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American Visions of Omnipotence (1945-1965)

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Abstract

The United States of 1945-1965 can truly be considered the omnipotent country, or superpower, having reached unbelievable boosting in every area domestically and abroad. Never were America's dreams more potent and amusing than at the end of World War II. The country had defeated the despair and poverty of the Great Depression, it had conquered the organized evil of militant fascism. The depression taught Americans of that generation resilience and bravery; the war consolidated them in a common purpose. Americans in 1945 stood confident at the top of global power; before them lay more wealth and happiness than any large group had ever dreamt of.

Keywords: American dream, isolationism, resilience, consolidation

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Introduction

For a short moment in 1945, when American stood at its summit, looking back on victory not only against the Axis powers, but also against the Great Depression, looked ahead to a seemingly limitless future. What Americans have done in the six decades since is crucially important and fascinating. These are great themes and events that have driven America.

American Dream

Among Americans there is a still progressive unfolding legacy of dreams born out of a global cataclysm. Americans have been dreaming since the birth of the nation; they dreamed of liberty, equality, and happiness; of prosperity for themselves and their children; they dreamed they would save their souls and save the world. Americans didn't all dream the same dream, or at the same time, as the American dream included the right of the individual dreamers to design their own. The dreams weren't always sunny and hopeful; some were dark and forbidding. But they drew America constantly forward, leading them toward the horizon of the future. There is an important factor, fundamental to an understanding of the United States and closely connected with the American dream: American society is the most open, and extremely and continually self-critical in the world. This openness and self-critical tradition can confuse foreigners who have been taught that one doesn't wash one's dirty linen in public (Stevenson, 2001). By tradition and experience, Americans are both cynics and idealists. Any country that was founded on ideals, as the United States was, will always have to measure the distance between where it is and where it should be. For example, that "all men are created equal", the nation is sorrowfully aware that not all Americans are being equally treated.

The distance between the reality of life and hope for a better one is also basis of the American dream. The promise of America for millions of immigrants was, and still is, not that things are better there, but that they could be. What exactly the American Dream is, has been painstakingly argued not only by Americans, but by the rest of the world. Meanwhile, there is little talk of any "British Dream", "Canadian Dream", or "Japanese Dream" (ibid, p. 9). This debate about America is linked to what it means to be an American, and the central point of the argument reflects the attitude that America is different, or should be, and this belief is the basic cause of many Americans' anger. It is like an endless civil war, or a great family fight: "We said we should do this! Then why aren't we doing it?" Often the most patriotic Americans are also the most critical of their country.

All rocket shots, manned or unmanned have been broadcast live to the world, whether they ended successfully, or like the Challenger shuttle, in tragedy. News and photographs of the war in Vietnam were sent across the world through American networks. Watergate and Three Mile Island (Nuclear plant. Generating reactor 2 – partial meltdown, navy in March, 1979, Pa, radiation leak) were also American.

The U.S. Wartime

The wartime alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union was based on common enemies, not common values. The principal enemy Germany, had been defeated, and with its defeat the alliance was beginning to fray. The reason for the conference at Potsdam was to keep the fraying within bounds, as long as possible. Yet Stalin understood that the United States and the Soviet Union would become rivals once again, as they had been rivals before the war. They might even become enemies (Brands, 2010). And in that competition, or animosity, America's atomic nom would give Washington a huge advantage. Yet the real secret of America's strength was to be found in the countryside of Michigan, thirty miles southwest of Detroit, on a creek called Willow Run, in a view of

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Soviet spies, lay the true engine of American victory. Built by Ford Motors Company for the federal government, the Willow Run plant's main building alone spread about seventy acres.

The facility employed forty-thousand men and women and utilized the assembly-line techniques that had made Ford Motor the master of automobile business in the early century. But instead of cars it produced airplanes, especially B-24 Liberators, the heavy bombers most responsible for the destruction of Germany and Japan.

Willow Run was the largest of America's hundreds of war production facilities. Plants in Wichita, San Diego, and Seattle contributed to the manufacture of warplanes; shipyards on the three American coasts built warships large and small, from aircraft carriers to landing craft, as well as Liberty Ship transports that ferried troops and equipment across the Atlantic and Pacific. Smaller factories producing fighter planes, trucks, tanks, jeeps, machine guns, grenades, bombs, torpedoes, and a number of other machines and instruments of war. By the summer of 1945 America's war plants had manufactured 1.600 warships, 5.800 transport ships, 88.000 tanks, 300.000 airplanes, 635.000 jeeps, 2.4 million trucks, 6.5 million rifles, 40 billion bullets. The U.S. outproduced all its enemies combined by a large margin. It also outproduced its allies, whose armies it equipped. Without American arms and ammunition – and food and fuel and clothing – the British might have collapsed amid the German bombing campaign of 1940. Without American heavy equipment – including entire trains and thousands of miles of track – the Russians could easily have broken beneath the weight of the German blitzkrieg.

Churchill knew this. Stalin knew it. Truman knew it. All Potsdam the three man stood side by side as recent victors over Germany. But Churchill understood that the war had gravely strained Britain, damaging its economy, unbalancing its financing. Stalin realized that the Red Army was less impressive than it appeared – that without American aid, it would have difficulty simply maintaining itself in the field let alone projecting Soviet power abroad (ibid, p. 10).

Employment Challenges of Demobilization

The essential task in post-war America according Dean Acherson, Franklin Roosevelt's assistant secretary of state for economic affairs, was reabsorbing the million persons currently employed as soldiers and seamen back into the civilian labor force. Reconverting the economy was a domestic matter, Acherson said, but also one of foreign policy. He pointed to the collapse of international trade during the Great Depression as the main reason for the prewar economic troubles. The transition to peace would be more than an economic problem. American entry into the fighting prompted the buildup of American armed forces, pulling those millions out of the civilian labor force. New workers took their places, the most distinguishing were women who collectively acquired the nickname Rosie the Riveter. In a way the entry of women into the industrial workforce wasn't new.

In the beginning period of America's nineteenth-century industrial revolution in New England textile mills young women operated the spindles and looms (Faragher, Buhle, Czitrom, Armitage, p. 224). But during World War II women took jobs in shipyards and drydocks, on truck and airplane assembly lines, or road and bridge construction crews, among the girders and scaffolding of building sites. The new opportunities demonstrated an important progress towards gender equality. Women showed they could work, and work well, where men alone had worked before.

Racial Fears

No less unpredictable than the movement in the workplace's gender line, was the alteration in the color line. In 1865 almost all African Americans lived outside the South. Nearly all remained there early in the XXth

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century. During World War I wartime jobs in Northern factories drew blacks north, what came to be called the Great Migration, which for the first-time populated Chicago, Detroit and other industrial cities with large number of African Americans. The migration slowed after the war and Great Depression, when jobless workers returned to their rural roots. The migration resumed during World War II. Some million black men and women moved of of the South besides of Northern cities, to Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland and Seattle, which had war-production facilities. The movement of blacks challenged fear and frequently hostility among the new neighbors. In Detroit 1943, large crowds of people – whites and blacks – gathered in amusement park on Bell Isle in the Detroit River. The teenagers triggered the fighting, spreading from the island onto mainland. President Roosevelt was obliged to send federal troops to restore order – and get workers back into the plants. Three dozen people, mostly black had been killed, and seven hundred injured.

Besides the fissure between whites and blacks, other clefts stemmed as well. Latinos – of Mexican descent mostly, had lived along the U.S. Mexican border for generations.

In South Texas, parts of Southern California – the presence of Latinos preceded the arrival of Anglos. Elsewhere immigrants from Mexico, and their children, made up the major segment of the Latino community.

In both settings they found life difficult, they worked on commercial farms for low pay. In June 1943 – the same month as the Detroit riot – a series of confrontations between Anglo and Latino youths in Los Angeles grew extremely violent. The Anglos were mostly military personnel from the army bases and most of them had never faced Latinos. A full-scale race riot embraced the city. The scale of injury and destruction was less than in Detroit, but a similar sense of injustice among Latinos, who felt that the police favored their antagonists, persevered long after the fighting stopped (ibid, p. 16).

The Programs of Roosevelt

Even as its hustled genders, races, and ethnic groups, the war breached old assumptions concerning the decent role of government in the lives of individual persons. The Great Depression had challenged the variant of the American dream: that men and woman who worked hard and saved for rainy days, could expect material comfort and security in their golden years, without applying to government. But the depression, with its massive unemployment and ubiquitous bank failures, revealed how painful the capitalist economy could turn out for Americans. Franklin Roosevelt failed to end depression, but programs he initiated went far beyond despair of the depression. Roosevelt accepted on behalf of the federal government greater responsibility for the welfare of the American people than any president before him. Many Republicans and conservatives resisted, but a majority of Americans accepted the new order with relief and thankfulness, evidenced by their resounding reelection of Roosevelt in 1936. During the war the welfare state – grew more permanent and mature. Very few people in 1940 received pensions from the Social Security system. But by 1945 as population aged, the number of recipients had grown dramatically, and it would continue to grow with each passing year. As a result, Americans built federal pensions into their mentality and became an entitlement.

The war expanded the federal role in other ways. The government-built apartments and single-family homes for workers in out-of-the way war plants; to compensate the colleges and especially the diverted millions of young people from colleges, Congress passed the GI bill, which would provide funding for the soldiers' return to the ivy-covered walls. The GI bill also insured home mortgages for veterans after the war. The government mediated labor disputes, bringing management and labor together when economic self-interest threatened to drive the two groups apart. Health care was linked to the workplace, employer-

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funded medical insurance turned out the most popular. No one deliberately designed this system of linking health care to the workplace, it was an accidental artifact of wartime policies. But the result was that individuals and families came to expect that someone else – employers – would fund their health care.

What Else Roosevelt Initiated?

In foreign relations no less than in domestic affairs, Americans in 1945 expected more of their government than they had a decade earlier. Roosevelt inherited a country almost incurably isolationist believing that America's fate depended little on the fate of other countries. Diligently he reversed this attitude. According him WWII might have been averted, had the Western democracies stood up to Hitler at Munich in 1938, when the German dictator demanded the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. The shift in popular thinking was completed only as Americans absorbed the significance of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Besides the 2.400 Americans killed by the Japanese bombs and torpedoes, Pearl Harbor finished off American isolationism, convincing Americans that the country could never again turn its back on the world.

Roosevelt institutionalized the new American thinking in a series of meetings during the last year of the war. At Bretton Woods, New Hampshire in 1944, representatives of forty-five governments gathered at the historic Mount Washington Hotel to reconstruct the world economy. Although in London in 1933 scudding the recent effort, he wasn't sure internationalization was the key to American economic recovery. But in 1944 the American economy had so surpassed the economies of all other countries, that free trade could only contribute to America's benefit. The commitment to freer trade took the form of General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, or GATT, which through negotiations over the following decades progressively reduced tariffs and other barriers to trade. The signers beloved that freer trade was in their economic interest allowing each country to sell what it was most efficacious at producing and purchase what other countries were good at. They also believed that free trade prevented and relieved political and military rivalries, that goods would cross borders, not armies.

Breton Woods stemmed two other institutions designed to improve the performance of the global economy. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, commonly called the World Bank, would coordinate the efforts of the warring nations to rebuild their economies after the conflict.

The International Monetary Fund, or IMF would stabilize exchange rates and currency flows.

For centuries, in the United States money had consisted of gold and silver coins, notes, circulated by banks, all competing in a confusion and economic inefficiency. The latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of an international gold standard, overseen by Britain, the leading commercial power of the time, and made possible by the gold dug from California and elsewhere after James Marshall's discovery on the American River in 1848. The United States joined the gold group informally at first and then following a furious rearguard action by the advocates of silver, formally in 1900. World War I disrupted the gold standard, along with other aspects of the international economy, and it had been only shakingly restored when the Great Depression shattered it again. The conferees at Bretton Woods made another try. They established a partial gold standard, restricting other currencies to the dollar, and the dollar to gold (at $35 per ounce). The outstanding difference between this new system and the system of the period before WWI was the securing foundation economy. Then it had been Britain's; now it was America's.

The United Nations Organization emerged from a different meeting, held at Dumbarton Oaks, in northwestern Washington D.C. Representatives from the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union, and China – the Big Four of the antifascist front-laid the framework for the successor group to the League of Nations.

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The Dumbarton Oaks conference was followed by an April 1945 meeting at San Francisco, where the postwar United nations was inaugurated. The United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, China, and liberated France took permanent seats on an inner group, the security Council, in which each exerted its authority for a substantive veto; dozens of other countries (subsequently all the nations of the earth) became members of an outer group, the General Assembly. In the General Assembly the sovereign equality of nations was guaranteed; each member state could speak its mind and cast its veto like every other member.

Roosevelt didn't live to see the United Nations authorization; he died of a stroke before, the San Francisco conference. But the United Nations, like the GATT, the World Bank, the IMF, and the Bretton Woods monetary system, reflected Roosevelt's strong belief that the nations of the world must cooperate economically and politically for fear they return to blows militarily and he believed in the reason ableness of the action.

One of the most sounding contributions of the U.S. in post-wat period was Marshall Plan. The Secretary of State George Marshall at Harvard in June 1947 called for ambitious program of aid to Europe to stabilize and ameliorate the situation there, in the interests of the Europeans and of the world. Congress approved the Marshall plan which sent some $13 billion in aid to Europe. The money came in series; the longest required that the money had to be spent in the U.S. on American goods, which were then shipped to Europe in American vessels. It was a huge program for American farmers, manufacturers, and shippers. It set a pattern for most American aid afterward.

The Golden Age of the Middle Class (1955-1960)

In 1950 the population of the United States was over 151 million. What demographers later called the Baby Boom began after the war and lasted into the 1960s. The national birth rate jumped from the depression period – 19 to 27 in 1947 and it remained above 24 till the end of the 1950s. All the babies and young children propelled a reconstruction of American culture. They started work – on the family farms, in their father's shops, by their mother's sides – at whatever time they became physically able. After WWII the availability of more time, more resources, and more kids created a child-based culture unlike anything previous in American history. Mostly economic exertion rotated around the physical needs and wants of the Baby Boomers and their families. Home construction boosted; auto manufacturing boosted; appliances and furniture and clothing and recreational equipment boosted too; food and pharmaceuticals boosted. New industries bloomed in areas little known before the war. Electronics stemmed as a growth leader, based on the recently invented transistor, which powered computers used by business but not yet by individuals. Television, first demonstrated before the war, entered homes by the hundreds, then thousands, then millions. Plastics replaced metal, wood, paper, and other natural materials in toys and tools, necessities, and knickknacks.

The aircraft industry filled the sky with planes and factories with workers; in 1957 airplanes for the first time carried more passengers than trains (ibid, p. 71).

Free At Last?

Only days after Kennedy's death Lyndon Johnson firmly determined to run for President to pass a Civil Rights bill, emphasizing his point about the unfairness of Jim Crow Law. The Southerner candidate from Texas knew that a vote in favor of civil rights bill would be for every Southerner. But after his sweet-talking and

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threatening paid off, and the House and Senate sent him the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which ordered an end to Jim Crow in nearly all areas of public life, he allowed himself a nationally televised statement. "We believe that all men are created equal, yet many are denied equal treatment. We believe that all men have certain unalienable rights, yet many Americans do not enjoy those rights; We believe that all men are entitled to the blessings of liberty, yet millions are being deprived of those blessings – not because of their own failures, but because of the color of their skin. The reasons for the denial were rooted in history and in human nature, but the reasons had lost force and the denial could not continue. Our Constitution, the foundation of our Republic, forbids it. The principles of our freedom forbid it. Morality forbids it. And the Law I will sign tonight forbids it" (Brands, 2010, p. 122).

Conclusion

Thus the Americans' visions of omnipotence (1945-1965) came true – the country became absolutely successful from many points of view domestically (socio-economically, demographically, politically, civil rights achievements), as well as in foreign affairs activities, and the Americans deemed themselves responsible for world order, inconceivable a half-decade earlier. In 1940 the warning of George Washington, cautioning Americans against involvement in the affairs of other countries, had aroused approvement from a majority of the American population. In 1945 those words sounded archaic, even naive. Isolationism had been acceptable until the Japanese bombs and torpedoes struck the American ships at Pearl Harbor. Americans would debate the alternative to isolationism, but the support of the debate had shifted so far towards continuing involvement in world affairs as the leave the few remaining isolationists without an audience.

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