is synonymous with a set of falsehoods intended to shield people from a harsh reality. Yet myth

remains the cornerstone of civilization. It binds together societies, creates nations, and defines peoples. Myth is a way to honor the past by transmitting it to the future, ensuring a continuity in national identity without which a nation dies.

Jan Assmann, Egyptologist and historian of cultural memory, identifies the biblical Exodus story as the epitome of political myth, and a template for building national identity in the modern era. In particular, he points to Exodus as "the founding myth of the United States of America." Assmann identifies three components of the Exodus narrative: oppression and flight; the establishment of the covenant; and arrival in the promised land.

Like the ancient Hebrew slaves in Egypt, oppressed by the state and refused the opportunity to worship their God, the people who would become Americans were prohibited by their governments from their mode of religious observance. The Hebrews were guided to the east out of Egypt, and the pilgrims made their flight west across the ocean. The Hebrews wandered the desert for 40 years.

We did not find America; we willed it into being, and the fates lacked the nerve to say no.

Similarly, American settlers faced an untamed land laced with uncertainty and hardship. Both groups endured the trials of the wilderness, and eventually, both received a new covenant. For the Hebrews, this was the Ten Commandments. For the Americans, it was the Declaration of Independence and soon afterward the Constitution.

Americans undertook the task with great gusto, creating cities, canals, roads, railroads, bridges, farms, houses, and machines. And we continue to build, because the nation's construction is never complete. Each generation of Americans has dedicated and sacrificed their lives to build a future for an exceptional people. Americans are not merely defined by their commitment to a creed. We are one people defined by self-confidence and an appetite for realizing what other nations would think impossible.

America is proof of the maxim that fortune favors the bold. Dire risk loomed over every improbable effort as Americans tried to forge a nation. The Founders accepted risk as the price of sovereignty. Immigrants made voyages across oceans with nothing but uncertainty on the other side. Cowboys, pioneers, soldiers, and freed slaves pushed into terra incognita. After 250 years, the blood of every American is intermingled with that of our risk-taking ancestors. That unusual quality – a willingness to take a chance against the odds – is a genuine, core trait of the American character.

Time and again, the fates smiled upon these risks. Critics dismiss our victories as mere luck, but America's good fortune is the harvest of our willingness to pursue grand dreams and demand improbable outcomes. We make the wagers other nations fear to name. This is why luck – and

God – favors us. We did not find America; we willed it into being, and the fates lacked the nerve to say no.

A century ago, the intellectuals declared the West a blocked Exodus – a desert dotted with the fragments of history. They preached that man was waiting for a God who never comes, urging us to see only fear in a handful of dust.

“These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” wrote T.S. Eliot, who renounced his American citizenship and fled to a dying empire. But even in the ash-heap, the West pulses with an energy that belied such disillusionment. Eliot wrote “The Waste Land” as a cultural endpoint, but his time in England made him forgetful: In America, the myth never ends.

Today, let’s bury the anti-hero. We do not seek permission to build; we seize the tools and the dirt. We accept the risk of the unknown as a necessary down payment for the glory of achieving the impossible. In every act of creation, we renew the covenant that our ancestors signed in blood. Whenever you choose discovery over doubt, or courage over complacency, you aren’t just living in America – you are willing it into existence. Fortune has smiled upon us before, and as we advance toward the next horizon, she will smile again.

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