

It's About Time

presented to the Sphex Club
by Julius Sigler
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I grew up in rural Florida in the 1940s. I was nine years old before we lived in a house that had functioning plumbing. My surroundings were long leaf pine forests, cypress swamps, unending groves of citrus trees and lots of water. My contact with “civilization” was largely through my reading and the radio. One of the most familiar sounds of my childhood was my mother saying “It's About Time” to turn on the radio.

“Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!

Look, up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's Superman!

Yes, it's Superman, strange visitor from another planet, who came to Earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men. Superman, who can change the course of mighty rivers, bend steel in his bare hands, and who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice and the American way.”

I understood truth: my parents taught me early on that telling the truth was immensely less painful than the alternative. And, in my five or six year-old mind, justice meant that the good guys always wore white hats, or American flags, and they always won. But even then, I wondered. Why should a strange visitor from another planet align himself with America? What precisely was “the American Way?” and why did Superman care? I never thought much about “the American Way” until I was much older, but I assumed that it must have something to do with the Pledge of Allegiance we had to memorize on the first day of school and recite daily thereafter.

Our family was a typical nuclear family; my father worked as a truck driver and my mother worked at home. I am the oldest of eight and the responsibility of being the oldest taught me much in the way of life skills – caring for younger siblings, cooking, shopping and even how to fix things. My parents taught me to respect my elders, especially teachers and policemen, to respect other people, including people of color, and to respect institutions. Using a derogatory term to describe others would produce the dreaded bar of Octagon soap. Having reached adulthood at the height of the Great Depression, they also taught me the value of hard work.

My adult beliefs were shaped by my parents, by my own reading, by my education, by my closest friends and by important events in the world and nation. I remember hearing about the dropping of the atom bomb on the radio. I remember my uncle returning from his service in China, still wearing his leather flight jacket with the Chinese and American flags. I listened to the McCarthy era hearings on the radio and observed the racial unfairness of the Jim Crow system on a daily basis. Although the Jim Crow system dominated southern culture, it didn't seem to make much difference to me on a personal level. For a couple of years we lived across the road from a black family who were just as poor as we. We played together in the afternoons and our parents shared food. My mom would bake cookies and cakes and share them. Their mother would “parch” fresh peanuts to share with both families. It was only when I started school and realized that my playmate was not in my school that I began to understand the heartless reality. My best friend through junior and high school was hispanic—a word

that I never heard or even thought about; my high school class was peppered with students who had Latin origins. His father had emigrated from Spain as a 12-year-old, but Tony was just Tony.

I did and do regard myself as patriotic, But I was even then beginning to see things that gave me reason to question. Perhaps it began with the insertion of the words “under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance. Even as a ninth grader, I was sensitive to the fact that my classmates did not necessarily hold the same religious beliefs as I. In elementary school, we had been encouraged to learn Bible verses and I knew that Jewish children did not believe what was contained in the New Testament. Our school day always began with a Christian prayer, an experience that was anything but worshipful. So what gave us the right to declare ourselves as God's chosen people?

So fast forward to a new century, passing through the Bay of Pigs, the Watergate Crisis, the Iran Contra affair, Viet Nam, our meddling in other countries, and so many other unfortunate events to the 2016 presidential campaign. I found myself pondering several questions. What makes a great nation? What gives us the right to consider ourselves a great nation? When were we great and how did we become less great?

I began to think about this topic as a possible, even necessary Sphex talk, about seven years ago. But as each of my appointed times approached, I backed away, primarily because the more I read and thought, the more elusive the talk became. It became so broad that I couldn't wrap my increasingly feeble mind around it. I came close to doing it again, but at the last minute, I decided that “it's about time!” So here goes. What follows is not a finished work. It's not even an adequate beginning. But I hope to learn what you think. So be prepared to respond as I try to identify the core beliefs that make America what it is and could be.

Let's begin with the obvious. The first lines of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution should be illuminating.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

The Declaration attributes the rights to “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of happiness” to the Creator. These “natural rights” were previously described by John Locke and others – rights that are given by god and cannot be taken away. Most Americans believe that we are a nation favored by god –that we have a divinely ordained duty to lead the rest of the world. The roots of this idea are rooted deep in our history. A century and a half before Jefferson, Governor John Winthrop of the Massachusetts Bay Colony wrote:

“. . .to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. . . . He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, “may the Lord make it like that of New England.” *For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word*

through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going."

The sermon from which this excerpt is taken makes the Puritan case for a covenant with God. But there is a difference between believing that God has given us rights and believing that God is on America's side. Many Americans believe that we are a Christian nation. But what version of Christianity? While many of the signers of the Declaration were Christians, it's also true that some were not. While Jefferson's personal views on religion remain unclear to historians, it seems clear that he believed in a god and creator. The reference to a "Creator" is somewhat generic and allows multiple religious beliefs to coexist.

In his Second Inaugural Address, President Lincoln said, "Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered...that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes."

In the great and tragic world wars of the last century each of the combatants believed that they were operating under some form of divine purpose. One can find examples of Nazi war propaganda that show aryan figures dressed as medieval crusaders with crosses on their shields watching over the marching German soldiers below—an army that was in fact preparing to murder millions of Jews. Even as a young person, I found the notion that God would always take our side more than slightly arrogant. Instead of assuming that God is *on our* side, I prefer to follow Abraham Lincoln's admonition that our greatest concern should be "whether *we* are on God's side."

Many have criticized the first line of the Declaration because of the reference to "Men" and the nation's failure to live up to the assertion of liberty for all. Despite the criticisms such as the use of the term "men," (not all men, just men who owned property; not all property owners, just citizens, and certainly not men of color – or women) the nation has I believe been built on the values of freedom, equality, and justice since its founding. Clearly the rights to life and liberty were not extended to everyone. While Jefferson and others are criticized for not addressing the fundamental question of slavery and freedom for all, I continue to be grateful that the words of the Declaration have been there to remind us of what we wish to be and to set the goal toward which we slowly stumble.

I think it's important to note that the Constitution, through the First Amendment, makes explicit the values of freedom of and from religion, freedom of speech, the press, and peaceful assembly. These freedoms are critical to any understanding of America. In 1804, President Thomas Jefferson invited the great explorer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt to visit him while Humboldt was touring the country. Humboldt was especially interested in aspects of the country: the spread of slavery and its consequences; the mining of gold as compared with Russia; and the possibilities of building a canal between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. The debate over the slave question had caused Humboldt to increase his criticism of American politics. During the visit, he picked up a newspaper from Jefferson's desk, read for a moment and folded the paper, returning it to the desk. "Baron Humboldt asked Jefferson, 'Why are these libels allowed? Why is not this libelous journal suppressed, or its editor at least, fined and imprisoned?' The question gave Jefferson a perfect opening. 'Put that paper in your pocket, Baron, and should you hear the reality of our liberty, the freedom of our press, questioned, show this paper, and tell where you found it.'" — Jon Meacham, [*Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power*](#).

As I have struggled to organize my thoughts, I want to briefly discuss three narratives that are appealing to a large cross section of the country. First, Americans believe that we are fundamentally different from other nations—that we are somehow superior. This superiority requires us to bear special responsibilities. Listen to these words, familiar to all of you.

“We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage—and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world...

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”

We are not the first to make such claims. The Athenians knew that they were superior and their hubris cost them dearly. Romans spread the Pax Romana to the entire world. The British talked about bearing the "white man's burden;" the French colonialists invoked *la mission civilisatrice* to justify their empire. Portugal, whose imperial activities were hardly distinguished, believed it was promoting a certain *missão civilizadora*. Of course, the United States has by far the better claim to virtue than Stalin or his successors. I recall that Mitt Romney and others took exception to Barack Obama's comment: “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism. I'm enormously proud of my country and its role and history in the world.”

We may be exceptional, but we are not the first nation in history to hold such beliefs.

Closely related to the previous belief is another narrative that says that we as a nation behave better than other nations—that we respect human rights, are a nation of laws, that we are peace-loving and that we above all celebrate and enjoy liberty. But one does not have to delve deeply into our history to learn that we have not always been so noble as our history textbooks tell us. In fact, I think the difference between what most of us believe about ourselves and what actually happened is at the root of the current attempts to cleanse even the sanitized history as it is taught in public schools.

In high school, I was taught much about “manifest destiny” and its role in our rapid expansion from coast to coast. I was not taught much about the human cost of that movement. For example, the history of Florida was an important part of the history curriculum. But while we were taught about the Seminole wars, we were not taught that US soldiers had arrested Chief Osceola and his lieutenants while under a flag of truce. We learned about the Battle of the Little Big Horn, but not that Custer was trespassing on tribal lands looking for gold. We didn't hear about the dozens of broken and disregarded treaties that paved the way for settlers. While it may not be possible to comprehend the reality of slavery, what I learned in school was definitely a sanitized version of that reality. I could go on, but you get the idea.

But, we have not been nearly so brutal as many victors have been. We have not chosen to create an overseas empire, nor have we caused countless millions to die for ideological reasons. The Athenians wiped out the entire population of the island of Delos because they chose to remain neutral during the Peloponnesian War. The Athenians obliterated Carthage when they finally defeated the Carthaginians. Those offenses pale in comparison to the efforts of Hitler and the Nazis, to Stalin's forced

collectivization or to Mao's Great Leap Forward. Given the power at our control, on the whole we have been restrained. Our leaders have done and continue to do what they thought was best to confront external threats. Washington could certainly have done much worse. It's clear that our leaders have done what they thought they had to do when confronted by external dangers, and moral choices were not always the deciding factor.

We often scold other nations for human rights abuses. But we share a mixed history with our own human rights. We've supported some pretty despicable and brutal regimes when it's been to our advantage. We have used torture tactics such as waterboarding when they have been deemed advantageous. We continue to strike suspected Isis and other terrorist leaders without benefit of trials. And we wonder why they hate us. We continue to be the world's biggest polluter—estimates are that the US military alone would rank fourth among world nations in the amount of greenhouse gases produced annually. Our children are not the best educated, the American quality of life is not the highest in the world, and while we do lead the world in the cost of medical services, our medical care does not make us the healthiest nation in the world.

However, there are certainly grains of truth in the idea of American morality. We can take considerable pride in the significant contributions to the stability and peace of the world through two world wars, the creation of the United Nations, the Marshall Plan, our support of NATO and stabilizing military presence in Europe and the Far East. And we are finally taking climate change seriously and moving to reduce carbon emissions.

Yet a third narrative argues that our nation has been successful because of the brilliance of its founders and the US Constitution, the importance of individual liberty and the creativity and hard work of the American people. Americans clearly believe in competition, despite the current practice of awarding everyone equally in youth sports. They believe that confronting and meeting challenges leads to personal growth and improvement. The combination of freedom and competition has led Americans to create the modern version of a free-enterprise economy and is undeniably successful. At least, that's the idea. But all too often the larger the business, the less it values competition, and monopoly is not just a board game. All one has to do is to compare gasoline prices from station to station. Businesses lobby for protection from foreign competition.

Traditionally, Americans do work hard – and they work long hours. They have little vacation time when compared to European nations. Most Americans have little time for leisure activities and are suspicious of those who seem to be doing “nothing.” I remember my parents saying “Don't just stand there, do something.” But recent people choosing not to work is disturbing, at least to me.

Listen to this quote from *You Can't Go Home Again* by Thomas Wolfe:

“So, then, to every man his chance—to every man, regardless of his birth, his shining, golden opportunity—to every man the right to live, to work, to be himself, and to become whatever thing his manhood and his vision can combine to make him — this, seeker, is the promise of America.”

This promise, stated by so many and in so many ways brought waves of immigrants to America in search of economic opportunity. The idea of the "melting pot" facilitated the assimilation of each wave of new Americans, although not without great struggles on the part of each group. Beginning with the archetypes of the “Yankee Trader,” and “Yankee Ingenuity.” America’s scientific and technological achievements are truly remarkable—even taking into account the huge influx of science and technical talent fleeing Europe in the 1930s. American economic success is equally remarkable. Both owe much to our political system and to the work ethic of Americans.

But our success is also due to our good fortune, to live in a good and gracious land with an ocean on each side. We were fortunate that the great European powers were at war in the 18th century and that England could not devote its entire military to quelling the rebellion. We were most fortunate that our founders were willing to risk the noose to create a new nation.

In the mid-1980s, I got to know an older student in my senior symposium class. He clearly was a person with a different background and a different view of the world—an excellent writer. I learned that he was a political refugee from Chile, a man who had held a responsible position in the Pinochet government. He was also an astute observer of his new country and over the past 30 years I have benefited from his observations of the American political scene. Following a class discussion, he shared an interesting document with me. It was given to him by the US Department of State during an orientation session for political refugees. The document described American beliefs such as equality, individualism, competition, control of time, self reliance, and how our behaviors and values might seem different to other cultures. Rather than discuss each of these values, I found the following brief description of “the American Way of Life,” which will bring this rambling to a close.

American writer and intellectual [William Herberg](#) offers the following definition of the American way of life:[2]

The American Way of life is individualistic, dynamic, and pragmatic. It affirms the supreme value and dignity of the individual; it stresses incessant activity on his part, for he is never to rest but is always to be striving to "get ahead"; it defines an ethic of self-reliance, merit, and character, and judges by achievement: "deeds, not creeds" are what count. The "American Way of Life" is humanitarian, "forward-looking", optimistic. Americans are easily the most generous and philanthropic people in the world, in terms of their ready and unstinting response to suffering anywhere on the globe. The American believes in progress, in self-improvement, and quite fanatically in education. But above all, the American is idealistic.

So, let's talk a bit about what you believe to be true about America.