"American Dream" or Global Nightmare?

Melanie E. L. Bush
Adelphi University, bush@adelphi.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jgi

Part of the American Politics Commons, American Popular Culture Commons, Cultural History Commons, Demography, Population, and Ecology Commons, Inequality and Stratification Commons, Politics and Social Change Commons, and the Race and Ethnicity Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jgi/vol3/iss2/4
"American Dream" or Global Nightmare?²

Melanie E. L. Bush

In the United States we are witnessing a period of heightened contestation about the parameters of nationalism, patriotism, and loyalty. The oft-heard phrase "Support the Troops" now signifies the desire both to send more soldiers to war and to bring home those already in combat. This "nation of immigrants" has spawned a new generation of "minute-men" to defend national borders while mainstream discourse touts the benefits of "diversity." Dreams of upward mobility present for some during the mid-20th century seem now hazy at best as the proportional income of those at top grows while the rest of the population increasingly struggles. In this context, this article explores related transitions in notions of "nation" and who "belongs."

"America" the Beautiful?
The Origins and Development of Nation and Empire

Portrayed as the perfect democracy, what is the origin and development narrative of this nation and empire? Does the story represent "truth," myth or something in between? Bacon's Rebellion (1676), the Declaration of Independence (1776), the Constitution (1787), the institution of slavery (1619-1866), legislations such as the Treaty of Guadeloupe Hidalgo (1848), People versus Hall (1854), the Dred Scott decision (1857), Jim Crow laws (1876 and 1965), and the ruling in Brown vs. The Board Education (1954) each mark the history of nation-building that intrinsically linked white supremacy and empire to the development of the United States.

The story of America is entrenched with and built upon tales of exceptionalism and superiority. From the early years of European conquest, enslavement and expansion, "nation" has been equated with a white racial portrait, contradicting earlier notions of enlightenment, common-unity, and
belonging. "All" never meant ALL, "men" never meant "human," and "equal" never really meant equal opportunity, outcome, or treatment. The equation of nation and white supremacy formed the foundational justification for trespass, genocide, domination, exploitation, and presumed entitlements of land, labor, and wealth. As the colonies and then the nation were established, struggles occurred about whose interests would be served and who could claim what rights. However contested, the nation and its laws were established with clear ideas about who should and would be protected.

The controversy over belonging and inclusion was embedded in the Declaration of Independence when the very idea that all men are created equal demanded an explanation for why some are not. This challenge was posed by numerous people for example in deciding how enslaved people were to be designated in the Constitution and throughout the early years of the United States. It was raised in the eloquent speech, "What to the Slave Is Your Fourth of July?" by Frederick Douglass (Douglass, 1970, p. 349) and in a discussion by Harriet Jacobs (1861) of the annual practice of "muster," a time when armed whites terrorized the enslaved population in anticipation of revolts. Jacobs suggested that this institution served to unite whites across class lines (Roediger, 1998, p. 336) and by doing so also defined the parameters of citizenship. By this time Native Americans had been the first victims of colonial expansion. The advancing frontier, so celebrated in North American folklore, is predicated upon the dispossession of Native American lands and the elimination of the Native Americans themselves.

"During America's colonial era the ideal of white identity was male, English, Protestant, and privileged. Over time this ideal evolved into free, white, male, Christian, propertied and franchised. These characteristics developed into a norm that subsequently became synonymous with American" (Davis, 2005, p. 155 citing Babb, 1998). This identity was also intertwined with notions of freedom, thereby reinforcing the relationship between whiteness and American-ness (Davis, 2005, p. 155). As an outcome of the institution of slavery, "there were perfectly strategic reasons to allow the identity of American to evolve in opposition to blackness—exploitation, appropriation and subordination of Blacks and Black labor" (Davis, 2005, p. 156).

National identification in the United States has always been inherently tied to racial status. Racism was implemented as a means of control to establish and then maintain the structure of social organization in the "new" world. Racial domination was encoded in the process of nation-state building for the United States as "Blacks were sold out to encourage white unity and nationalist loyalty to the state" (Marx, 1998, p. 267). Slavery, therefore, played a critical role in
providing a justification for the unification of whites racially as a nation (Marx, 1998, p. 267), a pattern that continues to impact national identity, notions of whiteness, and formulations of race in U.S. society today. The message has been conveyed that whiteness renders one “superior,” and to maintain this status, allegiances must be placed with those in power who have the resources and can divvy up benefits.

While particularly applied as a black-white polarization, the ideological formulation of race was also flexible. A stigma of racial inferiority could be invoked as needed to maintain divisions and enforce a social hierarchy. This stigma was applied to native and Mexican peoples who were characterized as savages, unfit to own and govern their land “coincidentally” at the time that those lands were desired by the wealthy elite. The “Trail of Tears” (1838) and the annexation of one-third of Mexican land (1848) are brutal testaments to this history of internal colonization, land appropriation, and genocide. During the mid-19th century, Chinese workers were used as the primary labor force in building California's railroads. Their subsequent brutalization, subjugation, and exclusion were framed overwhelmingly in racial terms (Smedley, 1993, p. 268).

Throughout the 18th and the early 19th centuries the formation and consolidation of working-class whiteness (Roediger, 1999, p. 14) and “American” identity was founded not just on economic exploitation but also on racial folklore (Du Bois, 1970). Du Bois describes this dynamic eloquently:

It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them (Du Bois, 1979, pp. 700-701).

This centering and privileging of the European (and male) experience has been endemic—“not just a by-product of white supremacy but an imperative of racial domination” (Roediger, 1998, p. 6). The new nation of the United States was built using the labor of Africans, Chinese, and a large number of
immigrants, exploiting the land and natural resources of indigenous peoples and Mexican territories, simultaneously excluding most of these groups from citizenship and the benefits of “belonging.” By the mid-19th century the arbitrary ranking of peoples and racial ideology had diffused around much of the world (Smedley, 1998, p. 695) and infused into emerging notions of who was “American.” At the 1903 “World's Fair,” being “American” and being “white” were explicitly viewed as superior in stark contrast to the colonized world of those considered lesser beings, for example Filipinos and Africans. The legitimacy of the racial order was thereby validated and inscribed in “science” and social practice that reinforced the concepts of race, hierarchy, and nation.

This was a central component of the incorporation of the Americas that was the constitutive act of the formation of the modern world-system as a capitalist world-economy. It involved first the subordination of the Americas as a periphery to the Western European core states, and then the political subordination of additional peripheries included the colonization of Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific, and finally the incorporation of East Asia.

In the later part of the 19th century upon arrival immigrants from Europe were integrated into the expanding industrial economy in positions where there was opportunity for upward mobility. By the turn of the 20th century, the demand was made of European immigrants to become like “us,” like it or not, but for peoples from other parts of the globe it was that you will never be like “us” (Smedley, 1993, p. 32). Following the pattern established early on, distinctions were made between who was deemed as belonging and who did not, who was “same” and who was “different,” “civil,” and “savage,” who could own land, who could read, who could be in charge of and exploit other people's labor and who could not. These questions were resolved in naturalized hierarchies of race, language, culture, gender, and through an ambiguous concept of national belonging, whereby core values such as “democracy,” “equality,” “freedom,” and “justice” were evoked on behalf of “all” and implemented on behalf of “some.”

Another dimension that came to define belonging was the emergence of “American English” during the early part of the 19th century. “When the new nation formed, British culture was still dominant, and it was not yet clear what it meant to be American Noah. Webster thought it was vital to shake off “foreign manners” and build an independent national culture...Webster's other political purpose in writing his dictionaries was promoting national unity... He believed that a ‘federal language’ could be a ‘band of national union’” (Cohen, 2006, p. 4). Certainly, this played a significant role in the much later emergence of the “English-only” movement and the depiction of those speaking languages other than English as less “American,” and worthy.
In this context it is notable that the beginning of the 20th century many symbols of U.S. patriotism emerged. Like the idea of the American Dream and democracy, the American flag has come to signify the elevated status of the United States in the global order. The flag’s symbolic meaning has been traced initially to the period after the First Reconstruction and through World War I (O’Leary, 1999, pp. 7-9) with many legal and political struggles over the definitions of loyal or disloyal citizens. During the period (1870-1920), there was disagreement and conflict over which icons, heroes, events, and identities constituted the national memory and the historical narrative. The “Pledge of Allegiance” was written in 1891; the “Star-Spangled Banner” was taken as the national anthem in 1931 with points of contradiction, and ambivalence about American ideals throughout (O’Leary, 1999).

The turn of the century marked a period of contestation about who was to be designated “white,” as a huge influx of immigrants from Europe and other parts of the globe tested the boundaries of citizenry and racial identity. European immigrants worked primarily within the modern industrial sector that strategically provided them with opportunities for upward mobility (Blauner, 1972, p. 62). This reality challenges the popular notion that “all Americans start at the bottom” and work their way up the ladder. The racial labor principle designated a different bottom for different groups (Blauner, 1972, pp. 62-63). The slogan, “nation of immigrants” therefore describes most predominantly the European experience despite the fact that Jews, Italians, and Irish, were not fully accepted as whites although over time, European Americans were transformed into a panethnicity that represented the distancing of individuals from their national origin, heritage, and language, and being grouped as “white” (Alba, 1990, p. 312). White classification was always clearly linked to national identity. Policies and programs of the early 20th century such as the G.I. bill and FHA loans provided further opportunities for upward mobility for peoples of European descent, enlisting them in a panethnic racial “club” so that they “became party to strategies of social closure that maintained others’ exclusion” (Waldinger, 2001, p. 20).

The ideological and institutional framework of white supremacy set the parameters for the development of the United States and the modern world system. It ultimately led to the expansion of U.S. global hegemony and empire resulting in tentative positioning of all non-Europeans both domestically and internationally.
Who Is an “American”? The System and its Symbols

Who IS an American? Someone born in the United States...a citizen... someone who believes in the “American” dream? Canadians? Mexicans? For most people of European descent there is no question about what it means to be “American,” they just “are.” Similar to being white, being American and a U.S. citizen is an assumed state of being from which all “others” depart. This status can be bestowed by birth, through inheritance or naturalization, by association, or through a belief system, but it can also be retracted, especially for people of color.

In particular, “Black incorporation is difficult because the dominant culture relies on a narrow conception of who is and can be “American.” Black people are considered unfit for membership because cultural representations of American identity have been shaped and defined as not-Black... American identity is directly associated with (and defined as white)” (Davis, 2005, p. 154). “The value-laden identities of American and Black are crucial mechanisms in the apparatus of white supremacy, and are used relentlessly to maintain white cultural hegemony in America using “science” and attitudes to produce and reproduce systemic white hegemony (Davis, 2005, p. 154).

Similarly, in Asian American Dreams (2000, pp. ix-x) Helen Zia asks:

What does it take to become American? The spirit of the question is not about the mechanics of becoming American, a process with which we are familiar: involving ourselves in our communities, gaining citizenship, participating in the political process by getting the vote out, running for office and yes donating to campaigns. Nor is it about getting acculturated—most of us have been Americans plenty long enough to walk the talk and traverse the nuances of the rhyme, rhythm and soul of this culture. What we’ve really been wanting to know is how to become accepted as Americans. For if baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet were enough for us to gain acceptance as Americans, then there would be no periodic refrain about alien Asian spies, no persistent bewilderment toward us as “strange and exotic” characters, no cries of foul play by Asian Americans.

Zia speaks of Asian Americans alternately being reminded of the 19th century congressional hearings debating whether Asians were too corrupt,
untrustworthy, and uncouth to be Americans and then in the next decade, upholding Asians as model citizens. The reality is that regardless of the mechanics, degree of assimilation or cultural habits, distinctions are made between images of “true Americans” and people whose status is considered questionable by ambiguous borders and margins at which they are positioned. Thus native-born people of Asian descent are still asked where they come from, as Mia Tuan says—caught between being forever foreigner and honorary whites (1999).

This ambiguous nature of being “American” means that the label may refer to someone with citizenship, nationality, residency or a quality related to a sense of belonging or even “…a belief system; the way you act and think toward other people” (Keri, Black quoted in Bush, 2004, p. 107). In this way the meaning of being American shifts between something tangible (naturalization and citizenship), something unambiguous (bestowed by birth), something ambiguous (a belief system), and something transitory (a combination of any of these).

Martinez writes,

Today's origin myth and the resulting definition of national identity make for an intellectual prison where it is dangerous to ask big questions, moral questions, about this society's superiority; where otherwise decent people are trapped in a desire not to feel guilty, which the necessitates self-deception... When together we cease equating whiteness with 'Americanness,' a new day can dawn (1996, p. 24).

Even whites who say they never think about being American expect a range of privileges as part and parcel of their birthright, including the “psychological wage” of a belief that “we are the best” and the material goods that accompany being located in the homeland of the world elite. “[The United States] has no collective identity except as the best, the greatest country, superior to all others and the acknowledged model for the world” (Hobsbawm, 2003, p. B8).

The concepts of “America” and “Las Americas” have been rendered irrelevant and nonexistent, as the United States has defined these terms solely in relation to itself. Martinez speaks of this when she says, “If ever there was a time for people in this white-dominated super-power to reject its racist contempt for 20 other American countries that happen to be of color, it is right now as Bush charges from one racist war to another” (2003, pp. 69-72). There have been calls for U.S. national identity to be redefined for example as “United
Statesian;" however, this too is a contested label as other nations also have "united states" or "America" as part of their official name (e.g. Estados Unidos Mexicanos). Perhaps U.S. American is most appropriate. Confusion also exists about distinctions between nation, state, and country.

In "Don't Call This Country 'America': How the Name Was Hijacked and Why It Matters Today More than Ever," Martinez discusses the relationship between the appropriation of this label and the U.S. history and worldview. She argues that while there are more than 20 countries within the continents of North and South America, it is the policy of manifest destiny to deny their existence, thereby equating "American" with someone of European descent. "In most U.S. eyes, the norm for American remains white—whether we admit it or not... In unthinking self-defense, we unite with a name that reflects a worldview both imperialist and racist" (Martinez, 2003, p. 3). This articulates a presumption of U.S. dominance such that there is no consideration of a broader "American" world.

Another component of this presumed exceptionalism is expressed through the idea that "God blessed this country." What does this mean when there are as many gods as there are religions, and when most of the world's people do not subscribe to a religion that believes in a Judeo-Christian "God"? Why bless our country (5 percent of the global population) and not someone else's? This notion reinforces national pride and asserts a sense of superiority and specialness.

What determines someone's identity and status, as well as self-determined roles versus those set by state and legal systems? Does national identity necessarily mean citizenship; what does national loyalty require? It appears to depend on whether one has the power to assert judgment. Being white, one is generally provided options to be patriotic and nationalistic, or not, and to decide the terms on which one's identities are negotiated. You can decide to think about being American, or not. You can choose one identity one day, and another on a different day. A person of color, however, as described above, does not have that privilege. One's identity is selected for you, like an arranged marriage with legal mandate.

The Lived Experience of the U.S. Founding Principles

Deeply rooted in the concept of American identity is the notion of uniquely democratic values, idealized principles of freedom, equality and individualism, and the belief that nowhere around the globe do people care so much about justice. Popular discourse conveys implicit beliefs and contradictory
interpretation of these ideals. For example, democracy is often taken to mean very ordinary things, for example being able to "say what you want to say, when you want to say it" yet recent evidence of governmental surveillance outside legal constraints lays this commonplace "truth" to rest. Similarly a recent *New York Times* article posed, "Is Freedom Just Another Word for Many Things to Buy? That depends on your class status" (Schwartz et al, 2006, p. 14). For millions of Americans without health insurance, jobs or housing, freedom means being free to be sick, unemployed, or homeless.

The United States is believed to be unique—built on a democratic foundation and supported with inspirational mottos such as "all men are created equal" and "for the people, by the people." The *New York Times* asserts that "American Idealism...has always existed in a paradoxical linkage with greed, an alarming tolerance for social injustices and the racial blindness that allowed the same mind that shaped the Declaration of Independence to condone slavery" (1999).

Founded as it was by people fleeing religious and political persecution, the Bill of Rights explicitly stands for freedom of speech, including the right to dissent. Despite this, such rights have been parcelled out to those considered "deserving," in contrast to those who are not, throughout U.S. history. "Us versus them' thinking easily becomes a general call for American supremacy, the humiliation of 'the other'" (Nussbaum, 2001, p.11). After September 11th, many who called for historical analysis were labeled seditious anti-American traitors.

In *An American Dilemma*, Gunnar Myrdal articulated the moral contradiction whereby the United States professes an allegiance to democratic and egalitarian ideals while allowing the reality of racial discrimination to exist within its boundaries (1964 [1944]). This contradiction points to who is considered deserving, who counts, who belongs, who is visible, who matters, and through whose eyes policy is set. In the current era, tax rebates to the rich occur simultaneously with budget cuts to education, health, and welfare. This reality speaks to the way that concentrations of whites and of people of color at different locations within the spectrum of economic well-being are demonstrations of the racial order and how it is embedded in the national policy. As the majority of whites in the United States deny the existence of racial inequality and uphold the idea of the nation as a meritocracy, it is most often they who support the status quo by accepting dominant explanations for poverty as being culturally based rather than structural and systemic. Nation and empire built upon white supremacy are thereby sheltered from scrutiny. When one considers these ideological frames in a global context, the imperial mission is simultaneously protected. Immigration patterns are portrayed as proof that the United States is "God blessed" (why else would so many people
migrate there); rarely is the question of how wealth accumulated in that part of the world discussed. The “hidden” history of imperialism is not part of the national psyche despite over 100 interventions in the last century.

In this context it is important to note that contrary to the popular notion of 1960s only as period for revolution, the shift to the right we have and continue to experience took root. This trend includes the consolidation of a conservative agenda articulated politically by the Project for a New American Century and economically evidenced in the polarization of wealth worldwide. The foundation and legitimacy of more recent waves of anti-immigration legislations throughout the country emanates from this ideological perspective. The U.S. nation should be protected for those who “belong,” especially its wealth. While the mobilization of marginalized and underrepresented populations both nationally and globally in the 1960s Civil Rights, feminist, Black and Chicano power, students and Gay Rights movements represented and accomplished significant changes in the national psyche and structure of society, these changes tell only part of the story.

The painful irony is that for many immigrants particularly from Latin and South America, their journeys have been precipitated by U.S. intervention and destabilization within their nations of origin (Gonzalez, 2000). Similarly, the existence of minutemen, established “to bring national awareness to the illegal alien invasion of the United States” with the justification that “There are two common ways to seize a country: by military invasion with bayonets fixed and guns blazing, or by incrementally transferring an aggressor nation’s population into the target nation, thereby overwhelming the host country by sheer numbers. The United States is the victim of the latter method” (Gilchrest 2009), provides harsh reminder of the hypocrisy in protecting Mexican land from Mexicans.

In recent U.S. elections (prior to 2008), aside from the issue of alleged election fraud, roughly 40 percent of the eligible population did not vote; of those who voted, just 51 percent supported the winning candidate (United States Election Project, 2004). Between 1970 and 2000 the number of 18 to 29 year-olds who voted in presidential elections dropped from about one-half to one-third, and from one-third to less than one-fifth for congressional elections (Galston, 2001, p. B16). Furthermore, the United States ranks 139th internationally in voter turnout in national elections since 1945. In the 2000 presidential election, less than 50 percent of the voting-age population voted (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2003a, b) with 38 percent of U.S. voting age citizens who had not completed high school voting compared to 77 percent of those with a bachelor's degree or higher (Livingston et al., 2003, p. VI). It is also significant that nearly a third of the members of
the House and Senate, but only one percent of the population they represent, is millionaires (Sklar, 2003, p. 58).

Furthermore, there are significant racial disparities between the percent of people in the armed forces compared to the civilian population. African-Americans, who are roughly 13 percent of the population overall, account for 22 percent of the armed forces. The Defense Department acknowledges that recruits are drawn "primarily from families in the middle and lower-middle socioeconomic strata" (Dickinson, 2005). It then comes as little surprise that the policies this government endorses do not correspond to the needs, concerns and dreams of the average American despite the demand for national allegiance even from those people who are rendered "disposable." Government policies resulting in massive displacement of people from the U.S. Gulf Coast region post-Katrina serve as yet another vivid and painful example of the gap between rhetoric of nation, belonging, and citizenship, and the lived reality of these principles.

That the general public knows so little about the structure and status of nations, peoples, and societies outside of the United States further reinforces the sense of exceptionalism. This imparts the sense of being special and different, and the need to protect the treasured commodity of "American" democracy and benevolent image of the United States. The government directs, the police protect, the schools educate, and individuals are responsible for the course of their lives. If one is not successful it is due to lack of motivation or hard work, an explanation reminiscent of the culture-of-poverty framework so often called upon to justify the disproportionate concentrations of poverty within certain populations, in particular communities of color. This rhetoric is replicated in relationship to the analysis of nations, such that the institutions and structures that have led to the concentration of power and wealth in the United States are denied and the consequences are viewed as natural, based on a presumption of superior intellect and culture. "Ours is a society that routinely generates destitution—and then, perversely, relieves its conscience by vilifying the destitute" (Ehrenreich, 2002, p. 9).

Overall this raises the question of the purpose and function of nationalism. In his famous work, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson locates the rise of "nations" as corresponding to the development of industrial capitalism, a historically contextualized concept, and asserts that once the printing press opened the possibilities of communication across territories, it became necessary to consolidate identity within communities. It has come to mean something very different.

There is a need for deeper understanding of global and local concerns as individuals, as a society, as a nation, and as members of the broadest all-
encompassing community of humanity in the 21st century. It is in this context that the question of nation, national pride, and empire must be analyzed. Why would qualities of cooperation and caring being presented as “American” as opposed to “human” nature? How could it be true that only “Americans” can lay claim to generosity, democratic ideals, the striving for freedom, and the passion for equality?

Hope ultimately resides in the ability of the peoples of the United States to reckon with the interconnectedness of all humanity, to conceive of ourselves as members of a global society, rather than as “Americans”—all the while taking responsibility for the actions taken in “our” name, and with our taxes. This is similar to considering oneself as part of the human community, positioned and allied with the world’s majority, yet recognizing the social, economic, and political realities of racism. Therein lies the particular responsibilities of peoples of European ancestry within the United States who specifically and especially benefit from the presumption of white superiority asserted upon communities of color with the nation and upon nations around the globe as an expression of the imperial obligation.

The nationalism of those in positions of dominance, like whiteness, is a fabrication with real social consequence constructed solely to bestow value upon its owners. It is, as the “Race Traitors” describe whiteness, like royalty—an identity propped up to render some people more worthy and righteous than others (Ignatiev and Garvey, 1996).

Is not nationalism—that devotion to a flag, an anthem, a boundary so fierce it engenders mass murder—one of the great evils of our time, along with racism, along with religious hatred? These ways of thinking—cultivated, nurtured, indoctrinated from childhood on—have been useful to those in power and deadly for those out of power... in a nation like ours—huge, possessing thousands of weapons of mass destruction—what might have been harmless pride becomes an arrogant nationalism dangerous to others and to ourselves (Zinn, 2005).

This question is of particular relevance given the history and development of the United States. Nation, therefore, in the belly of the beast sounds and acts a lot like empire. It's time to reconcile that reality and consider alternatives. As Andrea Smith recently said at the United States Social Forum, “Another World is Possible, Another United States is Necessary,” but is it?
References


Endnotes


2 In an article entitled "Oh, Gods," Toby Lester points out that new religions are born all the time. He quotes David B. Barrett, author of the World Christian Encyclopedia: "We have identified nine thousand and nine hundred distinct and separate religions in the world, increasing by two or three new religions every day" (2002. "Oh Gods!" *Atlantic Monthly*. February, p. 41). Furthermore, 67 percent of the world's people are non-Christian (www.adherents.com 2003).