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April 18, 2014
American Dreams/American Realities

Reinforcing the American Dream

America, through its times of hardships and of triumph, holds a defined identity. Its personality as a country continues to be reaffirmed through the speeches and publications of its leaders. For example, politicians, advertisers, and authors alike remind the public of three consistent themes within the American dream: the agrarian myth, the foreign devil myth, and the city on a hill myth. Why call them myths? These ideas are not representative of the American people as a whole but instead provide a falsified common basis for a prevailing American dream. Nonetheless, these ideas bolster the strength of the dream among its people. Although there are also the success and frontier myths, this paper focuses on specific speeches and publications that exemplify how leaders portray the agrarian myth, foreign devil myth, and city on a hill myth in order to establish them within the minds of the American people.

The agrarian myth revolves around a virtuous land, a Protestant work ethic, and a belief in American innocence and national purity. It's backward looking in that it finds perfection in the "good ol' days" of the past and yet, it was still applied to fit the times even as 20th century America advanced and diversified. By this, I mean to say that the individual hard-working farmer, tending the land and raising a family in rural America was no longer an accurate description of the reality for most Americans come the 20th century. Still the small town farmer, pure and innocent at heart, remained and continues to be an image that our nation's leaders and writers return to in order to bind and fortify the American spirit among its people.

Although many of the readings in the American Dreams and American Realities history course contain components of the agrarian myth, there are two pieces that perhaps portray it most completely. The first is “The Selling of Rural America” by Goldman and Dickens. This piece exemplifies how major American corporations such as McDonald’s, Coca-Cola, and Pepsi employ advertising strategies that rely on an image of small-town America. For example, the 1982 Coca Cola ad campaign “features a sixty-second epic narrative of the American family” and images of a farmer driving his tractor in the field (Goldman 594). McDonald’s and Pepsi used similar themes in their campaigns, and in doing so, contrasted the industrializing country and the growing materialistic attitude. Overall, the ads provided “a breakdown in the motivation for social participation with the nostalgic imagery of past social formations” (Goldman 586). The second reading from the course that draws upon the agrarian myth is McCarthy’s speech (which also illustrates the foreign devil myth) in his calling for a “moral uprising” (McCarthy 5). The agrarian myth describes America as a virtuous and principled society, so by blaming Americans of lacking morals and by calling for a “moral uprising,” McCarthy draws upon this myth. From these examples, we can see how people from different facets of society incorporate the common small-town, pure and innocent ideas associated with the agrarian myth.

The foreign devil myth is most easily described as repudiation of outside groups in order to define what it means to be an American. We can assume that this rejection of ideas and groups different than the norm strengthens the accepted protestant, capitalistic, and democratic viewpoints of American culture. We have had numerous “foreign devils” in American history including the Indians, the British, the Roman Catholics, the Communists, and most recently, the terrorists. In the 20th century, we see pieces of the

foreign devil myth with the influx of Americans and the Red Scare starting in the 1950s. For instance, in the early 19th century, Congress proposed multiple bills to restrict immigrants-“outsiders” from coming to America (Wilson 1). Later, in 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy vehemently draws a distinction between the western Christian world and the atheist communist world, distinguishing the communists as the foreign devil (McCarthy 2). Even children’s literature, such as the well-known Dr. Seuss books seem to portray a similar idea of good vs. bad. His book, How the Grinch Stole Christmas (1957), is an example of a book that portrays the foreign devil myth (Schubach 7). Whether consciously including the Grinch as a “foreign devil” or not, this story seems to reflect American societal values in that there is always an outside force that pesters society and that the community clearly distinguishes itself different from that outside force. This concept of defining who we are as Americans by separating ourselves from those different from us persisted throughout the 20th century and still today.

The last of the three myths discussed in this paper is the city on a hill myth, a myth founded in Puritan John Winthrop’s 1630 sermon “A Model of Christian Charity” (Lecture Spring 2014). In this sermon, Winthrop indicates that the American people are chosen by God to be missionaries and spread democracy. This idea caught on and is used to justify why Americans intervene in other countries and why there is an obligation of Americans to serve the world around them. President Reagan explicitly referred to the city on a hill concept during this Farewell Speech. Speaking of America, he says “and she’s still a beacon, still a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home” (Reagan 7). He describing America as a country open to and willing to help others from other nations,

and in doing so, implied America is a place admired by others as a “city on a hill.”

Furthermore, poet Emma Lazarus wrote the following:

““Give my your tired, your poor, /Your huddled masses yearning to breath free,/The wretched refuse of your teeming shore./ Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,/I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” (Lazarus 1).

These words, now displayed on the bottom of the Statue of Liberty, welcome the world to America’s abundant opportunities.

Even in the 21st century, this city on a hill concept has been used numerous times to justify American intervention in other countries. For example, George W. Bush’s National Security Strategy justifies Americans intervening in Afghanistan and Iraq based off of concepts of leadership and exemplary motions associated with the city on a hill myth. This action also depicts the foreign devil myth because it makes terrorists the new enemy and rationalizes sending troops into any countries that may house terrorists. This type of intervention and/or national leadership wasn’t much different from what America saw with President Wilson after World War I (Kennedy 1). From Winthrop’s speech to today, this missionary theme persists.

How these advertisers, politicians, and writers have incorporated the myths has fluctuated depending on the time. For example, before the Great Depression in the 1930s, the success myth was rampant but was beginning to be questioned. More than ever, there was a balance between rural and urban life, which created a tension between the success myth’s materialism and the agrarian myth’s virtues. Worried that Americans purity was fading, rural protestant Americans pushed for change through legislation by trying to restrict immigration, alcohol consumption, and evolution in general (Lecture Spring

2014). With capitalism seeming to fail with the Depression and the success myth losing its believers, the agrarian myth became more prevalent in the 1930s. Many people return home to rural communities and begin to turn to the past (pre-industrialization and fast-paced society) as the way to live. The pure, simplistic attitude of the agrarian myth remained a concept that politicians, advertisers, and writers looked back on in order to keep America grounded through the youth rebellion beginning in the 60s and the frustrations with Vietnam. At this same time, the government became “the protector and the guarantor of access to the American dream” (Lecture Spring 2014). This aligns with the idea of a “city on a hill” with the government acting as the missionary in this case. We see this myth take the spotlight immediately after WWI and then again when America intervenes in foreign countries in the late 20th century. As for the foreign devil myth, we see a focus on repudiation in the 1960 election with Catholic John F. Kennedy in the race and then again as communism became a scare. Examining the context of the course readings, we can see how speakers and writers alter their themes to fit the time, and almost always draw upon at least one of the myths discussed in the course.

In conclusion, it is evident that the agrarian myth, foreign devil myth, and city on a hill myth continue to be incorporated into lectures, writings, and promotions in American society. However, it must be acknowledged that some of these themes take the spotlight over others at certain times in our history. Admitting this, we must also recognize that the other myths endure until the time calls in which another of them –one of the five components of the American dream- needs to be reinforced. As America changes and grows, it is the politicians, writers, and advertisers that draw upon these themes and ultimately bolster the renowned “American dream.”

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However, these three pillars of the American dream – people, education and the investment in scientific research that is the wellspring of new ideas, new capabilities and new products – are all endangered. Despite record low unemployment and dire shortages of engineers and technical skills, immigration is viewed as a threat to American jobs and public safety. Public schools – where the American ideals, history and patriotism were instilled in all of us – are somehow viewed as a threat to those ideals and an unearned gift to ungrateful immigrants. Meanwhile, scientific research is viewed as a threat to those ideals and an unearned gift to ungrateful immigrants. The "American Dream" is a sort of ethos or set of beliefs that drive many U.S. citizens as they work toward creating a life for themselves. These ideals – American Dream. A set of beliefs or ideals that guide US citizens as they exist on a daily basis. Home – Resources – Knowledge – Other – American Dream. What is the American Dream? The –American Dream– is a sort of ethos or set of beliefs that drive many U.S. citizens as they work toward creating a life for themselves. This set of ideals – which includes notions of individual rights, freedom, democracy, and equality – is arguably centered around the belief that each individual has the right and freedom to seek prosperity and happiness, regardless of where or into what circumstances they were born. The American dream is the belief that anyone can attain their own version of success in a society where upward mobility is possible for everyone. The American dream is achieved through sacrifice, risk-taking, and hard work, rather than by chance. Key Takeaways. The term was coined in a best-seller in 1931, "Epic of America." James Truslow Adams described it as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement." The American dream was aided by a number of factors that gave the United States a competitive advantage over other countries. Homeownership and education are often seen as paths to achieving the American dream. The American Dream is a national ethos of the United States, the set of ideals (democracy, rights, liberty, opportunity and equality) in which freedom includes the opportunity for prosperity and success, as well as an upward social mobility for the family and children, achieved through hard work in a society with few barriers. In the definition of the American Dream by James Truslow Adams in 1931, "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability