Myths and [mis] perceptions

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WORLDVIEW

U.S. society is extraordinarily complex, diverse, and in many ways contradictory (Hartz 1955: 52). Yet Americans share a worldview that has been consolidated through laws and institutions, and that has become a model for a large number of countries in this century. This worldview is founded on the U.S. version of economic capitalism, which exalts private property, market forces, individual initiative, and liberalism—and liberalism’s goal of creating greater freedom for individuals, who, at least in theory, have equal rights and opportunities before the law (David Smith 1968). According to U.S. thought, the individual enjoys a privileged position. A pivotal notion here is the subordination of governmental institutions to the individual, whose responsibility and right it is to participate in the handling of public affairs. Because public power corrupts, the logic goes, government officials must be rigorously controlled.

Former U.S. president Harry Truman (1945–1950) declared that “the State exists for the benefit of man, not man for the benefit of the State” (NYT, March 4, 1947), reiterating a persisting theme in U.S. society, whose culture—films, literature, and theater—celebrates individual figures who confront, and usually vanquish, the powers of government as well as all manner of external threats. Complementing and reinforcing this worldview is the myth of the American Dream—the premise that anyone can go from rags to riches (or become president) in this land of opportunity and freedom, a promised land, at least for those who adhere to its prescribed lifestyle.
The individual’s rights are upheld by a number of mechanisms, including a wide range of organizations, both large and small, that constitute an extensive and complex social fabric. A multiplicity of groups, representing the interests of the many communities that practice participatory or “direct” democracy or who supervise and control their government officials, have appeared on every level and are concerned with a vast range of issues.

These broad arenas for individual action are supported, but also limited, by stipulations in law and custom. For example, custom dictates that wealthy individuals should return some of their wealth to the community. These philanthropists are rewarded with tax deductions in the short term and renown in the long term as their names are preserved in foundations, plaques, and buildings.

This exaltation of the individual, allied to an innate mistrust of the State and a preference for intermediate organizations, has generated in the United States an abiding disdain for systems of political ideas that are formally structured as ideologies; these are associated with institutions that curtail or inhibit the individual’s freedom of choice and action. This goes some way toward explaining the absence of militants or rigid, structured platforms in the U.S. political system. In the United States, as opposed to the rest of the world, political parties modify their programs according to the region, the election, the period, and/or the individual, with political debate focusing, therefore, on specific issues (Gabel 1974: 254). ¹

Despite the diversity and heterogeneity of their social fabric and their mistrust of ideologies, Americans have nonetheless created structured bodies of ideas to explain reality and also to serve as guidelines for action. The great majority of American society, including its most politically representative forces, shares a dominant worldview, even though specific groups or individuals may lean toward one or another variant of the conservative and liberal ideologies, generally converging on fundamental principles and diverging on the details.

Points of contention between conservatives and liberals have included the extent of the State’s role in resolving social problems and the form that foreign assistance should take. In very general terms, conservatives tend to assign a greater responsibility to the individual, while liberals have a “greater awareness of the group, and of the community’s responsibility for the maintenance of social welfare” (Marcus 1960: 224). Regarding foreign aid, conservatives have long held that the emphasis should be on private investment and trade; liberals, meanwhile, have stressed a greater role for government and multilateral resources.

¹On this topic, also see Shils 1968 and Aron 1966.
Even though they may disagree within the political arena, Republicans and Democrats, independents and libertarians, are linked by an essential set of values. This diversity founded on unity, this extraordinarily developed capacity to generate peaceful consensus, lies at the very heart of the enduring strength of U.S. institutions.

Other characteristics of U.S. political culture are optimism, pragmatism, and impatience. Americans believe that humanity is in a state of perpetual progress, confirmed by continual technological advancement. This widespread faith in technology is largely a result of the importance that the United States has traditionally assigned to education and the development of knowledge. It forms an important part of the American belief that almost any problem can be solved with initiative and the right technology, as long as both are applied in a timely manner (Marcuse 1968: 221-39).

Thus the American worldview is predicated on the principles of equality, individual freedom, respect for private property and free market forces, and a belief in the exceptional character of the United States and the American people (to be discussed in the next chapter). Such ideas pervade Americans’ very existence and define how they perceive themselves and other nations. These principles also inform American social science and journalism, whose exponents frequently seek to present facts in an objective manner and take a variety of perspectives into account.

“THE WORLD’S BEST HOPE”

Americans are absolutely convinced that they enjoy the best political, economic, and social system in history. As Stanley Hoffmann pointed out, Americans see themselves as the “favorites of history” (1968: 112). Heightened self-esteem and self-praise are nothing new; these have always formed part of the history of the United States. Shortly after the United States gained its independence from Great Britain, Thomas Jefferson announced that this new nation was the “hope of the world.” Some years later Abraham Lincoln added that the United States was the “last, and best hope on earth.” And well into the twentieth century, Ronald Reagan assured Americans that “U.S. citizens are freer than any other people” and that “they have achieved more than any other people” (in Armstrong 1983: 31-32).

These beliefs have been fundamental in shaping U.S. foreign policy. Americans have often felt a messianic need to impose their system of democracy, free economy, and social organization on the rest

1Not so many years ago, the Soviets were quick to reply that it was they who enjoyed the chosen system, in a clash of national egos that nourished the long-standing conflict between the two superpowers.
of the world, usually justifying their actions by asserting that sharing American ideas benefits everyone, including Americans. Such actions would be unexceptional if they were founded on egoism alone. But there is a spiritual dimension to this view of foreign policy, evident in the fact that presidential initiatives are termed "doctrines," as though they were part of the canonical precepts of religion. This deeply ingrained belief in the exceptional character of the United States has been used to justify this country's acts of aggression toward weaker nations.

The United States' arrogance, as well as the country's continued success, has provoked a broad range of reactions throughout the world. Some applaud Americans for their ability to generate wealth, their scientific advancements, capacity for organization, common sense, the high level of freedom most U.S. citizens enjoy, the tight rein they maintain on their political leaders, and their generosity. In many international sectors, the American way of life is a model to be emulated.

However, others criticize their defects and incongruities. They point out the United States' pervasive racism, unrefined cuisine, and lack of taste; the infantile nature of Americans' sense of humor; the drug addiction, violence, and loneliness that characterize life in the big cities; and the proliferation of unbalanced individuals, who, obsessed with success, adopt extravagant forms of conduct, ranging from impersonating Elvis to founding religious cults or cannibalizing their neighbors. The hypocrisY of U.S. foreign policy, which preaches the values of democracy while supporting corrupt and repressive governments, is also a frequent target for critics.

Following chapters focus on Americans' innate belief in themselves as an exceptional people, using this as a doorway to a more general exploration of the history of the United States and its relationship with Mexico.

Why Americans Believe They Are Exceptional

The American system encompasses a number of valuable features, among them the solidity of U.S. institutions and the clear-sightedness of the country's leadership at key historical moments. However, other factors have also played an important role in the history of the United States, and one of these is luck. In the United States' struggle for independence, the absence of feudal institutions and the meager opposition from the colonial British government meant that the country had no need to create a new central power in order to destroy the old order (Hartz 1955: 5, 16, 42). The human cost of independence was fairly minor: after eight years at war, the American forces had suf-
ffered only 4,435 battleground fatalities. This, together with the infant nation's able leadership, allowed a system to emerge that guaranteed ample margins of freedom for its citizens.

This lucky star continued to shine into the nineteenth century, when, isolated from the mainstream of European intrigue, the United States annexed extensive territories formerly belonging to its weaker neighbors. The U.S. invasion of Mexico in 1846, in which Mexico lost half of its national territory, cost the United States the lives of 1,733 combatants and some $170 million (in 1972 dollars) (Handleman 1973: 28–29). In 1867, the United States purchased Alaska from Russia, and in 1898, after an easy victory over an exhausted Spanish empire, it occupied Cuba, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico.

This expansion brought with it vast material resources, which were exploited with foresight and diligence. The expanding American experiment also served as a magnet, attracting an influx of dynamic and enterprising immigrants from all over the world. Once arrived, these immigrants had greatly varied experiences, with Africans, Chinese, and Mexicans, along with Native Americans, bearing the brunt of the heavy social costs of this ambitious experiment.

This period was followed by a schism between two opposing worldviews—the northern and the southern. The Civil War (1861–1865) inflicted lasting scars on the American social panorama. Its fatalities, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, make it the United States' most costly conflict in terms of casualties as a proportion of the nation's total population. In the realm of ideas, this conflict largely suppressed the southern worldview (although the "Jim Crow" laws extended the life of segregation).

Following the Civil War, the United States embarked on a redefinition and consolidation of its worldview. The "progressive" era that covers the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries eliminated many of capitalism's most glaring defects, thus preempting the active and vocal Left that was engaged in vigorous political planning for an alternative, socialist worldview (LaFeber and Polenberg 1975: 316–17).

In 1917, the United States entered World War I, just as the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia, initiating the global confrontation between two diametrically opposed worldviews that was to dominate the twentieth century. Within the United States, the ruling elites unleashed a ferocious campaign against the Left in the "Red Scare" of the 1920s, which effectively eliminated it as a viable alternative.

During capitalism's most serious crisis—the Great Depression of 1929—Fascism and Nazism played havoc with the European democracies, but in the United States even the most agitated of political protesters dared not overstep the system's rules.

By the end of World War II, the United States had attained a level of power unprecedented in human history. The wars of the first half
of the century had stimulated unparalleled economic growth in the United States, while the costs of war—in matériel and human lives—was shouldered primarily by other nations. In World War I, for example, the United States lost 116,516 soldiers in combat, compared to Russia’s total of 1,700,000; and in World War II, the United States suffered 291,557 casualties, while the Soviet Union reported total losses of 6,115,000.

**UNITY AND DISSENT IN THE POSTWAR PERIOD**

The second half of the twentieth century can be subdivided into three periods. The first two were summed up by Henry Kissinger: “after the Second World War, the American people were united in the firm belief that our cause was just, our purposes benign. . . . [After] Vietnam, we became a nation divided, full of doubt, and with little confidence in the kindness of destiny” (DOS 1975). The third period began in the 1980s and continues to the present.

World War II confirmed that the United States’ participation was indispensable in global affairs, thus resolving a long-standing struggle for dominance between the country’s internationalists and isolationists. Fighting under the liberal standards of individual freedom, free trade, and self-determination, the United States confirmed its exceptional character on the battlegrounds of World War II; it remained to be tested in the conflict with the Soviet Union.

During the Cold War, the United States was able to demolish every trace of left-wing organizations within its own territory, reaffirming the unity and consensus underlying the country’s worldview, fine-tuning their instruments, and imposing relationships of domination. Although coercion was used (in the witch-hunts of McCarthyism), in the main the majority view was imposed by means of hegemony, with the government and the media constantly reiterating the principles of the dominant worldview. In a society predisposed to believe any government statement, these ends were easily achieved.

A consequence of this process was the homogenization of society and the weakening of the cultural diversity introduced by the steady immigration stream. Paul Piccone noted that “Taylorization, capital-intensive technology, the culture industry, and consumerism, combined within a productive system that was based on the automobile and military expenditures, and this facilitated the penetration of capitalist relations into all crevices of everyday life” (1978: xxi).

Herbert Marcuse has suggested that American culture fell into a certain “unidimensionality” during the 1950s. Most Americans opted to adapt to the established order and abandoned all imaginings of alternate futures which, by questioning the intellectual validity and
legitimacy of the present, might support a different worldview. Drawing on terminology presented in the preceding chapter, Americans' capacity to create "collective dreams" was diluted. Marcuse maintains that perhaps "the most singular achievement of advanced industrial society" was that critical theory no longer had "the rationale for transcending this society" (1968: xii). Quashed in the arenas of politics and of ideas, critical theory's ties to any significant social group or social class were severed. Alternative worldviews persisted only as intellectual proposals, relegated to library collections or to clandestine radical groups in the ghettos of political marginalization.

This unidimensionality of American society, this gathering lethargy, came to an end during the 1960s and 1970s, when the established order was shaken by a series of protests against ethnic, political, economic, and gender inequalities, against the many vices (real and imagined) of industrialized society, and against the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. The greatest blow in terms of foreign affairs was surely the intervention in Vietnam, where the United States suffered 58,135 dead and a serious political defeat. This debacle was catastrophic for a people that had, so far, never lost a conflict on foreign soil (Hoffmann 1968). These years brought the exceptional character of the United States into question. U.S. society's enduring faith in its leadership crumbled, and public interest in foreign affairs began to rise. A majority of the population had concluded that their leaders needed permanent oversight, and this included their activities in other countries.

The 1980s went some way toward restoring confidence in the exceptional nature of the American system, but society's mistrust of its leadership, bred during the 1960s and 1970s, was not dispelled. In the sphere of foreign policy, this heightened awareness was reflected in an effort to understand and tolerate the differences of other societies and in a marked reticence to use military force to impose the United States' will on other nations. This attitude persisted even after the Cold War's demise. An important change taking place during the 1980s was that domination abroad came to be exerted through economic instruments and multilateral institutions that enjoy the support of most world governments and in which the most important member is the United States. Democracy and peace are now enforced mainly through the United Nations or through economic adjustment programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund.

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Relationships of domination, hegemony, and coercion are useful concepts when analyzing events within a nation-state whose government
Chapter 2

holds a monopoly on the use of violence. To apply these concepts to the study of international relations may seem somewhat unconventional; the international system lacks a supranational authority able to exert coercion. Nonetheless, these concepts are useful in the study of an international system that includes strong and weak nations, and in which powerful countries can resort to force or hegemony in order to impose their will.

The goals of U.S. foreign policy have always been to defend America's interests, to combat threats to its integrity, and to promote (sometimes to impose) its lifestyle and forms of political or economic organization. What has evolved is the manner in which these goals are pursued and adapted to the moment, the region, and the country. Although during the nineteenth century Washington rarely hesitated to dispatch marines or gunships to impose its will by force, by the turn of the century a transition was under way. This era witnessed significant European expansion into Africa and Asia, while the United States merely demanded that these lands open their doors to U.S. trade and capital in a "anticolonial imperialism" that sought to dominate without actually occupying territory (and facilitated the Morrow-Calles understanding of 1927).

The United States' self-perception, the nature of its political system, and certain changes in the international community's agenda all made persuasion an increasingly important tool. A National Security Council report dated March 1953 reflects the alternative policies regarding Latin America that received consideration in the postwar era (NSC 1953a). The report was based on the notion that the "salient political feature" in the Western Hemisphere was the "United States' predominant status" (NSC 1953a: annex, p. 1). The NSC's intelligence analysts confirmed a widely shared idea: that the Soviets could potentially project their power into the region, and that "Communism in the Americas" was a "potential threat" (JSPC 1947: 20; NSC 1948: 2). Three options were suggested:

- A "policy of compulsion," defined as a return to "military force, economic sanctions, and political pressures to compel Latin American countries to act in accordance" with the United States' best interests. It was concluded that, at that time, this option would prove "disastrous."

- A "policy of detachment," which would rely on "occasional favors, and the occasional display of military force in urgent circumstances, to keep the situation under control." This option was rejected: given the ongoing global confrontation with the Communist countries, such a policy might facilitate the "rise to pre-
dominance in Latin America of forces inimical to United States interests.

- A “policy of cooperation,” which would accentuate the “community of interests, the close interdependence both in peace and in war, and the similarity of goals of all Western Hemisphere countries, including Canada.” It was felt that this would be the policy that could “best serve the interests of the United States” in both the short and the long term.

An important aspect of this NSC document is that it states the manner in which this goal is to be achieved: the best method would be to convince Latin Americans that it is in their interest to “collaborate” with the United States, with whom they share a “similarity of objectives.” The U.S. Department of State also emphasized that the goal for American foreign policy should be to persuade Latin Americans that “their own best interest requires an orientation of . . . policies to our objectives” and that the United States was treating them fairly and respecting their economic and social aspirations (DOS 1952: 34–36).

To pursue this objective, U.S. policy makers implemented a number of procedures. Intelligence systems produced extensive reports on the situation in Latin American countries and on the views of their elites. Opinion polls, meanwhile, provided “snapshots” of public opinion; in 1947, public opinion polls carried out by American intelligence indicated that Latin American “majority opinion is not only Catholic and patriotic, and thus inherently anti-Communist, but it is also strongly pro-democratic and reformist” within a “predominantly capitalist framework” (CIG 1947). Some of these opinion polls cast doubt on the accepted myth of Mexico’s anti-American stance. The United States Information Agency reported that “in no other countries . . . does the US rank higher in the opinion of the general public than it does [in Mexico and Brazil]. A large majority [of Mexicans and Brazilians] found US economic policies generally helpful [and were favorable toward] private foreign investment” (USIA 1956: iii–iv).

The United States’ preference for hegemony does not mean that it has renounced the use of coercion. To the contrary, a wide range of military, economic, and diplomatic instruments for coercion remained, and a multitude of arguments were developed to justify their use. An internal State Department document from 1952 notes that the principle of nonintervention was “not a United States doctrine: it was imposed . . . by the unanimous will of the Latin American states as the price for their participation in the inter-American system” and was directed “solely against [the United States]” (DOS 1952: 22). According to another document, an important U.S. goal in Latin America
should be to “prevent the spread of irresponsibility, of extreme na­tionalism, and of the belief that [this region] can ever be immune from the exercise of American power” (NSC 1952: annex, p. 11).

Following chapters include explanations of the different ways that hegemony and coercion were combined, as well as the justifications that were presented for their use.