We're #1:
How American Narcissism and US Imperialism Reinforce Each Other
Donald Earl Collins

On Sunday, February 24, 1980, the US national hockey team defeated Finland 4-2 to take the gold medal at the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York. Two days earlier, the so-called "Miracle on Ice" occurred, in which that same US team beat the once dominant Soviet Union team by a 4-3 score. Throughout their run toward gold, fans chanted "U-S-A! U-S-A! U-S-A!" as a sign of both their fandom and their patriotic love for all things American, with occasional "We're number one! We're number one! We're number one!" chants in the last few minutes of the US win against Finland. This was how the press framed the spectacle, an outpouring of love and patriotism in the midst of increasing tensions with the Soviet Union in the last decade of the Cold War. Not to mention in the midst of American stagflation and rising unemployment after three decades of global economic dominance.

Contrast this sample of patriotic pageantry with the chants from the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, California. It was the Olympic cycle in which the Soviets refused to participate, all in retaliation for the US boycotting the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow, the latter a response to the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Without the rival Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact nations attending the Los Angeles Olympics, the US won 83 gold medals (Romania was second, with 20). Yet American fans continued with "U-S-A!" and "We're number one!" chants at every chance, through Carl Lewis' four gold medals in track and field and the US women's volleyball semifinals against Brazil. Even more distinctive was how the corporate sponsors for the Los Angeles Olympics

picked up on these allegedly patriotic themes. McDonald's specifically ran the "'When the U.S. wins, you win!" campaign during the 1984 Summer Olympics, which caused the company to run out of Big Macs by the beginning of August The US won a then record-breaking 120 medals (Hollie, 1984).

Journalist Frank Deford perhaps put it best in his August 13, 1984 postscript on the behavior of American fans during the Los Angeles Olympics, in the *Sports Illustrated* article "Cheer, Cheer, Cheer For The Home Team." Deford wrote, "God only knows what the 2.5 billion people around the globe who are watching the Games will think of a vain America, so bountiful and strong, with every advantage, including the home court, reveling in the role of Goliath." Deford went further, though, guessing fairly accurately what the rest of the world was likely thinking in 1984. He surmised, "At best, we've been dreadful hosts; at worst, we've revealed ourselves as bullies—of our friendly competition and of an ideal—because in these Americ Games there has been no room for those who failed, or for those poor, huddled masses of athletes who dared come from foreign lands" (Deford, 1984, pp. 38-39). Deford did not write the words *American imperialism* or *American narcissism*, but with phrases like "reveling in the role of Goliath," "bullies," and "a vain America," he might as well have.

Here's a simple proposition for looking at the US, whether in 1776, 1984 or 2015. We are a people so obsessed with individual achievement and triumph that our absolute allegiance to individualism is really our society's collective narcissism. Our narcissism is truly the one thing—maybe, even, the *only* thing—that unites us all as Americans. That narcissism permeates every aspect of our existence and is embedded in every American

institution. The Olympics may well be a gigantic display of nationalism. Over the past seven decades, though, it has become but one crucial example of American economic dominance and geopolitical influence, both signs of an imperialism that is reinforced by America's everyday, ordinary narcissism.

America's narcissism, thus, is the *cause* of long-term changes to its society, and a consequence of American imperialism over the course of US history. However, America's narcissism is a *consequence* of America's growing influence and dominance on the world stage. Both the collective cultural and psychological state of narcissism and principle of imperialism serve as the bedrock for the conception and existence of the nation-state that is the United States. They reinforce and are dependent upon each other, and are key to truly understanding the truths, the lies and the contradictions in all of America's institutions.

For the purposes of this discussion, though, the main issue is showing how America's narcissism has played out on the national and world stage since the US reached superpower status in 1945. Through its geopolitical and economic imperialism--and the selling of narcissism through imperialism--the US has managed to export its narcissism across the globe, and deepen the hold of narcissism on ordinary Americans, all providing a further cultural reach than most are willing to admit.

Literature Review

Before discussing the nuances of the argument the author has embedded here, it is important to note what narcissism is and is not. This means a turn toward the fields of psychology and psychiatry, an area in which the author worked for a number of years

before turning his full attention to the history profession. According to the beta-version of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (DSM-V), narcissistic personality disorder (under the code 301.81) is "a persistent manner of grandiosity, a continuous desire for admiration, along with a lack of empathy." In order to determine if a patient may have narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), a psychiatrist must determine if that patient meets at least any five (5) of the nine (9) standards below:

1. A grandiose logic of self-importance
2. A fixation with fantasies of unlimited success, control, brilliance, beauty, or idyllic love
3. A credence that he or she is extraordinary and exceptional and can only be understood by, or should connect with, other extraordinary or important people or institutions
4. A desire for unwarranted admiration
5. A sense of entitlement
6. Interpersonally oppressive behavior
7. No form of empathy
8. Resentment of others or a conviction that others are resentful of him or her
9. A display of egotistical and conceited behaviors or attitudes

(American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Narcissism is not simply selfishness or egotistical expressions of self-love. Possible concurring disorders could include antisocial personality disorder, borderline personality disorder, and/or histrionic personality disorder. Bottom line, while there are certainly extreme cases of narcissism, to the point where societies can end up with a Ted Bundy or an Adolf Hitler, most clinically diagnosed narcissists are normal to high functioning. Still, as psychology professors Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell noted in their recent book *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (2009), "'normal' narcissism is potentially even more harmful because it is so much more common," as millions now live in the "land of grandiose fantasy," with disastrous results (pp. 3-4).

As Twenge and Campbell noted, understanding what they called "the narcissism epidemic" is critical precisely because "its long-term consequences are destructive to society." They also wrote, "[t]he cultural focus on self-admiration began with the shift toward focusing on the individual in the 1970s, documented in Tom Wolfe's article on 'The Me Decade'" (1976) and Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979). The problem with this assessment -- in fact, the problem with most assessments on this topic -- is that Twenge and Campbell have neglected America's long history of navel-gazing. Obsessions with individualism and competitive advantage have always been a part of American history. Though the focus on the individual may well have become more intense since the 1970s, the origins for these ideas go back much further than these authors' younger days (Twenge and Campbell, 2009, p. 4).

As Twenge and Campbell have also said, albeit indirectly, my assertion that American society is narcissistic when taken as a whole is not an entirely new one. The late cultural historian Christopher Lasch (1932-1994) wrote about *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), a *New York Times* Bestseller for which he won the 1980 National Book Award for Current Interest. Lasch wrote that in the US, "a way of life…is dying" because of "the culture of competitive individualism which in its decadence has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war of all against all, the pursuit of happiness to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self." (p. xiii).

This author's take on American narcissism, though, has nothing to do with Lasch's ideas of the collapse of "liberal culture…the wreckage of capitalism," or "cultural elitism" born out of the post-World War II period. The author's contention is that narcissism is

the foundation from which American culture (real and imagined) has sprung over the previous four centuries. Although Lasch is correct in arguing that narcissism in American culture has become more pernicious since the US reached superpower status and its consumer culture emerged out of World War II, there were plenty of signs of narcissism as a critical American phenomenon beforehand.

From John Smith and the original Jamestown settlers and their single-minded search for gold to the Puritans and their escape from religious persecution. Both only persecuted other English settlers and Native Americans for not converting to their profit-making or Christian ways. There's also Manifest Destiny, exploitation of Latin America's "Banana Republics" and the Kingdom of Hawaii, the building of the Panama Canal, the consideration of the American West as described by Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis, even though millions of Native Americans lived in this "wilderness." All indicate America's love of itself as righteous under any circumstance, and the use of the other, of so-called outsiders, in order to achieve further greatness.

Though the post-war economic boom and the Cold War may well have intensified both American imperialism and the nation's collective cultural narcissism, "the good old days weren't always good" (to quote Billy Joel), or, in loftier terms, were hardly immune from both forces. Indeed, they were fundamental to crafting the American id as obsessed with competition, with individualism, with winning, and with proclaiming dominance over those it deemed losers. To the point where all evidence for this narrative of imperialism and narcissism is usually transmuted into the American ideals of individualism, hard work, and always on the side of good or God (the latter depending on

one's religious perspective). For most ordinary Americans, the US could never be an empire, because the US does not acquire or colonize territories, enslave foreign inhabitants, or deliver evil ideals to foreign lands. The US is the nation every other country on Earth looks up to, the one every nation-state envies.

Former long-time editor of *Harper's Magazine* Lewis H. Lapham wrote the provocative piece "The American Rome" in August 2001, just a month before the 9/11 attacks. In his article, Lapham critiqued American justifications for war and atrocities through the lens of innocence. That America views itself as young, innocent, and incapable of imperialism or exporting evil to the world, even when the evidence is obvious. Because of this view, Americans tend to have a skewed view of foreign affairs and of the nation's geopolitical, economic and cultural ambitions.

Much like ancient Rome, according to Lapham, America tends to see itself as "betrayed (at Pearl Harbor, the Little Big Horn, Havana Bay)," and at the World Trade Center, and can "justify the use of brutal or un-Christian means to defend the Ark of Safety against the world's treachery." This is why "America never needs to appoint truth commissions similar to those established by South Africa, Chile, Burundi, and any other country seeking to come to terms with its inevitably tragic past. The American past isn't tragic," at least according to American history textbooks (Lapham, 2001, p. 34).

This is more than a sign of innocence or naiveté, not with all the world has learned about American political and military intentions over the decade since Lapham published "The American Rome." Between unscrupulous American business practices at home and abroad, American consumer culture, and the American military acting as "nation-

builders" around the globe, it would be obvious to most that America has not been an innocent nation for a while. But because Americans cling to their belief in a sense of innocent and sacrosanctity, it becomes clear that a certain societal neurosis is involved. An unhealthy narcissism has spread across the land, in much greater supply than America's "amber waves of grain."

As with the other authors on this issue, Lapham really only focused on the years after 1970, with an emphasis on the decade between the end of the Cold War and the edge of the War on Terror. Lapham does tap into this greater sense that, "[n]ever intrinsic to the American landscape or the American character, evil is a deadly and unlicensed import, an outlandish disease smuggled through customs in a shipment of German philosophy or Asian rice" (Lapham, 2001, p. 34). That sentence alone could serve as either evidence of American narcissism, or at least, evidence of Lapham's narcissism recognizing American narcissism.

Lapham, though, contradicted himself, and in doing so, misconstrued the relationship between American narcissism and American imperialism. Toward the end of "The American Rome," Lapham argued, "[u]nlike their overlords in Washington, the American people never have been infected with the virus of imperial ambition; nor have we acquired an exalted theory of the state that might allow us to govern subject peoples with a firm hand and an easy conscious" (Lapham, 2001, p. 37). Lapham may well be right about the latter, but on the former, the literature in the fields of psychology, psychiatry and history suggest otherwise. According to the DSM-V manual, NPD can also include "impairment in personality functioning" in at least two out of four areas: "Individuality,

Self-direction, Empathy, Closeness" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Trouble with self-direction, or in this case, with the idea of blatant colonial imperialism might be typical of ordinary Americans, but most Americans would not have a problem with the idea of imperialism in general.

Unlike Lapham, historian Joshua B. Freeman leans away from this sense-of-innocence analysis of American imperialism, preferring instead to ascribe to ordinary Americans a sense of willful ignorance with regard to the projection of US military and economic dominance. Freeman wrote, "for a country with an archipelago of defense establishments spanning the globe and ever-growing international economic interests, the United States evinced a low level of public curiosity about the rest of the world," as many Americans "had little interest in foreign places, cultures, or languages" (Freeman, 2012, p. 435).

Freeman's answer for why this disconnect exists between America's expansive global dominance and the ordinary American's lack of interest in the world was simplistic. He posited that "the United States remained a nonmartial society even as it maintained the world's most potent military, with a low cultural and social presence of the armed service outside…major military facilities" (Freeman, 2012, pp. 434-35). (MSNBC host Rachel Maddow made a similar argument in her bestseller *Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power* (2012), though she concluded that this had a deleterious effect on American democracy, creating a secret military culture in the process). Leaving aside the fact that social scientists such as Barry Glassner in *The Culture of Fear* (1999), Andrew J. Bacevich in *The New American Militarism*, and Chalmers Johnson in *The Sorrows of*

Empire (2005) all point to parallels between violence and militarism at home and the US projection of both across the globe, there is one other issue. Being deliberately ignorant of the rest of the world is itself a possible sign of narcissism across American society. If the US is the leading superpower, and has always aspired to empire, as most of the authors on this topic suggest, then it is also reasonable to conclude that narcissism -- not mere innocence or unconscious ignorance -- is at play here.

The late literary theorist/critic and public intellectual Edward Said indirectly tied US imperialism to American narcissism in the new preface he wrote for his polemical classic *Orientalism* (1978) in May 2003, a few months before his death. Said wrote,

> What I do argue also is that there is a difference between knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes and on the other hand knowledge -- if that is what it is -- that is part of an overall campaign of self-affirmation, belligerency, and outright war. (Said, 2003, p. xix).

Said added that there is a "profound difference between the will to understand" and "the will to dominate." He wrote this in the context of the US invasion of Iraq in the name of finding WMD's, nation-building, oil, and other euphemisms. Yet Said's argument also communicated an acknowledgement of an imperial nation with narcissistic personality disorder, including the need for "self-affirmation." (Said, 2003, p. xix).

Announcing America's Presence With Authority:

Somewhere between Sunday night at 7:16 pm Washington, DC time on August 5, 1945 and mid-afternoon, Monday, August 6, most Americans learned the news that Lt. Col. Paul Tibbets and the crew of the B-29 bomber christened *Enola Gay* dropped a new weapon of great power over the Japanese city Hiroshima. The weapon, the second atomic

bomb detonation in world history, instantly killed 70,000 people and destroyed nearly five square miles of the city. Another 70,000 in Hiroshima would die of radiation sickness, burns and other injuries by the end of 1945. The US Army Air Corps followed up the Hiroshima bombing with another B-29 dropping a single plutonium bomb on Nagasaki at 10:02 pm Wednesday evening, August 8, Washington, DC time. Between 35,000 and 50,000 people died within seconds of that blast and vaporizing heat. With those weapons of mass destruction, the US announced to Japan, Josef Stalin and the Soviet Union, and the rest of the world that it was now a superpower, a new and dominant force in the world.

Of course, the US had been building to this moment of supreme geopolitical and economic dominance for decades. The "arsenal for democracy" had retooled itself to mass produce the weapons for wartime and mass destruction in the half-decade before the white lights of nuclear fission wiped out two Japanese cities the second week in August 1945. However, if the people in the US and rest of the world had only seen it as just another world power prior to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they soon saw the US differently afterward.

The narrative and the debate in the seven decades since has been about whether the US should have dropped those WMDs on primarily civilian targets at the end of World War II. Especially since the Japanese had made a number of overtures toward surrender since the summer of 1944, and especially after losing in Iwo Jima in April 1945. Richard Rhodes in his *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (1986) and *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb* (1995) has clearly shown that the atomic bomb drops were much

more about warning the Soviets that we could decimate their population centers if they went to war with the US than saving tens of thousands of American lives in an invasion of Japan. Still, most Americans firmly believe that those bombs saved many more lives than the 250,000 or so who died in Japan by 1950. Especially American lives (Rhodes, 1986, pp. 633-34, 637-38, 692-94; Rhodes, 1995, pp. 180-81).

Beyond this narrative of taking lives to save lives is the logic of what led to the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the first place. That logic is born from the combination of US imperialistic tendencies and American narcissism. As pointed out previously, Pearl Harbor remained seared in the minds of millions of Americans for decades after December 7, 1941. The "Jap sneak attack" that forced the US into the Second World War remained fresh in the minds of Americans throughout the war. When combined with anti-Japanese racism that had been part of American culture prior to Pearl Harbor, and the zero-sum brutality with which both the US and Japanese militaries fought the War in the Pacific, it should be no surprise that policy makers would want to drop WMDs on unsuspecting Japanese targets.

Polls conducted between 1941 and 1945 show that Americans pretty much cared little about what would happen to the Japanese and their country over the course of World War II. In his *War Without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War* (1986), historian John W. Dower culled together polling data from the period. Dower noted that the American "obsession [with annihilation] extended to many men and women far removed from the place of battle, and came to embrace not just the enemy's armed forces but the Japanese as a race and culture (p. 53)." In comparative data from two Gallup polls

conducted in January 1942 and December 1944, when pollsters asked Americans what should happen to Japan and the Japanese at the end of the war, American attitudes had hardened over time. While 29 percent of Americans wanted Japan "destroy[ed] as a nation" in the 1942 poll, by December 1944, the number had grown to 33 percent. Another 13 percent wanted to "kill them (Janssen, 1995, p. 41)." Almost half of the respondents wanted Japan destroyed and its people annihilated. Even four months after Japan had surrendered, a *Fortune* survey found that 23 percent of Americans wanted to use "many more of them [atomic bombs] before Japan had a chance to surrender (Dower, 1986, p. 54)."

The betrayal of Pearl Harbor, Japanese atrocities at Bataan and elsewhere, all influenced these views. Yet there's much more embedded in these attitudes. As noted in DSM-V, "interpersonally oppressive behavior," "no form of empathy," and "resentment of others or a conviction that others are resentful of him or her" are also involved. Combined with the anti-Japanese racism, the need to protect America's newfound superpower status, and the fog of war, visiting new horrors on Japanese cities would not only be seen by Americans as acceptable, but also necessary. Without this sense of personal betrayal and satisfaction on the part of ordinary Americans, there would never have been a need to justify dropping the only two atomic bombs ever used on civilian targets. Without this narcissism, there would be some recognition that the US had committed crimes against humanity, according to the Geneva Conventions.

The issue of lives having value or possessing no value is also part of the dual coin of US imperialism and American narcissism. Hiroshima and Nagasaki are hardly the only

cases in which Americans deny the humanity of the "other" in both war and peace. The nearly two-decade-long US military involvement and incursions in Vietnam serves as another example. Though the US justified its involvement through its need to contain Soviet and Chinese communist influence in Southeast Asia via the "Domino theory," the US military escalation that began in 1955 put an eventual full-blown war on top of what was in essence a post-colonial civil war. According to the *BMJ* (previously known as the British Medical Journal), as many as 3.8 million Vietnamese died during the US-inspired and involved conflict between North and South Vietnam, with the US estimate of 2.1 million deaths seen as the minimum (Obermeyer, Murray, and Gakidou, 2008, p. 1482; Rosen, 2015).

The late Stanley Karnow's classic *Vietnam: A History* (1991), noted that "American soldiers…frequently dismissed them [the Vietnamese] as 'gooks' for whom the Western concept of life was alien (p. 22)." Historian Nick Turse, however, goes even further, showing that "[m]urder, torture, rape, abuse, forced displacement, home burnings, specious arrests, imprisonment without due process…were no aberration. Rather, they were the inevitable outcome of deliberate policies" (Turse, 2013, p. 6). The complete disregard for Vietnamese lives and land, and an almost complete lack of empathy are the byproducts of both US imperialistic policies and ordinary Americans as citizens and soldiers narcissistically dehumanizing their "enemy" in order to "win" at all costs.

In contrast, Americans have revered the loss of more than 58,000 military personnel as if a supernatural entity foisted the Vietnam conflict on the nation, signified by Maya Lin's black marble Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall. More importantly, most

historians and journalists whom have written about the Vietnam War in the past four decades ignore the issue of the distinct difference in American attitudes toward lives lost altogether. They have instead concerned themselves with either memoirs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and heroism or the question, "Why did America lose in Vietnam?" Very little of the literature examines the US perspective that allows for precious American lives on the one hand and expendable lives of non-Americans, especially Asian, African or other brown-skinned peoples, on the other. Navel-gazing in the midst of great suffering is certainly a textbook example of NPD (Appy, 2015; Herschensohn, 2010; Record, 1998; Rosen, 2015; Sheehan, 1988).

The late architect of the Vietnam War, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, wrote in his apologia *Wilson's Ghost* (2001), there "was approximately zero empathy on each side, no understanding in Washington and Hanoi of the values and assumptions that were driving the policies of their adversaries (p. 70)." Maybe so. Yet McNamara demonstrated classic US imperialism reinforced by narcissism in this instance, to believe that "each side" was equally responsible for a conflict that clearly was about US geopolitical interests. The US was the aggressor in the conflict, and as the world's democratic superpower, needed empathy *before* engaging in such a destructive war. The US lacked empathy for the Vietnamese militarily and culturally. As Karnow wrote, General William Westmoreland "often said during the war, 'They are Asians who don't think about death the way we do.' Such racist remarks oddly nullified America's official claim to be defending the freedom of the South Vietnamese, who were also Asian (Karnow, 1991, p. 22)."

Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Vietnam all represent not-so-subliminal messages that America sends to the rest of the world through its policy makers and news and entertainment outlets. One American life lost in war is more valuable than the lives of tens of thousands of others around the world. Certainly this may well have been true at other times, like with "Remember the Maine" as a prelude to the Spanish-American War in 1898 or the Germans sinking the Lusitania in 1915. Clearly since becoming a superpower in 1945, and with the War on Terror in the past 15 years, has US imperialism and American narcissism combined to distort the value of an American life versus the unvalued humanity of people of color in the rest of the world.

"You Asked For It, You Got It!"

There is almost unanimous consensus that the years of supreme American global economic dominance lasted from roughly 1945 until the OPEC oil embargo of 1973-74. There may well have been signs that the US economy would not sustain GDP growth rates of nine percent or even six percent by the early 1960s, as the economies of Western Europe and Japan were rebuilding rapidly. Yet ordinary Americans and many policy makers did not glean those messages until they were in half-mile long lines on odd-number days waiting for a couple of gallons of gas. With the embargo, rising inflation and interest rates, higher unemployment, and annual GDP growth of only three or four percent, the time in which the US represented more than 50 percent of the world's economic output became a distant memory.

Nothing symbolized the decline of US economic dominance more than Japan's emergence as a dominant economic powerhouse in its own right. And no one product

from Japan represented its post-World War II economic resurrection more than the Toyota Corolla. Originally exported to the US in 1968, Americans by the mid-1970s bought between 20,000 and 30,000 Corollas annually, out of the 500,000 Corollas Toyota produced per year (Lecraw and Morrison, 1993, p. 187; Toder, 1978). Toyota vehicles became the #1 import in the US automobile market by 1972. The OPEC oil embargo, high inflation, and cheaper Japanese cars with high gas mileage made for more Japanese incursions on American auto industry profitability. As such, the once dominant and almost unopposed US auto industry began its long spiral of decline, plant closings and layoffs by the end of the 1970s.

Japan became the scapegoat for ordinary Americans again. This time, the betrayal was about the helping hand the US had given Japan in the decade or so after World War II. After all, the logic for many Americans went, "we" helped Japan rebuild, to make a long-time enemy into an ally, but only on terms that favored America's global economic dominance. As Dana Frank showed in her *Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism* (1999), a new "Buy American" movement emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, in which "Buy Americanism descended into Asian-bashing as a scapegoat for corporate behavior (pp. 126-32)."

Though the US did not go to war to annihilate the Japanese as it had attempted to in the 1940s, the anti-Japan/Japanese bashing was both figurative and literal. It came in the ritualistic destruction of the Toyota Corolla. On Wednesday, March 3, 1981, United Auto Workers union members of Local 588 at the Ford stamping plant in Forest Park, Illinois (suburban Chicago) took sledgehammers to a 1975 Toyota Corolla in the name of,

"If you sell in America, BUILD in America" (Associated Press, 1981; http://www.aaja.org/vc-timeline/). A charity event meant to raise money for laid-off steelworkers in Gary, Indiana on September 10, 1982 involved Gary autoworker Jim Coleman and businessman Charlie Cobb, as they took turns with sledgehammers on another Toyota Corolla (Associated Press, 1982; http://www.aaja.org/vc-timeline/) . On Labor Day, September 2, 1985, union supporters in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania put together a parade float in which "a brawny American steelworker smash[ed] a Japanese-made car and its buck-toothed passengers" with a sledgehammer (Garver, 1989, p. 61; Frank, 1999, p. 184). The organizers camouflaged their overt racism around the slogan "Put America Back To Work: Buy American-Made Products."

These responses to 1970s stagflation and a double-dip recession from 1981 to 1984 were about more than worries over job losses and frustrations boiling over from the effects of high inflation rates and higher gas prices. This was the need for a scapegoat, especially one that looked like the "other." Most importantly, though, this was about winning and losing, under an umbrella of imperialistic and narcissistic assumptions. First and foremost, the assumption that Japan and the dutiful Japanese worker owed the US some undefined economic allegiance, as if Japanese companies had forced Americans to buy Toyota Corollas and Datsun 240Zs (the latter before they reverted to Nissan in the 1980s) over the previous decade. Second was the assumption that American products were not only better, but that buying American products would demonstrate patriotic love preserving America's present and future. The third assumption in this 1980s version of an anti-Japanese campaign was that smashing Toyota Corollas with sledgehammers

could yield Americans a victory over another nation, as if the US was still in the middle of fighting World War II. At best, ordinary Americans found themselves disillusioned from the idea that US economic dominance could go on unchallenged into eternity. At worse, most Americans had their narcissist confidence in their country as an economic winner over the rest of the world shaken, but only temporarily.

The past 15 years with China poised to take the mantle of the world's #1 economy has shaken the American "fixation with fantasies of unlimited success" even further. China-bashing has almost fully replaced the need to destroy Toyota Corollas in the parking lots of steel mills and stamping plants. Then again, thousands of these plants and mills have closed across the country in the past three decades, leaving few people to even contemplate overt gestures to demonstrate dominance. There have been no Labor Day parades in recent years, in any case, in which protestors have attempted to destroy their iPhones or solar panels or clothes, most of which are all made in China.

Spreading #1 Values:

There are 197 countries in the world today, varying from ones in borderline anarchy and sure-fired tyranny to many with some form of democracy. The problem with American foreign policy and military interventions, though, is that American officials have expressed a desire to spread *American* democracy. A problem since President James Monroe issued what the world commonly knows as the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, the idea that the US must spread its exceptional brand of democracy has grown in scope over the past century. There were some attempts to bequeath America's brand of democracy on West Germany and Japan in the years after World War II. Yet even General Douglas

MacArthur's constitutional experts borrowed heavily from the United Kingdom's parliamentary system and went beyond the US Bill of Rights in setting up Japan's model constitution in 1947 (Azimi, 2012, December 14). As the Potsdam Conference established in its Declaration in July 1945, the occupation of Japan would end only when a "peacefully inclined and responsible government" had been implemented, in line "with the freely expressed will of the Japanese people." Not an *American* democracy, but a liberal government (Potsdam Declaration, 1945). Even at the height of the Cold War, American foreign policy was about containment of communism first, and spreading democracy second, as evidenced by US interventions propping up corrupt dictators in Ferdinand Marcos in The Philippines, Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan, and of course, the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

However, with the end of the Cold War in 1989 and especially since 9/11, a key part of American foreign policy through the cruel stick of military intervention has been an insistence on inculcating good American values in allegedly less civilized parts of the world. As then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said on NBC's *Today Show* in reference to Iraq in March 1998

> It is the threat of the use of force [against Iraq] and our line-up there that is going to put force behind the diplomacy. But if we have to use force, it is because *we are America; we are the indispensable nation*. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us (emphasis added).

Albright's statement is an indispensable one. It sums up US foreign policy and militarist interventions in the Middle East, in South Asia and in East Africa over the past quarter-century. The need to punish America's enemies, to destroy their infrastructure and kill

and maim terrorists, dictators and millions of innocent men, women and children on the one hand. And then introduce American-style democracy and capitalism (most see them as one and the same) on the other. Albright's statement smacks of both US imperialism and American narcissism, especially in seeing the US as "the indispensable nation."

Apparently, this wonderfully narcissistic phrase came about in 1996, "when political journalist Sidney Blumenthal and foreign policy historian James Chace struggled to come up with a memorable phrase to describe America's post-Cold War role in the world." They passed the phrase on to Albright, as if good phrases make for good bedfellows. As *Foreign Policy* writer and senior fellow Micah Zenko noted, Blumenthal in his Clinton presidency memoir *The Clinton Wars* (2002) defined "the indispensable nation phrase: "Only the United States had the power to guarantee global security: without our presence or support, multilateral endeavors would fail" (Zenko, 2014; Blumenthal, 2002, p. 155). Zenko went on to add his own layer of US imperialism and American narcissism to this extraordinary assumption of self-importance. "The reason that the United States is not the indispensable nation is simple: the human and financial costs, the tremendous risks, and degree of political commitment required to do so are thankfully lacking in Washington" (Zenko, 2014). In other words, if the US willed it, and wanted to commit its entire federal budget to empire-building and "global security," they could really become the indispensable nation, shipping America's exceptional democracy overseas with our tanks, bombers and soldiers.

The "indispensable nation" is also a wonderful way of saying that the US is #1, come heaven or hell, or Iraq and Afghanistan. President Barack Obama gave an

"indispensable nation" speech to West Point graduates on May 28, 2014. There, President Obama said, "The values of our founding inspire leaders in parliaments and new movements in public squares around the globe." What values exactly, President Obama did not say, but certainly American democracy was likely among them. This despite the fact that parliamentary leaders have democratic system significantly different than the more rigid American one. Nevertheless, President Obama continued, arguing, "the United States is and remains the one indispensable nation" (The White House, 2014).

The implication in this speech was clear. A quarter-century after the end of the Cold War, US foreign policy reflected both its imperialism and its narcissism. President Obama's speech affirmed what the US has seen as its absolute right to "use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand it," as "America must always lead on the world stage. If we don't, no one else will" (The White House, 2014). Again, like it says in DSM-V, a standard marker of NPD is the "credence that he or she is extraordinary and exceptional," which in this case, is about the US as a superpower and a "global force for good," as Keith David narrated in "America's Navy" commercials in 2014.

President Obama confirmed both the nation's continued commitment to military interventions and impositions of American democracy -- and American narcissism -- with these words:

> I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being. But what makes us exceptional is not our ability to flout international norms and the rule of law; it is our willingness to affirm them through our actions…But remember that because of America's efforts…more people live under elected governments today than at any time in human history (The White House, 2014).

Even with his administration's attempts at a kinder, gentler form of geopolitical engagement, President Obama himself showed that US commitment to dictating terms to much of the world militarily and diplomatically will be the main goals of US foreign policy for the foreseeable future. Objections from the rest of the globe will be duly noted and ignored.

The parliamentary system is far more common than an American form of democracy, the latter of which puts more emphasis on stability than in responding to changing political conditions. Because American leaders believe that American democracy must be the best one, American foreign policy makes the assumption that American democracy can work under any and all conditions and circumstances, like Iraq and Afghanistan. Given the sectarian violence and the advent of Islamic State in the four years since US military forces left Iraq, and the reemergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan (not to mention the limited parliamentary systems in both nation-states), this standard policy has been a nearly complete failure.

Even more significant than the contradiction of attempting to force American democracy on nations and people who tend to opt for European or even Japanese-style parliamentary systems is the contradiction between how Americans see their own democracy and how the American values that are spread likely do not include that democracy. Take any international ranking of nations based on the level of fairness in elections, in democratic practices in general, and in terms of human rights. The Electoral Integrity Project -- run concurrently by Harvard University and the University of Sydney -- ranked the US 26th out of 73 countries on the fairness of the election process scale,

between Micronesia and Mexico as moderately fair. The Democracy Index 2013 from the Economist Intelligence Unit ranked the US 19th out of 167 countries, even though many Americans claim the US is "a city upon a hill," the greatest democracy in the world (the indexers ranked Uruguay ahead of the US). Maplecroft's 2014 Human Rights Risk Atlas ranked the US 139th out of 197 countries in level of human rights risks (the higher the ranking, the more likely a government was violating the human rights of its citizens). Still, 58 other nations had a lower risk of committing state-endorsed violations of civil and human rights than the US. Not exactly #1 here for the US, either (Norris, Frank, and Martinez i Coma, 2014; Brice, 2011; Gates, 2013).

In contrast, the percentage of Americans who view the nation as #1 or close to #1 remains fairly high. In its June 2014 political typology survey, the Pew Research Center asked its question on how Americans should view the US and its standing in the world. On the statement the US "stands above all other countries in the world," 28 percent of respondents agreed, while another 53 percent agreed with the statement that the US was only "one of the greatest countries in the world, along with some others." In 2011, 38 percent of respondents saw the US as #1 -- or exceptional, or indispensable -- and 58 percent saw the US as "one of the greatest countries in the world." Though these poll numbers show a decline in the past few years, there remains the long-standing trend of a disconnect between American views of the US and where the nation ranks when viewed through a more objective lens.

Some of this misunderstanding of the meaning and shape of American democracy at home can be attributed to sheer ignorance of world affairs, a lack of US press coverage

of international news, or any number of assessments made by political science scholars. Given the ever-present narcissism in US foreign policy and in American politics, should there really be any surprise that this disconnect exists? After all, a firm belief in being exceptional and extraordinary, and believing that one "can only be understood by, or should connect with, other extraordinary or important people or institutions," is a fundamental standard in determining narcissistic personality disorder. (Pew Research Center, 2014; http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/26/section-2-views-of-the-nation-the-constitution-and-government/)

There is at least one area in which Americans and many in the rest of the world do agree on regarding the spread US dominance. A 2015 Pew Research Center survey found that a median 50 percent of the respondents polled in 40 countries believed the US to have the #1 economy in the world. Only 27 percent of that same group of respondents gave China that title. The slow but steady recovery from the Great Recession over the last six years has apparently helped in how Americans view the US economically. Forty-six (46) percent of Americans view the US as having the world's most dominant economy, versus 36 percent believing that China does. Contrast this with the 2013 Pew Research survey on this same question, when only 39 percent of Americans polled put down the US as having the world's #1 economy, while 44 percent of Americans chose China as #1. Still, this is where the broad global consensus ends. When asked about who would be the world's leading superpower in the future, Pew found that "[o]verall, majorities or pluralities in 27 of 40 countries surveyed say" China. In contrast, slightly more Americans

(48%) believe that "China will never replace the U.S." as #1 than believe that China has or will overtake the US (46%) as the #1 superpower (Wike, Stokes, and Poushter, 2015).

This all points to a partial truth. Although most around the globe view the US as a critical part of the world's economy, there are mixed views about what the US will evolve into in the future. Whereas in the US, Americans tend to remain steadfast in their beliefs that the US will remain #1 economically and as a superpower, as long as Americans can find work. Despite the Great Recession, the American view of the US as #1 remains almost unshakable.

Part of the reason for this is the US military and geopolitical dominance around the globe. However, the bigger and more insidious reason for this dichotomy about the US as the #1 superpower versus the US as the #1 economy comes down to economic imperialism. The spread of American products, services and business practices around the world in the past three decades has made Americanism economically ubiquitous. Sociologist George Ritzer wrote as much in his 1993 book T*he McDonaldization of Society*. He defined McDonaldization as "the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world (p. 1)." Ritzer posited that the rationalization of McDonald's methods -- particularly ones about producing a predictable product in great quantities with minimal or no use of a low-skilled, low-wage workforce -- is what has spread across the US and around the globe since the early 1980s. (Ritzer, 2013). This, more than anything else, may well be why the US remains #1 economically, in a cultural, if not in a statistical, sense.

That transmission of American economic imperialism to the world beyond McDonald's and Big Macs, Apple and iPhones, and Starbucks and venti lattes is what Americans ultimately celebrate as part of the "we're #1" paradigm. This despite the outsourcing of jobs from the US to the rest of the world, despite Enron, Lehman Brothers, the Dot.com and the housing busts of the previous decade. For there are "physical and psychological wages" to being part of being #1, even if those benefits do not flow directly into the pockets of the ordinary American. This phenomenon can really only be explained by narcissism, a collective type in which the combination of a "fixation with fantasies of unlimited success, control, brilliance, and beauty" and the "conviction that others are resentful" of this success comes together.

Harvard law professor Amy Chua (mostly known for her controversial 2011 book *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*) wrote about this phenomenon in her 2003 book *World On Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability*. In the process, she indirectly implicated American narcissism as a root cause of the dichotomy between American views of US dominance and the world's much more marbled view of the same. In a chapter with the same title, Chua wrote, "Why do they hate us?," adding that, "[a]midst grief, anger, patriotism, defiance, and retaliation, Americans have repeatedly returned to this question," as if the world had turned to terrorism 9/11-style as a means to express their contempt for US economic imperialism (p. 230). While Americans rightfully celebrate US economic dominance, despite "the extreme wealth disparities inevitably produced in a capitalist economy," according to Chua, "anti-Americanism," though "not always active…is an ever-present vein of hatred,

waiting to be mined, whether by a charismatic demagogue or a triggering event (Chua, 2003, p. 197, 249)."

Chua's overgeneralizations contain the assumption that anti-American views of US economic dominance are unjustified, and may be slights and betrayals of the US in a geopolitical sense, a loud and clear example of American narcissism, from Chua and her view of the US. As much as *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman's rambled in his *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (2005), he did make one important and relevant point that would serve as a good counter to assessments like Chua's. "The assumption that because America's economy has dominated the world for more than a century, it will and must always be that way is…dangerous," Friedman wrote (Friedman, 2005, pp. 376-77). Not just because of the economic problems the US has faced in the twenty-first century, but also because of the narcissism that this assumption contains.

Conclusion:

In addition to spreading dangerous economic practices and ideas around in the US and abroad, there is the possibility that the US is also exporting its neuroses and psychoses with them. As journalist Ethan Watters noted in his book *Crazy Like Us* (2013), the US is "engaged in the grand project of Americanizing the world's understanding of the human mind…industriously exporting our ideas about mental illness (pp. 1-2)." The result over the past 30 years has been the US "for better and worse, homogenizing the way the world goes mad (Watters, 2013, p. 2)." PTSD, schizophrenia, anorexia, and depression were among the mental illnesses Watters discussed in *Crazy Like Us*. US superpower

influence, economic imperialism, and especially American narcissism did not find their way into Watters' book. Yet in spreading American ideas about mental illness, or at least, psychiatric disorders, narcissism and its relationship to US imperialism should have made the cut.

At this point, the burning question that scholars should ask is whether imperialism and narcissism are one and the same. Or, to be more specific, are nations that practice imperialism like the US by definition automatically narcissistic? The answer depends on a more thorough examination of narcissism in US history, the American cultural, political and economic traditions, its projection of power over time, and how it has translated to the ordinary American citizen over time. Not to mention using the lens of narcissism as a means to understand empires as disparate as ancient Rome, Han Dynasty China and Great Britain over the course of world history.

The author does have a few suggestions. The evidence so far leans toward a form of American exceptionalism in the area of transmittable narcissism. That is, that belief in the American Dream, in American exceptionalism, in the nation as #1 despite all evidence to the contrary, is a unique byproduct. It is both the output of American imperialism and the result of four centuries of narcissism as a bedrock psychological condition of the nation's one-time colonial status and imperialistic yearnings for conquering the North American continent. Whatever else can be said of Rome, of Persia, of the dar al-Islam, narcissism may have been the psychological condition of their rulers, of the noble and elite classes. But narcissism was not something that was in the bloodstream of every person who lived and died in those empires.

This paper is not an attempt to judge whether American narcissism -- in combination with US imperialism or by itself -- is dangerous or damaging to the nation, or has ever been. Part of the problem with the social science literature to date is the idea that in 1979 or in 2009, narcissism reached critical mass and could now level American society. American narcissism is here, US imperialism is real, and scholars must understand its full nature before passing any meaningful judgment on the matter.

References:

American Psychiatric Association (2013). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*. Washington: American Psychiatric Association.

Appy, Christian (2015, April 27). "America Officially Lost the Vietnam War 40 Years Ago This Week" *MotherJones.com*, http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/04/40-years-later-will-end-games-iraq-and-afghanistan-follow-vietnam-playbook.

Asian American Journalists Association. "A Timeline of the Vincent Chin Case." http://www.aaja.org/vc-timeline/.

Associated Press Archives. http://www.aparchive.com/.

Azimi, Nassrine (2012, December 14). "Constitutionally Sound." *New York Times*. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/15/opinion/global/the-Japanese-constitution.html?_r=0.

Bacevich, Andrew J. (2008). *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Bacevich, Andrew J. (2005). *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Blumenthal, Sidney (2003). *The Clinton Wars*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Brice, Arthur (2011, December 19). " Report: North Korea World's Least Democratic Nation." *CNN*. http://www.cnn.com/2011/12/19/world/world-democracy-report/.

Chua, Amy (2003). *World On Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability*. New York: Doubleday.

Deford, Frank (1984, August 13). "Cheer, Cheer, Cheer For The Home Team." *Sports Illustrated*, pp. 38-41.

Dower, John W. (1986). *War Without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Karnow, Stanley (1991). *Vietnam: A History, Second Edition*. New York: Viking.

Frank, Dana (1999). *Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Friedman, Thomas (2007). *The World Is Flat 3.0: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Picador.

Freeman, Joshua B. (2012). *American Empire: The Rise of a Global Power, the Democratic Revolution at Home, 1945-2000*. New York: Viking.

Garver, Paul (1989). "Beyond the Cold War: New Directions for Labor Internationalism." *Labor Research Review*, 60-71. http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/lrr/vol1/iss13/4.

Gates, Sara (2013, December 4). "The 10 Worst Countries For Human Rights." *Huffington Post*. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/03/human-rights-risk-atlas-2014-violations-maplecroft_n_4374133.html.

Glassner, Barry (1999). *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things*. New York: Basic Books.

Herschensohn, Bruce (2010). *An American Amnesia: How the US Congress Forced the Surrenders of South Vietnam and Cambodia.* New York: Beaufort Books.

Hollie, Pamela G. (1984, August 10). "Big Mac's Big Giveaway." *New York Times*.

Janssens, Rudolf V. A. (1995). *"What Future for Japan?" U.S. Wartime Planning for the Postwar Era, 1942-1945*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Editions Rodopi.

Johnson, Chalmers (2005). *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Lapham, Lewis H. (2001, August). "The American Rome." *Harper's Magazine*, pp. 31-38.

Lasch, Christopher (1979). *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Lecraw, Donald J., and Morrison, Allen J. (1986). *Transnational Corporations & Business Strategy*. London: Routledge.

McNamara, Robert S. and Blight, James G. (2001). *Wilson's Ghost: Reducing the Risk of Conflict, Killing, and Catastrophe in the 21st Century*. New York: Public Affairs.

Maddow, Rachel (2012). *Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power*. New York: Broadway Books.

NBC (1998, March 19). "Interview with Madeleine Albright." *Today Show*.

Norris, Pippa, Richard W. Frank, and Ferran Martinez i Coma (2014). *The Year in Elections 2013: The World's Flawed and Failed Contests*. Cambridge: The Electoral Integrity Project. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:11744445.

Obermeyer, Ziad, Murray, Christopher J. L., and Gakidou, Emmanuela (2008, June 28). "Fifty Years of Violent War Deaths from Vietnam to Bosnia: Analysis of Data from the World Health Survey Programme." *BMJ*, pp. 1482-86

Potsdam Declaration (1945, July 26). http://www.ndl.go.jp/constitution/e/etc/co6.html.

Record, Jeffrey (1998). *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press.

Rhodes, Richard (1986). *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*. New York: Touchstone.

Rhodes, Richard (1995). *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Rosen, Elizabeth (2015, April 16). "The Vietnam War, as Seen by the Victors." *TheAtlantic.com*, http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/04/the-vietnam-war-as-seen-by-the-north-vietnamese/390627/.

Said, Edward (1978). *Orientalism, 25th Anniversary Edition*. New York: Vintage Books.

Sheehan, Neil (1988). *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. New York: Vintage Books.

Toder, Eric J. (1978). *Trade Policy and the United States Automobile Industry*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.

Turse, Nick (2013). *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Twenge, Jean M. and Campbell, W. Keith (2009). *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*. New York: Free Press.

Watters, Ethan (2010). *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Wike, Richard, Bruce Stokes, and Jacob Poushter (2015, June 23). "Global Publics Back U.S. on Fighting ISIS, but Are Critical of Post-9/11 Torture." Washington: Pew Research Center.

The White House, Office of the Press Secretary (2014, May 28). "Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony." https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony.

Zenko, Micah (2014, Novermber 6)."The Myth of the Indispensable Nation." *Foreign Policy*. http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/06/the-myth-of-the-indispensable-nation/.