

Jensen, R. (2004). *Citizens of the empire: The struggle to claim our humanity*.

San Francisco: City Lights Books, pp. 1 – 17.

The Greatest Nation on Earth

In any debate, the person who has the power to set the framework and define the terms has an enormous advantage. Part of the struggle for the antiwar movement, and those taking critical positions more generally, is to avoid being trapped in the rhetoric of the dominant culture.

Especially since 9/11, through the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, there have been three crucial rhetorical frameworks that have been difficult to challenge in public. All of them are related, but each has to be deconstructed separately. First is the assertion that the United States is the greatest nation on earth. Second is the claim that one must support the troops because they defend our freedom. Third is the assumption that patriotism is a positive value. Anyone who challenges any of these in public in the contemporary United States risks being labeled irrelevant, crazy, or both. But all three claims must be challenged if there is to be progressive political change.

My critique does not dictate a single political strategy for dealing with these rhetorical frameworks in public. With different audiences and in different situations, different strategies will be appropriate. But it is crucial to be clear about why these ideas are dangerous. Embedded in each are moral and political assertions and assumptions that have to be resisted, which should make progressive political people cautious about buying into the frameworks at all. I will suggest that it's important not just to criticize the dominant culture's version of each claim but to step back and critique the framework itself.

One of the requirements for being a mainstream American politician, Republican or Democrat, is the willingness to repeat constantly the assertion that the United States is "the greatest nation on earth," maybe even "the greatest nation in history." At hearings for the House Select Committee on Homeland Security on July 11, 2002, Texas Republican Dick Arme described the United States as "the greatest, most free nation the world has ever known." California Democrat Nancy Pelosi declared that America is "the greatest country that ever existed on the face of the earth." Even other nations that want to play ball with the United States have caught on. When George W. Bush visited our new favored ally in the Persian Gulf, Qatar, the *Al-Watan* newspaper described it as "A visit by the president of the greatest nation."

I want to offer a different assessment: Any claim to being the greatest nation is depraved and dangerous, especially when made in the empire.

Sign of Pathology

Imagine your child, let's call him Joe, made the declaration, "I am the greatest ten-year-old on earth." If you were a loving parent, interested in helping your child develop into a decent person, what would you say? Let's assume you believe Joe to be a perfectly lovely boy, maybe even gifted in many ways. Would you indulge him in that fantasy? Most of us would not.

Instead, you would explain to Joe that however special he is, he is one of millions of ten-year-olds on the planet at that moment, and that—if there were a measure of greatness that could take into account all relevant attributes and abilities—the odds are against Joe coming out on top. But more important than that, you would explain to Joe that people are a wonderfully complex mix of many characteristics that are valued differently by different people, and that it would be impossible to make any sensible assessment of what makes one person the greatest. Even if you reduced it to a single item—let's say the ability to solve mathematical problems—there's no imaginable way to label one person the greatest. That's why people have so much fun arguing about, for example, who is the greatest hitter in baseball history. There's no way to answer the question definitively, and no one really expects to ever win; the fun is in the arguing.

Now, if Joe makes it to adulthood and continues to claim he is the greatest, we would come to one of two conclusions (assuming he's not saying it just to hype the sales of his book or sell tickets

to some event): Either he is mentally unstable or he's an asshole. That is, either he believes it because there's something wrong with him cognitively and/or emotionally, or he believes it because he's an unpleasant person. It's painfully obvious that the best evidence that Joe is not the greatest is his claim to be that, for we can observe that throughout history people who have something in them that we might call "greatness" tend not to proclaim their own superiority.

So, we would want to put the brakes on young Joe's claim to greatness as soon as possible because of what tends to happen to people who believe they are the greatest: They lose perspective and tend to discount the feelings and legitimate claims of others. If I am so great, the reasoning goes, certainly my view of the world must be correct, and others who disagree with me—because they lack my greatness—must simply be wrong. And if they are wrong, well, I'm certainly within my rights as the greatest to make sure things turn out the way that I know (by virtue of my greatness) they should. The ability to force others to accept the decisions of those with greatness depends, of course, on power. If Joe takes positions in society that give him power, heaven help those below him.

All these observations are relevant to national assertions of greatness. Such claims ignore the complexity of societies and life within them. Even societies that do great things can have serious problems. We are all aware that a person with admirable qualities in one realm can have quite tragic flaws in another. The same is true of nations. Constant claims to being the greatest reveal a pathology in the national character. Crucially, that pathology is most dangerous in nations with great economic or military power (which tend to be the ones that most consistently make such claims). That is, the nations that claim to be great are usually the ones that can enforce their greatness through coercion and violence.

Nothing in this argument denies the ways that children or nations sometimes do great things. It is rather the claim to uniqueness in one's greatness that is at issue.

What is Greatness?

Let's assume, for the sake of discussion, that determining which nation on earth is the greatest would be a meaningful and useful enterprise. On what criteria would we base the evaluation? And how would the United States stack up? In other words, what is greatness?

We might start with history, where we would observe that the histories of nation-states typically are not pretty. At best, it's a mixed bag. The United States broke away from a colonial power ruled by a monarch, espousing the revolutionary political ideal of democratic rights for citizens. Even though the Founding Fathers' definition of "citizen" was narrow enough to exclude the vast majority of the population, that breakthrough was an inspirational moment in human history. That's why, when declaring an independent Vietnam in 1945, Ho Chi Minh borrowed language from the U.S. Declaration of Independence.

But from the beginning the new American experiment was also bathed in blood. The land base of the new nation was secured by a genocide that was almost successful. Depending on the estimate one uses for the pre-contact population of the continent (the number of people here before Columbus)—12 million is a conservative estimate—the extermination rate was from 95 to 99 percent. That is to say, by the end of the Indian wars at the close of the nineteenth century, the European invaders had successfully eliminated almost the entire indigenous population (or the "merciless Indian Savages" as they are labeled in the Declaration of Independence). Let's call that the first American holocaust.

The second American holocaust was African slavery, a crucial factor in the emergence of the textile industry and the industrial revolution in the United States. Historians still debate the number of Africans who worked as slaves in the New World and the number who died during the process of enslavement in Africa, during the Middle Passage, and in the New World. But it is safe to say that tens of millions of people were rounded up and that as many as half of them died in the process.

Some would say greatness is not perfection but the capacity for critical self-reflection, the ability to correct mistakes, the constant quest for progressive change. If that were the case, then a

starting point would be honest acknowledgment of the way in which the land base and wealth of the nation had been acquired, leading to meaningful attempts at reparations for the harm caused along the way. Have the American people taken serious steps in that direction on these two fundamental questions regarding indigenous and African peoples? Is the privilege of running casinos on reservation land a just resolution of the first holocaust? Are the Voting Rights and Civil Rights Acts an adequate solution to the second? Can we see the many gains made on these fronts, yet still come to terms with lingering problems?

And what of the third American holocaust, the building of the American empire in the Third World? What did the nation that finally turned its back on slavery turn to?

—The Spanish-American War and the conquest of the Philippines, at a cost of at least 200,000 Filipino lives.

—The creation of a U.S.-dominated sphere in Central America backed by regular military incursions to make countries safe for U.S. investment, leading to twentieth-century support for local dictatorships that brutalized their populations, at a total cost of hundreds of thousands of dead and whole countries ruined.

—The economic and diplomatic support of French efforts to recolonize Vietnam after World War II and, after the failure of that effort, the U.S. invasion of South Vietnam and devastation of Laos and Cambodia, at a cost of 4 million Southeast Asians dead and a region destabilized.

We could list every immoral and illegal U.S. intervention into other nations, which often had the goal of destroying democratically elected governments, undermining attempts by people to throw off colonial rule, or ensuring that a government would follow orders from Washington. But the point is easily made: Subjecting claims of American greatness to historical review suggests a more complex story. The United States has made important strides in recent decades to shed a brutal racist history and create a fairer society at home, though still falling short of a truly honest accounting and often leaving the most vulnerable in seemingly perpetual poverty. At the same time, U.S. policy abroad has been relentlessly barbaric. Such an examination would lead to some simple conclusions: The United States was founded on noble principles that it has advanced and, often at the same time, undermined. As the United States has emerged as a world power with imperial ambitions—and we rest now at a place where commentators from all points on the political spectrum use the term "empire" to describe the United States, often in a celebratory fashion—we have much to answer for. Historically, empires are never benevolent, and nothing in history has changed that should lead to the conclusion that the United States will be the first benevolent empire. Unless, of course, one believes that God has a hand in all this.

What's God Got to Do With It?

During the 2000 presidential campaign, George W. Bush was trying to recover from his association with the painfully public bigotry of Bob Jones University. On matters of racism, it's impossible—even for politicians—to make claims about America's heroic history. But in remarks at the Simon Wiesenthal Center and the Museum of Tolerance, Bush said, "For all its flaws, I believe our nation is chosen by God and commissioned by history to be the model to the world of justice and inclusion and diversity without division."

This invocation of a direct connection to God and truth—what we might call the "pathology of the anointed"—is a peculiar and particularly dangerous feature of American history and the "greatest nation" claims. The story we tell ourselves goes something like this: Other nations throughout history have acted out of greed and self-interest, seeking territory, wealth, and power. They often did bad things in the world. Then came the United States, touched by God, a shining city on the hill, whose leaders created the first real democracy and went on to be the beacon of freedom for people around the world. Unlike the rest of the world, we act out of a cause nobler than greed; we are both the model of, and the vehicle for, peace, freedom, and democracy in the world.

That is a story that can be believed only in the United States by people sufficiently insulated from the reality of U.S. actions abroad to maintain such illusions. It is tempting to laugh at and dismiss these rhetorical flourishes of pandering politicians, but the commonness of the chosen-by-

God assertions—and the lack of outrage or amusement at them—suggests that the claims are taken seriously both by significant segments of the public and the politicians. Just as it has been in the past, the consequences of this pathology of the anointed will be borne not by those chosen by God, but by those against whom God's-chosen decide to take aim.

What stance on these matters would leaders who took seriously their religious tradition take? Scripture, for those who believe it to be an authority, is—as is typical—mixed on these matters. But certainly one plausible reading of that text would lead one not to claims of greatness but of humility. As one of the Old Testament prophets, Micah, put it: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8).

In the second presidential debate on October 11, 2000, Bush himself made this point. When asked how he would try to project the United States around the world, Bush used the word "humble" five times:

It really depends upon how our nation conducts itself in foreign policy. If we're an arrogant nation, they'll resent us, if we're a humble nation but strong, they'll welcome us. And our nation stands alone right now in the world in terms of power, and that's why we've got to be humble and yet project strength in a way that promotes freedom.

We're a freedom-loving nation. And if we're an arrogant nation, they'll view us that way, but if we're a humble nation, they'll respect us. I think the United States must be humble and must be proud and confident of our values, but humble in how we treat nations that are figuring out how to chart their own course.

Although all available evidence suggests Bush and his advisers (or any other U.S. president, for that matter) were not serious about pursuing a foreign policy based in humility, his comments were sensible. Humility, it is important to remember, does not mean humiliation; it is a sign of strength, not weakness. It means recognizing that the United States is one nation among many; that the only way to security is to work together democratically with other nations; and that multilateral institutions must be strengthened and we must be willing to accept the decisions of such bodies, even when they go against us.

In other words, the exact opposite of the path that the Bush administration has pursued.

Blame America First?

When one points out these kinds of facts and analyses, which tend to get in the way of the "greatest nation" claims, a standard retort is, "Why do you blame America first?" Though it is a nonsensical question, the persistence and resonance of it in the culture requires a response.

First, it should not be controversial that when assessing the effects of actions, one is most clearly morally responsible for one's own actions. Depending on the circumstances, I may have obligations to act to curtail someone else's immoral behavior, but without question I have an obligation to curtail my own immoral behavior. In some circumstances, if someone else's immoral behavior is so egregious that the harm it does to others requires immediate intervention and such intervention is feasible in the real world, then there can be cases in which I have cause to temporarily put on hold an assessment of my own behavior to stop the greater evil. But such cases are rare, and the human tendency to rationalize our own bad behavior should give us pause whenever we claim that the greater good requires us to focus on the mistakes other people make before we tackle our own.

So, in place of the common phrase "judge not and ye shall not be judged," perhaps the rule should be "invite judgment of yourself by others, come to judgment about your behavior, commit to not repeating immoral behavior, repair to the degree possible the damage done by previous immoral acts, and keep an eye on others to help them in the same process."

There is no reason that the same logic that applies to us as individuals should not apply to us collectively as citizens of a nation. From such a vantage point, the emptiness of the accusation that one shouldn't "blame America first" becomes clear. America should be blamed first, if and when America is blameworthy. If the United States has engaged in behavior that cannot be morally

justified—such as the invasion of another country to overthrow its legally elected democratic government for the self-interested material gain of some segment of U.S. society—whom else should we blame? Because people often use the term "blame" in a way to redirect accountability (when Johnny blames Joey for breaking the toy, we suspect that Johnny actually had something to do with the accident himself), the phrase is designed to divert people from an honest assessment. A better formulation would be, "Why do you hold America accountable first?" In that case, the obvious answer—we should hold America accountable first when America is responsible—is somewhat easier for a reasonable person to see.

That does raise the question, of course, of who is a reasonable person. We might ask that question about, for example, George H. W. Bush, the father. In 1988, after the U.S. Navy warship *Vincennes* shot down an Iranian commercial airliner in a commercial corridor, killing 290 civilians, the then-vice president said, "I will never apologize for the United States of America. I don't care what the facts are."

Whether the firing was an understandable reaction to the misidentification of the Iranian aircraft (as apologists claim), a deliberate act to send Iran a message about U.S. intentions in the region (as some suspect), or the responsibility primarily of a hyperaggressive, trigger-happy commander (as others argue), Bush's declaration is an extraordinarily blunt admission that he does not adhere to even minimal moral standards. The grotesqueness of the episode was only compounded by the fact that Bush later awarded the ship's commander a Legion of Merit award for "exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding service." We could call it the "blame America never" approach.

The Facts Matter

My position does not lead to a blanket denunciation of the United States, our political institutions, or our culture. I simply put forward the proposition that facts matter. If we are to be moral people, everything about the United States, like everything about any country, needs to be examined and assessed. People often tell me, "You assume that everything about the United States is bad." But, of course, I do not assume that; it would be as absurd as the assumption that everything about the United States is good. After a lecture in which I outlined some of the important advances in the law of free speech in the United States but was also critical of contemporary U.S. foreign policy, someone in the audience asked, "Is there anything about America that you like?" Yes, I said, there is much I like—for example, the advances in the law of free speech that I just spent considerable time describing and celebrating. For some reason, honest assessments of both the successes and failures of the United States are seen as being hypercritical and negative.

The facts do matter, of course. And the "greatest nation on earth" mantra tends to lead us to get the facts wrong. Take the question of foreign aid. One would assume that the greatest nation on earth, which also happens to be the wealthiest nation on the planet with the largest economy, gives generously to nations less fortunate. And, in fact, many Americans do assume that. Unfortunately, it's wrong. Political journalist William Finnegan summarizes the polling data:

Americans always overestimate the amount of foreign aid we give. In recent national polls, people have guessed, on average, that between 15 and 24 percent of the federal budget goes for foreign aid. In reality, it is less than 1 percent. The U.N. has set a foreign-aid goal for the rich countries of .7 percent of gross national product. *A few countries have attained that modest goal, all of them Scandinavian. The U.S. has never come close, indeed, it comes in dead last, consistently, in the yearly totals of rich-country foreign aid as a percentage of GNP.* In 2000, we gave 1 percent. President Bush's dramatic proposal, post-September 11, to increase foreign aid to \$15 billion looks rather puny next to the \$48 billion increase in this year's \$379 billion military budget.

So, on this count, are the Scandinavian nations the greatest on earth? They also seem to have the edge on us in providing health care to their citizens. Here's the assessment of two prominent U.S. medical researchers:

The absence of universal access in the United States is a global scandal. No other highly industrialized country has so many citizens totally without access to even the most rudimentary health care. Consider these facts: there are almost twice as many people in the U.S. without access to health care than the entire population of Scandinavia where access is a universal right.

One might think that the greatest nation on earth would not leave its most vulnerable citizens without reliable access to health care. There will be, of course, disagreement on how to best achieve that, but it seems not to be a serious goal among the dominant political players in the United States.

So, we score higher on legal guarantees of freedom of speech but lower on guarantees of health care compared with other developed countries. Our history and contemporary foreign policy suggest that self-interest and greed usually trump concern for human rights and democracy. Yet the existence of a democratic process at home—the product of much struggle by the forces interested in progressive change—should leave us with hope that we can change the course of that policy through long-term, dedicated efforts. But to do that, honest reflection on the record is required. And it matters. It really matters. It is one thing for small and powerless nations to have delusions of grandeur; they can't do much damage outside their own borders. It is quite another thing for the nation with the most destructive military capacity in the history of the world—and a demonstrated willingness to use it to achieve self-interested goals—to play the "greatest nation on earth" game. To the degree that the game diminishes people's ability to assess facts, reach honest conclusions, and take moral action based on those conclusions, it increases the risk of people everywhere. It makes it easier for leaders to justify wars of conquest and mask the reasons for those wars. It's easy for a vice president to say, as Dick Cheney did in a speech in 2002:

America is again called by history to use our overwhelming power in defense of our freedom. We've accepted that duty, certain of the justice of our cause and confident of the victory to come. For my part, I'm grateful for the opportunity to work with the president who is making us all proud upholding the cause of freedom and serving the greatest nation on Earth.