OMNI HISTORY OF USA NEWSLETTER #1, December 15, 2013. WHAT IS THE STORY OF NORTH AMERICA?
Compiled by Dick Bennett for a Culture of Peace and Justice.

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CHRISTAL BRIDGES, “STORY OF AMERICA”

Celebrating the American Spirit is the inaugural presentation of the Museum’s collection. Featuring more than 400 works by American masters, and highlighting the full scope of American art and history, this historic and significant collection has been assembled to showcase the artistic traditions of American art. The works are arranged roughly chronologically—with a focus on thematic groupings and stylistic affinities—to tell the story of America's history as seen by its artists.

Several themes emerge through the collection including artists' interactions with nature; the American artist on the world stage; and the presence of women in American society, with an emphasis on their evolving role, both as subject and as artist. . . .

1. Crystal Bridges expands collection, tells story of America | Business ...
THE AMERICAN SPIRIT? By Dick Bennett

That’s not easily defined. Perhaps one aspect of that spirit is exemplified by Alice Walton. I wish she had also given a billion dollars to assist the nonviolent peace movement, to challenge the $630 billion for the Pentagon this fiscal year (plus the money for the wars, for nuclear weapons, and the VA), but that’s not her tradition. I never forget that instead of Chrystal Bridges she might have spent her family’s money to promote wars or like the Koch brothers in trying to rig our politics for corporations and the rich. The questions and the alternative history found in this USA Newsletter offer no criticism of Alice Walton; rather we recognize in her gift to the nation the search for our spirit through its artists.

But we must ask: The American Spirit? “American”? Is it unified? And more complex, who is to report that Spirit, or must it be inevitably reports plural, diverse commentators reporting on a diverse history? Perhaps the museum actually does that already and will increasingly as the collection expands.

Then whose story? “The Story of America through the Art at Chrystal Bridges.” I have begun to make notes about what is there, and I urge you to do the same (and let me know the Director of Chrystal Bridges what you perceive).

For example, the collection contains many drawings of Native Americans. What story does this collection tell? Hundreds of Indian nations were destroyed and millions of Indians killed by the conquest of the continental USA by European settlers. Is that the story? Is it represented adequately at Chrystal Bridges? Is it represented? The attritions? The expulsions? The massacres? From Jamestown to Seattle?

And what kind of individuals? What role does class play? The developers of Chrystal Bridges foreground General George Washington. Is the story of America one of “great men,” leaders military, political, scientific? It was this “story of America” that Howard Zinn rebelled against in his book A People’s History of the United States (adapted by Rebecca Stefoff as A Young People’s History of the United States: From Columbus to the War on Terror packed with photos and drawings). In his Introduction to the adaptation for young people, Zinn discusses the question: “Isn’t it unpatriotic to emphasize slavery and racism, the massacres of Indians, the exploitation of working people, the ruthless expansion of the United States at the expense of the Indians and people in other countries?” His reply includes the importance of truth and justice both to a democracy and to future citizens. Democracy requires the questioning search for reality and young people must learn to question power if we are to avoid totalitarianism. We are enjoined to “alter or abolish the government” when it fails to provide “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” (This is a good point—but every place is good—to stop using the word America, since it dismisses the proper distinctions of North and South and Central America.)

Chrystal Bridges gives the “story of America”? Let’s be asking the question. Perhaps our
questions will lead to the full story “through the Art at Chrystal Bridges.” And some day perhaps their wording will be “The Story of the United States of America at Chrystal Bridges.” The following writings remind us of that complete story.

1. HOWARD ZINN, A *People’s History of the United States*

   [www.historyisaweapon.com/zinnapeopleshistory.html](http://www.historyisaweapon.com/zinnapeopleshistory.html)Cached - Similar

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   A *People’s History* Of The United States by Howard Zinn. Presented by History Is A Weapon. A Note and Disclaimer are below. Return to History Is A Weapon. 1. Columbus, The Indians - Tyranny is Tyranny - Drawing the Color Line

2. [A People’s History of the United States - Wikipedia, the free ...](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_People’s_History_of_the_United_States)Cached - Similar

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   A *People’s History* of the United States is a 1980 non-fiction book by American historian and political scientist Howard Zinn. In the book, Zinn seeks to present ...

   Overview - Critical reception - Other editions and related works - Current editions

3. [A People’s History, A People’s Pedagogy – Zinn Education Project](http://zinnedproject.org/about/a-people’s-history-a-people’s-pedagogy)Cached - Similar

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   Zinn’s people’s history is passionate, probing, and partisan. Zinn begins from the premise that the lives of ordinary people matter — that history ought to focus on ...


   You +1’d this publicly. Undo

   Rating: 4 - 2258 reviews

   Since its original landmark publication in 1980, A *People’s History* of the United States has been chronicling American history from the bottom up, throwing out ...

5. [Howard Zinn Dead, Author Of 'People’s History Of The United States ...](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/.../howard-zinn-dead-author-o_n_439350....Cached - Similar)

   You +1’d this publicly. Undo

   Jan 27, 2010 – Howard Zinn, an author, teacher and political activist whose leftist "A People’s History of the United States" became a million-selling alternative ...

6. [A People’s History of American Empire by Howard Zinn - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Arn3lF5XSUg)

   Mar 28, 2008 - Uploaded by HenryHolt

   Empire or Humanity? What the Classroom Didn’t Teach Me about the American Empire by Howard Zinn ...

7. More videos for Zinn, People’s History »

8. [PDF]

101 Changemakers are about people who challenged established ideas and practices, people who “shaped struggles for social justice,” the “unsung heroines and heroes of US history.” The book opens with Crispus Attucks, Tom Paine, Tecumseh, Sarah and Angelina Grimke, and David Walker, and closes with Tony Kushner, Chuck D, Bhairavi Desai, Elvira Arellano, Laila Al-Arian, and Constance McMillen. Each profile is told by an especially motivated and talented writer.

From the opening page of The Untold History, the importance of studying history with new lenses is crystal clear: “Historical understanding defines people’s very sense of what is thinkable and achievable. As a result, many have lost the ability to imagine a world that is substantially different from and better than what exists today.” The book is based upon the authors’ documentary film series by the same title. The two depict the struggle for “a more just, humane, democratic, and equitable world” particularly by tracing the development of US militarism and empire and rationalizing myths, which is to say the “ways in which we believe the country has betrayed its mission.”

Clarity Press, 2012.

In the great tradition of Howard Zinn, 101 Changemakers offers a “peoples’ history” version of the individuals
who have shaped our country for middle school students. In the place of founding fathers, presidents, and
titans of industry, are profiles of those who courageously fought for social justice in America: Tecumseh,
Harriet Tubman, Mark Twain, César Chávez, Rachel Carson, Harvey Milk, Henry Wallace, and many
more. *101 Changemakers* aims to provide young students with new ways of understanding how history is
written and made.

**About the author**

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**November 12: Oliver Stone "Untold US History" documentary on "Showtime" and Book**

Do you have cable TV and get "Showtime"? Wouldn't watching this with your friends be a nice community activity for a cold November evening?

Glenn Greenwald says:

"Oliver Stone is releasing a new book, entitled "The Untold History of the United States", which highlights key facts in US history over the last century that have been largely ignored or affirmatively distorted. I've read parts of the book and recommend it highly (a summary of his chapter on the Obama presidency is here). Beginning 12 November, Showtime is broadcasting a 10-part documentary to accompany the book; I've seen the first four installments and cannot recommend it highly enough.'

[http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/oct/30/obama-first-term-racism-charges](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/oct/30/obama-first-term-racism-charges)

Oliver Stone’s “Untold History” Documentary and Book

*Jon Wiener* November 14, 2012  |  *This article appeared in the December 3, 2012 edition of The Nation.*

If you thought *Oliver Stone’s Untold History of the United States*—a ten-part documentary series premiering November 12 on Showtime—would offer a series of conspiracy theories concerning the American past, you would be wrong. Despite Stone’s 1991 film *JFK*, there’s no JFK assassination conspiracy here—just a statement that the public found “unconvincing” the Warren Commission’s conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. There’s no 9/11 conspiracy, and no allegations that Franklin Roosevelt schemed in secret to get the Japanese to attack Pearl Harbor as a backdoor way to force the United States into World War II. *The series’ massive, 750-page companion volume, co-written with historian Peter Kuznick, also shuns conspiracy theories.*

The “untold history” here, which starts with World War II and ends with Obama, will not be unknown to readers of *The Nation*. Many of them already know that the Soviet Union
defeated Hitler’s armies, not the United States; that Japan would have surrendered in August 1945 without the use of atomic bombs; that the United States has a long history of backing right-wing dictators around the world rather than supporting democratic movements. But many TV viewers are not Nation subscribers—at least that’s what I’ve been told—and even longtime readers of America’s oldest weekly will find plenty of provocative ideas here. Stone is quick to acknowledge that he is hardly the first to present this kind of alternative, critical view—his illustrious predecessors include, of course, Howard Zinn’s A People’s History of the United States, and also the bestselling Lies My Teacher Told Me by James Loewen. But neither of those historians ever had a ten-part series on cable television. Only Oliver Stone has the power to pull that off.

If there are no conspiracy theories here, Stone also eschews another line of argument that many might expect from him: that the ruling class is all-powerful, that Wall Street—the subject of one of his most memorable films—controls everything, along with bankers and the corporate elite, leaving ordinary people helpless. The thesis of the Showtime series, as well as its companion volume, is different: that history is not an iron cage, the keys to which are held by the ruling class. At many pivotal moments, Stone argues, history could have taken a radically different course. The missed opportunities, the roads not taken—these are Stone’s central themes, which he argues with energy, passion and a mountain of evidence (the companion volume has eighty-nine pages of footnotes).

Case number one: if Henry Wallace had won the vice presidential nomination in 1944, he would have become president when Roosevelt died in 1945, and we probably would not have bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and could have avoided the cold war as well. It’s a startling and intriguing argument. Usually we teach about Wallace as the hopeless, left-wing third-party candidate of 1948, when he split from the Democrats and ran on the Progressive Party ticket. McCarthyism had already taken hold of American politics, and Wallace was red baited into a crushing defeat.

Four years earlier, however, the situation was very different: Wallace was Roosevelt’s incumbent vice president, and the Soviets were our allies. A Gallup poll in July 1944 asked likely Democratic voters whom they wanted on the ticket as veep. Sixty-five percent said Wallace, while Truman came in eighth, with just 2 percent. Roosevelt announced that, were he a delegate, he would vote for Wallace. Claude Pepper, a Democratic senator from Florida, tried to nominate Wallace at the convention, but the conservative party bosses, who opposed him, adjourned the proceedings. “Had Pepper made it five more feet [to the microphone] and
nominated Wallace,” Stone argues, “Wallace would have become president in 1945 and… there might have been no atomic bombings, no nuclear arms race, and no Cold War.”

Case number two: even with Truman as president in 1945, it was not a foregone conclusion that the United States would drop the bomb. Generals Eisenhower and MacArthur both opposed it, along with most of the other top generals and admirals—and they were joined by many of the scientists who had developed the bomb. If only President Truman had listened to them…

Case number three: if JFK had not been shot in 1963, Stone is convinced he would have pulled US forces out of Vietnam and negotiated an end to the cold war.

Case number four: if George W. Bush had listened to his intelligence agencies in 2001, the 9/11 attacks would not have taken place.

None of these hypotheticals, Stone claims, were impossible long shots or hopeless causes; every one of them could have happened. There’s plenty here to argue about—I debated with colleagues about the Wallace scenario for days—but that’s one of the things that make Stone’s work so engaging and rewarding.

* * *

Historical documentaries are familiar fare on TV. Of course, we have Ken Burns on PBS and the endless hours of World War II on the History Channel. But these are celebratory stories of American heroism and virtue—precisely what Stone rejects. He has achieved something quite different, something closer to what Jeremy Isaacs accomplished in his two monumental documentaries: *The World at War*, a twenty-six-hour series on World War II produced by Britain’s Thames Television and broadcast in the United States on PBS in 1975, and *Cold War*, a twenty-four-part series conceived by Ted Turner and shown on CNN in 1998. These are magnificent works that tell their stories from different viewpoints and avoid American exceptionalism.

Stone’s style of documentary filmmaking, however, departs radically from the conventions. Ken Burns, Jeremy Isaacs and the History Channel all follow the same timeworn format: a series of talking heads—experts and “witnesses”—appear onscreen to tell viewers what to think, and when they are finished, illustrative footage is presented. Stone has eliminated all the talking heads, on the grounds that they disrupt the flow of images. Indeed, a parade of different people, with their different ways of speaking, can be distracting. In Stone’s series, he
is the sole narrator, calm but forceful, and aside from a brief appearance at the start of the first episode, we never see him onscreen—we see only the newsreel footage, the headlines, the maps, the historical documents. The resulting programs have an undeniable visual power, even though the black-and-white newsreel footage may not engage younger generations raised on high-definition color.

When I asked Stone at a recent book event in West Hollywood why he decided to take up TV documentaries, he said one man was responsible: Peter Kuznick, a professor of history and the director of the award-winning Nuclear Studies Institute at American University. Kuznick is the author of Beyond the Laboratory: Scientists as Political Activists in 1930s America, and the co-editor of Rethinking Cold War Culture. He also provides a valuable service every summer: he takes an American history class on a field trip to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (He calls it “education abroad.”)

For years, Kuznick taught a course at American University titled “Oliver Stone’s America.” Stone finally accepted an invitation to come to the class, and at a dinner afterward, he says, Kuznick told him the story of how close Wallace came to getting renominated as vice president in 1944. Stone says that’s what convinced him to do a history documentary for TV, and to ask Kuznick to be his co-author and partner on what would become a four-year project. There’s never been anything like it on television; the prevailing notions of American “altruism, benevolence, and self-sacrifice” have never been challenged quite so effectively for such a wide audience.

In our November 19 issue, Eric Alterman punctured enduring myths about the Cuban missile crisis.

Jon Wiener
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Untangling the world's love-hate relationship with America

Katrina vanden Heuvel
Over the last thirty years, anti-government arguments by conservative pundits and politicians have gained prominence, and the rhetoric this 2012 campaign season seems more toxic than ever. Republicans are relentlessly pushing the notion that lower taxes, less regulation and small government (except for defense) will magically end the recession and create a better country, and “job creators” will lift all boats.

It's BS. As Congressman Barney Frank recently said, “I've never seen a tax cut put out a fire. I've never seen a tax cut build a bridge.”

Americans benefit every day from government—from consumer protection to roads and bridges to food and safety regulation—even people who claim to hate an “activist government” are some of the prime beneficiaries of the safety net at a moment when there are still over four unemployed workers for every available job and nearly one in six Americans lives in poverty.

But the GOP has wagered its future on ruthlessly and relentlessly attacking government—it isn’t about to let reality get in the way of its crusade.

Republican presidential candidates are tripping all over one another trying to prove who will take the biggest axe to government the quickest. So Mitt Romney labels regulations “the invisible boot of government to bring us all down” and argues that “we need to get the federal government out of education.” Rick Santorum fearmongers about “the narcotic of government dependency,” and Gingrich plays to old myths and racial stereotypes as he spreads lies about food stamps—one of the bright spots of the safety net in terms of responding to the needs of the Great Recession.

Washington Post columnist Courtland Milloy is spot on in writing of Republican presidential plans to abolish the Environmental Protection Agency and FEMA, “So what happens when disaster strikes? Who comes to the rescue—the local church, the Rotary Club? Who ensures that our food is safe, the air and water clean?”

Understanding that government has always been fundamental to the success of individuals, businesses, communities and this nation is becoming a key issue in the 2012 election. Even if it must also be reclaimed from Super PACs, lobbyists, and Washington insiders, the problem isn’t “Big Government,” it’s Big Money capturing government.
No one has homed in on the need to reset the narrative on government more effectively than Elizabeth Warren who laid out her cogent argument simply and powerfully in a gritty video clip that went viral: “There is nobody in this country who got rich on his own. You built a factory? Good for you. But I want to be clear: you moved your goods to market on the roads the rest of us paid for; you hired workers the rest of us paid to educate; you were safe in your factory because of police forces and fire forces that the rest of us paid for. Now look, you built a factory and it turned into something terrific, or a great idea? God bless. Keep a big hunk of it. But part of the underlying social contract is you take a hunk of that and pay forward for the next kid who comes along.”

President Obama, too, picked up on this theme in his State of the Union address when he said, “No one built this country on their own. This nation is great because we built it together. This nation is great because we worked as a team. This nation is great because we get each other’s backs.”

These ideas are reflected in a new book—The Self-Made Myth, by United for a Fair Economy’s Brian Miller and Mike Lapham. Former US Secretary of Labor Robert Reich says, “This book challenges a central myth that underlies today’s anti-government rhetoric: that an individual’s success is the result of gumption and hard work alone. Miller and Lapham clearly show that personal success is closely tied to the supports society provides. Must reading for all who want to get our nation back on track.”

A central thesis of the book is that the greater an individual’s success, the greater his or her dependence on public infrastructure, public investment in research and innovation, and regulations and fair rules—all of which business leaders in the book cite as essential to their own accomplishments.

Indeed, the profiles of business people who recognize the important role government plays in their success are one of the great contributions of The Self-Made Myth. Kim Jordan, CEO of New Belgium Brewing, talks about the roads carrying Fat Tire beer around the nation. Glenn Lloyd of City Fresh Foods and Ben Cohen of Ben & Jerry’s ice cream discuss the confidence provided by food safety regulations. Thelma Kid, co-founder of David-Kidd Booksellers in Tennessee, cites the importance of a Small Business Administration loan she received in helping her to break through the glass ceiling. The book also debunks the tiresome claims by the likes of Donald Trump, Ross Perot and the Koch Brothers that “self-made” means supporting a “you’re on your own” kind of politics and economy.
The 1 percenters profiled in this book are ready to stand with the 99 percent, and they aren’t alone. Co-author Lapham is founder of Responsible Wealth, a network of over 700 business leaders and wealthy individuals that advocate for more progressive taxation. There are also thousands of “high-road” businesses represented by the American Sustainable Business Council, devoted to a vibrant, just and sustainable economy. More than fifty local chambers of commerce have denounced or canceled memberships in the US Chamber because its hyper-corporatized ways fail to represent the values of small businesses and entrepreneurs who are connected and committed to their communities. What all of this means is there’s now a real and growing potential for new alliances between progressives and businesspeople who recognize that we are all in this together.

US CULTURE OF WINNING
You recall Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele’s humiliation after suggesting in a closed meeting that the U.S. will lose the war in Afghanistan? “…that’s the one thing you don’t do is engage in a land war in Afghanistan? Because everyone who’s tried, over a thousand years of history, has failed.” Republican leaders blasted him. Senator McCain fumed: “It’s America’s war, and we can’t afford to fail….we have to win here.” Republican Senator Lindsey was “‘dismayed, angry, upset’” over Steele’s comments; “a victory over the militant Islamic Taliban is ‘imperative.’” General David Petraeus declared, “‘we are in this to win.’” Republican pundits William Kristol and Liz Cheney demanded Steele’s resignation. Steele quickly reversed himself: “‘The stakes are too high for us to accept anything but success in Afghanistan.’”

A new book by Peter Beinart traces the history of the US culture of victory, a country where success is a national religion. Here is a review from The New Yorker. See other reviews.
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Air America
Peter Beinart’s “The Icarus Syndrome” recounts a century of foreign-policy folly by George Packer June 28, 2010

Keywords
Peter Beinart;
Foreign Policy;
Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.;
(Pres.) Woodrow Wilson;
First World War (World War I);
Vietnam War
“The Icarus Syndrome: A History of American Hubris” (Harper; $27.99) belongs to the literature of humbling—a fact that Peter Beinart readily admits on its first page, where he describes a lunch of martinis and political gossip in New York with an elderly Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. In the runup to the invasion of Iraq, Beinart, the wunderkind editor of The New Republic, had fastened on wings of superb confidence and taken to air and print in order to champion the coming war. By 2006, when he sat down with Schlesinger, Beinart had concluded that it had been a tragic mistake. Over lunch, Schlesinger suddenly asks, “Why did your generation support this war?” Beinart tries to answer with a dose of self-mockery and bland generalization. “Then [Schlesinger] spilled his martini, and for the first time looked frail. Waiters swarmed; I was off the hook. We never spoke again. Less than a year later, he died. But as one often does after flubbing a pregnant moment, I kept going over the scene in my mind, trying to formulate an answer worthy of the question and the questioner, something that convinced him I wasn’t a fool.”

The voice recounting this nicely observed scene isn’t the callow and insistent one of Beinart’s first book, “The Good Fight: Why Liberals—and Only Liberals—Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again,” which was published around the time of his lunch with Schlesinger. “The Good Fight,” with its hopeful title and dubious subtitle, appeared while the author was still falling out of the sky and struggling to regain altitude. A political manifesto based on a sketchy reading of Cold War anti-totalitarianism, the book assumed definitive positions, even as they crumbled on the page. The war had delivered a hard blow to Beinart’s thinking, but he hadn’t yet fully absorbed it.

For his second, and much better, book, Beinart turns to look back at the past hundred years of U.S. foreign policy in the baleful light of recent events. “The Icarus Syndrome” finds the ground littered with Peter Beinarts, lying amid the remnants of large ideas and unearned confidence. This is a study of three needless wars, all exemplifying a peculiarly American type of grandiosity: Woodrow Wilson’s decision to lead the country into the First World War, ending in the collapse of his vision for a postwar international order based on the abolition of force; Vietnam, where the doctrine of containment was stretched beyond the breaking point; and Iraq, where the pursuit of American global hegemony went to die. Each of these disasters was based on an oversimplifying ism—Progressivism, liberal anti-Communism, and neoconservativism [Dick: and US exceptionalism.]—and each is characterized by its own causal myopia, which Beinart (who retains a fondness for categorical labels) calls, respectively, the hubris of reason, the hubris of toughness, and the hubris of dominance.

By now, these three episodes have been pretty thoroughly tilled, and Beinart—a prodigious reader with a knack for the right quote—relies heavily on the primary historical research of others, making (and claiming to make) no big original discoveries. You might not have known that, in the nineteen-twenties, many American leaders regarded France as a greater threat to world peace than Germany; or that John F. Kennedy once told a friend over drinks that the Vietnamese “are going to throw our asses out of there at almost any point”; or that Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Ronald Reagan’s first Ambassador to the United Nations, was such an ultra-realist that she insisted on trouncing the young children of a friend during a game of Sorry! But a reading of Margaret MacMillan’s “Paris 1919,” Ronald Steel’s “Walter Lippmann and the American Century,” David Halberstam’s “The Best and the Brightest,” and James Mann’s “The Rise of the Vulcans” would already have given you a decent grounding in Beinart’s material.
“The Icarus Syndrome” is useful not for what it uncovers but for the patterns it finds in familiar events. Beinart is alert to the circular turns of the historical wheel (with a nod to Schlesinger’s senior and junior): “cycles of success leading to hubris leading to tragedy, leading, perhaps, to wisdom.” Since American life in the twentieth century was a nearly unbroken ascent to greater wealth and power, American leaders had to keep relearning the lesson of limits. Wilson and the Progressives came to power during a long and prosperous peace, passed legislation that brought a moral order to the brute forces of industrialism and machine politics, believed that international relations could be similarly rationalized, plunged into the European inferno of the First World War, and saw their dream of a League of Nations crushed by the more hardheaded Georges Clemenceau, in Paris, and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, in Washington. The bitter peace of Versailles shaped the experience of the next generation—Franklin Roosevelt’s and Dwight Eisenhower’s. Having attained a more tragic and clear-sighted view of world affairs than the Progressives, these leaders established a more durable postwar order. But the years of olio following the Second World War led the next generation—John F. Kennedy’s—to fear softness, crave challenges, and see every Cold War flareup as an ultimate test of will. The result was Vietnam. The wheel turned again; the limits of American power became all too evident, and none other than Ronald Reagan learned to live within them—getting a low-cost, morale-boosting win in Grenada that became a Clint Eastwood movie (“When looking tough was risk-free, Reagan played the part for all it was worth,” Beinart writes), then helping to negotiate the peaceful end of the Soviet Union. The fall of Communism led to more prosperity, renewed self-confidence, rising impatience among the sons to try out their wings—until George W. Bush, like Wilson, began to believe that American arms could usher in world freedom.

Published on Tuesday, January 18, 2011 by The Guardian/UK

The Myth of 'American Exceptionalism' Implodes

Until the 1970s, US capitalism shared its spoils with American workers. But since 2008, it has made them pay for its failures

by Richard Wolff

One aspect of "American exceptionalism" was always economic. US workers, so the story went, enjoyed a rising level of real wages that afforded their families a rising standard of living. Ever harder work paid off in rising consumption. The rich got richer faster than the middle and poor, but almost no one got poorer. Nearly all citizens felt "middle class". A profitable US capitalism kept running ahead of labor supply. So, it kept raising wages to attract waves of immigration and to retain employees, across the 19th century until the 1970s.

Then everything changed. Real wages stopped rising, as US capitalists redirected their investments to produce and employ abroad, while replacing millions of workers in the US with computers. The US women's liberation moved millions of US adult women to seek paid
employment. US capitalism no longer faced a shortage of labor.

**US employers took advantage of the changed situation: they stopped raising wages.** When basic labor scarcity became labor excess, not only real wages, but eventually benefits, too, would stop rising. Over the last 30 years, the vast majority of US workers have, in fact, gotten poorer, when you sum up flat real wages, reduced benefits (pensions, medical insurance, etc), reduced public services and raised tax burdens. In economic terms, American "exceptionalism" began to die in the 1970s.

The rich, however, have got much richer since the 1970s, as every measure of US income and wealth inequality attests. The explanation is simple: while workers’ average real wages stayed flat, their productivity rose (the goods and services that an average hour's labor provided to employers). More and better machines (including computers), better education, and harder and faster labor effort raised productivity since the 1970s. While workers delivered more and more value to employers, those employers paid workers no more. The employers reaped all the benefits of rising productivity: rising profits, rising salaries and bonuses to managers, rising dividends to shareholders, and rising payments to the professionals who serve employers (lawyers, architects, consultants, etc).

Since the 1970s, most US workers postponed facing up to what capitalism had come to mean for them. They sent more family members to do more hours of paid labor, and they borrowed huge amounts. By exhausting themselves, stressing family life to the breaking point in many households, and by taking on unsustainable levels of debt, the US working class delayed the end of American exceptionalism - until the global crisis hit in 2007. By then, their buying power could no longer grow: rising unemployment kept wages flat, no more hours of work, nor more borrowing, were possible. Reckoning time had arrived. A US capitalism built on expanding mass consumption lost its foundation.

The richest 10-15% - those cashing in on employers' good fortune from no longer-rising wages - helped bring on the crisis by speculating wildly and unsuccessfully in all sorts of new financial instruments (asset-backed securities, credit default swaps, etc). The richest also contributed to the crisis by using their money to shift US politics to the right, rendering government regulation and oversight inadequate to anticipate or moderate the crisis or even to react properly once it hit.

Indeed, the rich have so far been able to use the crisis to widen still further the gulf separating themselves from the rest, to finally bury American exceptionalism. First, they utilized both parties' dependence on their financial support to make sure there would be no mass federal hiring program for the unemployed (as FDR used between 1934 and 1940). The absence of such a program guaranteed that real wages would not rise and, with job benefits, would likely fall - as they indeed have done. Second, the rich made sure that the prime focus of government response to the crisis would benefit banks, large corporations and the stock markets. These have more or less "recovered".

Third, the current drive for government budget austerity - especially focused on the 50 states and the thousands of municipalities - forces the mass of people to pick up the costs for the government's unjustly imbalanced response to the crisis. The trillions spent to save the banks and selected other corporations (AIG, GM, Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, etc) were mostly borrowed because the government dared not tax the corporations and the richest citizens to raise the needed rescue funds. Indeed, a good part of what the government borrowed came precisely from those funds left in the hands of corporations and the rich, because they had not been taxed to overcome the crisis. With sharply enlarged debts, all levels of government face
the pressure of needing to take too much from current tax revenues to pay interest on debts, leaving too little to sustain public services. So, they demand the people pay more taxes and suffer reduced public services, so that government can reduce its debt burden.

For example, California's new governor proposes to continue for five more years the massive, broad-based tax increases begun during the crisis and also to cut state services for the poor (reduced Medicaid funding) and the middle class (reduced budgets for community colleges, state colleges, and the university system). The governor admits that California's budget faces sky-high interest costs and reduced federal government assistance just when the crisis increases demands for public services. The governor does not admit his fear to tax the state's huge corporate and private individual wealth. So, he announces an "austerity program", as if no alternative existed. Indeed, a major support for austerity comes from the large corporations and wealthiest Californians, who hold the state's bonds and want reassurances that the interest on those bonds will be paid.

California's austerity program parallels similar programs in many other states, in thousands of municipalities, and at the federal level (for example, social security). Together, they reinforce falling real wages, falling benefits, falling government services and rising taxes. In the US, capitalism has stopped "delivering the goods", as it so long boasted. The reality of ever-deeper economic division clashes with expectations built up when wages rose over the century before the 1970s. US capitalism now brings long-term painful decline for its working class, the end of "American exceptionalism" and rising social, cultural and political tensions.

Richard Wolff gives his monthly talk on global capitalism at the Brecht Forum in New York on 18 January; for more information about Professor Wolff's lectures, podcasts and media appearance, visit his website

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WASHINGTON — A new intelligence assessment of global trends projects that China will outstrip the United States as the leading economic power before 2030, but that America will remain an indispensable world leader, bolstered in part by an era of energy independence. Russia’s clout will wane, as will the economic strength of other countries reliant on oil for revenues, the assessment says.

“There will not be any hegemonic power,” the 166-page report says. “Power will shift to networks and coalitions in a multipolar world.”

The product of four years of intelligence-gathering and analysis, the study, by the National Intelligence Council, presents grounds for optimism and pessimism in nearly equal measure. The council reports to the director of national intelligence and has responsibilities for long-term strategic analysis.

One remarkable development it anticipates is a spreading affluence that leads to a larger global middle class that is better educated and has wider access to health care and communications technologies like the Internet and smartphones. “The growth of the global middle class constitutes a tectonic shift,” the study says, adding that billions of people will gain new individual power as they climb out of poverty. “For the first time, a majority of the world’s population will not be impoverished, and the middle classes will be the most important social and economic sector in the vast majority of countries around the world.”

At the same time, it warns, half of the world’s population will probably be living in areas that suffer from severe shortages of fresh water, meaning that management of natural resources will be a crucial component of global national security efforts.


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