# The United States

## A World Within, the World Without

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# The World and the New Frontiers of the U.S.

There has been an ongoing debate in the United States throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries about the actual meaning and persistence of the ideal of the "American way of life," or the "American Promise," if not the American Dream – what it means, and meant, to Americans, but also what sense people around the world have of it. Moreover, nowadays the most prominent aspect of this debate relates to the supposed or actual decline of American power in the world. What is certain is that the relatively brief experience of a world rotating around an axis of which the United States is the major constituent is over. We are moving back into a multipolar world, although the United States will remain an important factor. Robert Kagan holds that the American model actually is here to stay, at least for a long while. The matter, however, is not so much the power the United States can exercise, but to what extent the American model is or has been successful. Furthermore, if 9/11 represents a watershed marking the redefinition of the actual meaning of the "American Promise," the United States already experienced times in which the American order was questioned and partly shaken (Ickenberry 6). The Federal Republic carried within itself, from the very beginning, the seeds of a new *ordo seclorum* and its antibodies. The new order was established for the freedom and self-rule of some, yet also relied on the suppression of others in a permanent contradiction that required continuous adjustments in order to pursue an expansion of the benefits of a liberal state. This contradiction has survived even until now and is part and parcel of the American Federal Government and of its actions within and without the continental borders. These contradictions can be detected in the way the United States confronts the world not just in its foreign policy but also in its interaction with other peoples and other nations. To what extent is it possible to use the United States as a parameter to understand the world today because of and beyond its centrality in the twentieth century? The attitudes of other people toward the U.S. vary to extremes, of course, but whatever the approach, they are bound to have an opinion if not a stance about America.

This is the reason why, in 2009, the annual American Studies seminar held at the Centro Studi Americani in Rome concentrated on different aspects of the American response to crises and issues that were as much international as they were domestic. The idea was to offer graduate students the opportunity to approach U.S. society and culture from different vantage points so as to see to what extent the country can be assumed as a parameter of world issues and what is its relation with the rest of the world. If, in the second half of the twentieth century, globalization was used as synonymous with the "Americanization" of the world, nowadays such interpretation does not hold even a cursory view of international affairs. The United States seems to have lost not only its centrality but also that traditional sense of identity as the cradle of freedom and democracy that, although rejected by many within and without the country, gave Americans a sense of purpose and of historical dynamism that for a long time characterized their way of life. As David Foster Wallace put it in a 2006 interview:

> So which way it will go? I don't know. And it's one reason it's a very frightening time in America, particularly with the people who're in power right now – many of us are in the position of being more afraid of our own country and our own government than we are of any supposed enemy somewhere else. For someone like me who grew up in the sixties at the height of the Cold War and whose consciousness was formed by, "we are the good guy and there's one great looming dark enemy and that's the Soviet Union," the idea of waking up to the fact that in today's world very possibly we are the villain, we are the dark force, to begin to see ourselves a little bit through the eyes of people in other countries – you can imagine how difficult that is for Americans to do. Nevertheless, with a lot of the people that I know that's slowly starting to happen. (Karmodi 2011)

These questions also puzzled other peoples around the world, especially during the tenure of George W. Bush and after 9/11. Confronted by a dramatic attack on its territory and bound to respond to a new threat that seemed to be able to shatter the tenets of an American world order, the United States launched into war while at the same time elevating walls around its borders, and not only metaphorically. In turn, this changed entirely the meaning of that basic myth of American identity that is the frontier, which took on the sense it had before American ideologists and exceptionalists reinterpreted

what F.J. Turner identified as an "American social development." The frontier is that geographic, and at the same time imaginary, line that contributed to the nation-building process and made mobility and the overcoming of boundaries a trait of Americans' perception of themselves. The frontier of twenty-first-century America looks once again like a boundary, within which to find shelter from a world that does not look like what Americans imagined only a few decades back.

In different ways and from different fields, the four keynote speakers AISNA invited to the 2009 seminar approached this aspect of "Americanness" and the crisis of such a model. They proposed approaches capable of shedding new light onto the "dilemma of American identity" and the role the United States plays at the international level, which we found stimulating and innovative. For this reason, we asked them to prepare a paper we could present into a coherent whole in the AISNA journal. What follows are the reflections of different scholars who use interdisciplinary approaches, although from very diverse perspectives, to discuss shared issues, among them, violence and justice. This is a recurrent theme in American history, with the latter intended as a proper application, within American policies, of the highest values human beings consider central in their world view. Therefore, the very concept of a just war and of prosecuting those responsible for violence becomes the instrument for the application of American law worldwide. Along with these topics, central to the current debate on the future of the international role of the United States, it is essential to understand how Americans conceive and have conceived of their relations with other people, other identities, and other cultures. To what extent were they able to contribute to the making of a modern American identity or to question and at the same shape a general sense of instability and of purposelessness for the United States?

The loss of stability, a blurring of identity, a general reconsideration of purpose in American culture, and a critical revision of exceptionalism are the underlying themes of the United States' recent relationship with the world (Bender 2006, Herring 2008). Along with these themes, the historian should also keep in mind the relevance of the interpretive categories of U.S. history: the frontier, a pluralistic society, the conception of the future, the perception of and the relationship with other people and other countries. Only by keeping in mind all these factors and categories can we manage to achieve

an understanding of the new role the United States is coming to play at the world level while at the same time appreciating the changing relationship the country has with the rest of the world.

9/11 represents a watershed in the American perception of itself and of international relations. This is something many scholars and analysts agree upon, but looking closely at American history, it is possible to realize how the detonating factors that brought to the post-9/11 crisis were already in place before then – as far back as the loss of status and of self-reliance Americans experienced in the 1970s through the final phase of the Vietnam War, the oil crisis, and Watergate (Herring 810-811). Since then, Americans have struggled with their attempt at re-establishing a centrality they sensed they were losing. But what they had started to lose, actually, was their trust in their form of government, the possibility of the final achievement of "the American dream." The projection into the future and the ultimate overcoming of the frontier was giving way to a sense of stalemate and isolation. The U.S. has always been part of a worldwide web, which becomes even more meaningful today because of social networking websites. Created and developed at first in the United States, they are not necessarily dependent on one center. The very structure of the World Wide Web is itself an exercise at skipping possible interruptions of a system that does not rely on one single main source but is meant to develop across frontiers. This enables new generations of Americans to redefine the concept of the frontier, and even of the future, and the future role of their country. Exceptionalism has to be abandoned for a more realistic interpretation of an America that is part of a world network adjusting to new impulses and in need of models that may change over time. Again, it was David Foster Wallace, in *Infinite Jest*, who provided that reading of a very plain American society, which makes America the sought-after land of opportunity or plenty. In the moment the United States drifts away from such plainness, transforming the perception of its role into a mission to spread the American dream no matter by which means, it loses its very peculiarity and its longed-for exceptionalism. Therefore, it is possible that what truly characterizes the United States is that sense of being at ease with one's own sense of right and reality that you find in other countries but that in the United States has become a kind of shared, mythic, or broadly-appreciated common sense. America is thus equated with liberty and justice. As much as

the attack of 9/11 was an attack on liberty, America's role in the two world wars of the twentieth century was an assertion of justice and a campaign for liberty (Bonazzi). Therefore, the wars launched by the United States on Afghanistan and Iraq were once again wars to assert American freedom and to defend the American way of life. Woodrow Wilson stated that American ideals were universal ideals and that it was the United States' duty to enable other countries to pursue their own liberty the American way. Franklin Roosevelt claimed the principle of the four freedoms, which were as much American as universal. And George W. Bush brought that idea to its ultimate consequence by turning it upside down: what the attackers of the U.S. most hate is American freedom. President Bush declared in his address to Congress in September, 2001:

> Americans are asking why do they hate us? They hate what they see right here in this chamber – a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms – our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other … These terrorists kill not merely to end lives, but to disrupt and end a way of life. With every atrocity, they hope that America grows fearful, retreating from the world and forsaking our friends. They stand against us, because we stand in their way.

If these people did not understand the values of modern freedom, the United States had to force them to. In a definition of the "American idea" in *The Atlantic* special issue for its 150th anniversary, historian Alan Brinkley stated, "America's self-image is more deeply bound up with a sense of having a special place in history than most other nations' are." This has often caused the United States to move off track in its contention to have a mission in the world. That messianic call Americans have often felt on several occasions throughout history resulted in actions that altogether changed the meaning of mission itself. Because of the United States' growing prominence in the twentieth century and its new search for markets along with an expanding economy, many U.S. leaders ended up stretching the sense of mission: from the "act of sending" someone to carry a credo or an ideal over to other people, to a military intervention that can in the end force others into accepting one's own system of life. But this was the consequence of a first major crisis of the "American way of life" that occurred in the last quarter of the nineteenth

century with the massive industrialization of the country and especially with the closing of the frontier in the 1890s.

Following the declaration of the Bureau of the Census, which stated the completion of western settlement, the crisis of 1893 and the internal instability caused by the confrontation between capital and labor gave Americans a sense of uncertainty about the future. What seemed an ever-expanding mental and physical projection had come to an end. On that very year, Frederick J. Turner enunciated his thesis, which, while establishing an exceptional course of history for the United States, at the same time froze the concept of the frontier into a past that, albeit mythical, was destined to go. But the very force of that American ideal could inform the future course of history. By the turn of the century a *translatio imperii* took place permitting the country to overcome the internal crisis of a model while at the same time exporting it.

Amy Gutman has probably best summarized what the actual American mission could be:

> Leaving the fate of our democracy in the hands of a diverse and constantly changing American citizenry that is guided by constitutional democratic principles is perhaps the most enduring American idea of all. That is why protecting individual freedom and cultivating a highly educated citizenry is our society's utmost responsibility. This dual mission – recognized from our founding but far, far from realized to the present day – has never been more important than in these perilous times. We the People will determine whether – and which – future Americans have more or less opportunity to enjoy the fruits of our great constitutional freedoms. (Gutman 2007)

Perilous times indeed, which actually may hinder what is most valuable to the American system. Elaborating the tragedy of 9/11 does not mean, therefore, retaliating, rather it could mean an individual as much as a collective effort to overcome fear and mourning. The harder the times, the bigger the commitment to the "great constitutional freedoms;" but this is not what President Bush seemed to have in mind in the years following 9/11. Looking backward could help the country process that feeling of frustration at the impossibility of telling the untellable. Jonathan Safran Foer best expressed this feeling and the contradictions of the American response by drawing a parallel between the impossibility of telling the story of the Dresden

bombing, recounted by Kurt Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and of the attack on the Twin Towers. In his bestselling novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, he compares two very different events that see the United States in both positions as the aggressor and the victim.

After 9/11 the United States seems to be searching for a new identity after losing the central position in world affairs that helped define its role in the past. However, the American model is still dominant, as evidenced by several authors but, unlike what many would expect, not assimilated without revisions in other countries. Rather, it was revisited over the years as many a country in Africa, Asia, and even Europe emancipated in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War. The new societies emerging at the end of the twentieth century used instruments that proved functional in their new democratic systems but not necessarily taking them after the American model. The United States should then come out of that "Us/Them" dichotomy, where "them" stands for the rest of the world, and redefine its place without elevating barriers. Maybe that was what fascinated many who voted for President Obama in 2008. He seemed to suggest new ways of being American. He is himself a synthesis of and an answer to the many poignant questions Americans ask themselves about the recent past; he was still young at the end of the Cold War and the product of multicultural America. But the President has not managed so far to have that necessary impact that could actually contribute to the overcoming of two shocks: the attacks of 9/11 of course, and the realization, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, of the inability of the United States to maintain its central standing in world affairs.

The American century lasted a little more than a full hundred years. If we take as a starting point 1898, when the country projected its expansion overseas after the conquest of the frontier, it is possible to trace that expansion up to the early twenty-first century following the Clinton administration's several interventions in different theaters of war around the world. These interventions were often defined as humanitarian efforts, which in many cases resulted in bombing other countries for "their own good." Once again the United States assumed its intervention in support of shared liberal values to be necessary no matter what the cost. It was a "benevolent" expansion of the influence of the United States that, in the end, failed. But the first cracks in the fabric were detectable in the 1970s when the power of the country within its

"sphere of influence" began vacillating. The oil crisis and the last shots of the Vietnam War, the institutional crisis brought about by Watergate, and the rise of international Muslim terrorism enable the observer to date the beginning of the end of the American century to that time. But a major turn came with the end of the Cold War and the subsequent ten years that impressed commentators as the completion of American world power. In the process of reconsidering its sphere of influence, which seemed to be expanding, the United States did not realize that it was instead imploding. The new challenge in the end came from not so clear an enemy, Islamic fundamentalism, although signs of its ascendancy were already visible by the 1970s.

The United States is today suffering from an anxiety resulting from a violence that is both suffered and inflicted. Terrorism therefore shows in its entirety the essence of human vulnerability because it unleashes a violence that is out of control and does not come from a clear source. There is no "evil empire" responsible for it, and this violence seems to be the result of an outrage hard to identify and contain (Butler 55). This is part of the reason why Christian revivalism has made a comeback. The explanation of the crisis culminating in 9/11 can be found in the millenarian predictions and the idea that what America suffered is the punishment for the mistakes made in the past and for having walked too far from God's path. But this idea connects also to the American ideology of Manifest Destiny. If in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was the destiny of the United States to spread over the continent and even overseas, carrying the torch of civilization, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, America is bound to retreat because it has not fulfilled the promise of its destiny. As in the TV Series *LOST*, the United States is looking for the causes of the wreckage and some of them may be found in supernatural reasons. Although a regular pattern in American TV series and American movies, the dichotomy "us" versus "them" is central in several post-9/11 series: *LOST*, *24*, *The Wire*, *Rubicon*, and others. The unknown and threatening people living on the island of the survivors in *LOST* are called "others," quite a telling name for unknowable and apparently foreign beings who turn out to be humans themselves. While the "others" landing on the shores of the continent at the beginning of the twentieth century were foreign aliens who looked for their own "American dreams," the "others" today are foreigners who attack that very dream by destroying others'

lives and the symbols of the American century. Yet there is a possibility of salvation that apparently is not projected onto the future but, contrary to the best American tradition of relying on the creativity and invention of the new generations, comes from the past. It comes from people born shortly before or during World War II who experienced the Cold War, fought in Vietnam, and saw the end of the "American dream."

Two American movies take up precisely these issues: *Gran Torino* by Clint Eastwood and *In the Valley of Elah* by Paul Haggis. Both movies have at their centers two aged male protagonists, both veterans of cold wars: Korea and Vietnam. Walt Kowalsky (Clint Eastwood) and Hank Deerfield (Tommy Lee Jones) suggest there is an escape from the uncertainty and fear of the new century, but this does not come from the traditional sources of American identity and self-assurance. Rather, hope comes from a redefinition of the self and not necessarily the individual of the frontier myth, the lonely pioneer, or the reconstituted community of farmers who won the West with their own toil. It is within any member of society, whether a Vietnam veteran or a young immigrant woman. The United States of the twenty-first century is a composite community where it is as possible to find room as it is to find total alienation. It is up to individuals to reach that sense of community that alone can actually make a person feel at ease with himself/herself and with others. To do this, however, Americans should overcome the traditional barriers between cultures as much as they should overcome their sense of exceptionalism when comparing their own experience with that of other countries. Every national experience is exceptional in its own way, in that it is peculiar to a specific people and a country. This in a way is similar to what is experienced by many "westerners" in today's global world, but it is American in that it forces each and every member of the Federal Republic to deal with the shedding of the traditional interpretation of the frontier, with a growing pluralism, or with a lost sense of self-reliance. The "promise of American life," therefore, can be handed over to a Hmong adolescent by a Korean War veteran in *Gran Torino* who is full of prejudices against foreigners and deeply enamored of the American dream as it stood in 1972. This was the year of production of the Ford Gran Torino, the automobile Clint Eastwood preserves as an icon in the homonymous movie and leaves as a bequest to the young immigrant he saves while dying, signifying who's actually carrying on the American dream in the new century. The Gran

Torino was produced by the American car company "par excellence" between 1968 and 1978, and it is a perfect metaphor for the decade of disillusionment the United States experienced between the Tet offensive and the success of the Islamic revolution in Iran. A cheap sports car that the "average American" could afford and that still conveyed a sense of the success of the "American experiment," the Gran Torino turned out to be an illusion, much like the city where it was built, Detroit. The model in the movie was produced a year before the oil crisis that sent gasoline prices skyrocketing and Detroit into decay. It is possible to date to that time the change of self-perception that saturated Americans before the end of the Cold War. The assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, the following election of President Nixon and the crisis in Vietnam, the fall of Saigon and the Watergate scandal, all contributed to ignite a deep crisis while the country tried to stick firmly to the old tenets of its self-definition. Only with the increasing immigration and globalization, and the final detonator of 9/11, did Americans from the older generations realize the American dream as they had conceived of it was not up for grabs anymore. Because of all the changes occurring within the United States and in the world in the meantime, that ideal was changing into something else, which is probably much more inclusive than what Americans had thought of until then. If the United States had influenced the world, the world had taken over the American dream, creating a loop that once and for all unmade exceptionalism as a category to understand the United States. By going to the United States, the immigrant makes the American dream his/her own but at the same time contributes to the redefinition of that dream. The Americanization of the world eventually brings the "worldization" of the United States, and it cannot be otherwise: the "American dream" is a human dream. Only this way does the United States remain a point of reference for the generations coming of age in the twenty-first century.

At the same time, the middle generation of the twentieth century – the generation that was in Korea and Vietnam, that experienced and, in many cases, led the students' movement, that went to power and even had the time to hand it over to younger representatives born during the 1960s – could be the one capable of saving the country from itself. There are those who still do it by closing frontiers, waging wars, and claiming the peculiarity of the American experiment, but there are others instead who realize how necessary

it is to understand the pasts of others, as well as one's own, while coming to terms with a violent present. This generation of combatants, however, "cannot go it alone." It needs help from other actors, whether this turns out to be the new generations of their grandchildren, of whatever ethnic origin, or outsiders who can provide the country with a redefinition of its goals and its standards.

*In the Valley of Elah* is another example taken from the movies of the changing attitude Americans of the early twenty-first century assume when confronted with the disquieting reality of an army that is no longer a guarantee of national security but instead a self-referential structure ready to bypass justice in order to save its own image and status quo. Tommy Lee Jones as Hank Deerfield, a Vietnam vet, uncovers the terrible truth behind his son's assassination after he returned from the horrifying experience of the Iraq War. Characterized as a perfect impersonation of a new frontiersman, a Texan, like George W. Bush and of his same age, Jones/Deerfield still believes in the "American promise" and challenges the truth offered by the army commands about the disappearance of his son, who was actually killed by his comrades during a meaningless quarrel and possibly under the effect of drugs. Although he uncovers the truth, the protagonist suffers a defeat in his very ideals, like the United States of the new century. The war fought by the United States is not a "just war" in the name of universal ideals anymore. It is a rather blurry conflict against an even more indistinct enemy. 9/11 managed to upset the basic assumptions of the American myth of "humanitarian intervention" on behalf of the liberty of others. At the same time the soldiers are exposed to a violence that they bring back home. A good percentage of Iraq veterans suffer, in fact, from post-traumatic disorder; their nightmares are not over once they return to "regular lives," and they don't have ideals capable of sustaining themselves through the readjustment to civil life. In a way, they are very much like their country in the new global era: traumatized by the attacks on the Pentagon and the Twin Towers and instinctively capable of inflicting as much violence on its supposed or real enemies. In the end Deerfield receives a package with the Stars and Stripes that his son sent from the war before being repatriated, and he decides to fly it upside down as this is a customary sign of distress in the armed forces and signals the need for help from the outside. "Others" can probably bring relief, and these "others" are possibly the new generations around the world.

Once again, the solution can be in the hands of the younger generations for whom the Cold War is history and 9/11 a memory of infancy or at most of adolescence. For them the frontier is neither the Wild West, nor the Iron Curtain or the wall dividing the U.S.-Mexico border; it is a temporary limit easily overcome by the World Wide Web. Their identity is molded by the Internet and its social networks. The youth of the twenty-first century does not have to use a leap of imagination to identify with other peoples' experiences or struggles; they find correspondents worldwide through chat rooms and Youtube. They can directly share experiences and reactions with people across the world, and overcome those "national boundaries" that granted a strong but limited identity. Tahrir Square is thus connected to Washington Square, and, although the issues may seem very different, they are indicators of a general change of perspective induced by technology developed in the United States but now shared globally. The future of America, as it should be, is therefore as much in the hands of a new generation now coming of age as it has been in those of the youth of the 1950s-60s. The risk of yet another isolationist pull is thus avoided by Facebook, Twitter and the like, as it is the tendency of local revolutions to remain internal affairs of countries under extreme dictatorships. It is sufficient to look into what is happening in the Arab world. Many of the uprisings, a product of local conditions and protest, find inspiration in the models coming from the West especially through the Internet (which cannot be monitored like television) and are then locally transformed and managed. It is possible to say, therefore, that the American century closed in 2001, but its effects will still be felt for a long while, also because the new communication media still have their major source and managements in the United States. The problem for the United States, then, is to come to terms with this reality and accept the idea that it still has a role – not a mission – to play. This entails contributing its power and technology to a worldwide communication and sharing of know-how and information that cuts across frontiers.

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