

The Jeremiad, Exceptionalism, and Terrorism in America

Violence and terrorism are complex matters when framed within the context of American history. The United States tends to view its most imminent threat as a foreign one; the nation is incapable of fitting terror within the infrastructure of its own narrative. Underscoring the fundamental American mentality and self-perception are the American jeremiad and exceptionalism, which help to foster this conception of threat as sourced from foreign entities. In order to grasp an understanding of and acknowledge this misguided perception, one must recognize it in the broader frame of the American ethos. The American notion of the fundamental source of violence and terrorism is informed by traditional national epistemes that struggle to identify these issues as capable of being American.

Exceptionalism and the jeremiad intertwine to create a perceived existence of an America positioned on a pedestal, largely due to the belief in an unparalleled uniqueness and the possession of a special relationship with God. This faith in a superior existence fosters the American notion of the *other*, whether this be with regard to race, ethnicity, or religion, and fuels the notion that this *other* fundamentally challenges the American ethos and therefore constitutes America's greatest threat. With this characterization, the American understanding of threat and violence becomes limited and held to certain criterion, and therefore it is difficult for Americans to accept instances of domestic—specifically white supremacist—acts of violence as terrorism. These white supremacist acts of terror are carried out against those deemed as *other*, specifically minorities or immigrants, in defense of the American ideals epitomized by exceptionalism and the jeremiad. This type of terror uses the actions of America as a nation, which have historically been justified as a protection of exceptionalist and jeremiadic ideals, as a model on which to base

its violence. By this token, if Americans were to truly acknowledge this type of violence as a form of terror that fits into the greater American narrative, rather than being an anomaly to it, there would be an acknowledgement of the treachery in our foundational national principles. By adopting a new perspective which considers the entire framework that has shaped America's self-perceived identity, specifically the interplay of the American jeremiad and exceptionalism, Americans can reflect differently on this self-perception and understand how it impedes upon their ability to grasp the true nature of terror.

The Foundations of American Exceptionalism

American exceptionalism guides the nation's conception of and interaction with global politics, as well as its self-perception. This sense of exceptionality prefaces the establishment of the nation itself, derived from John Winthrop's seventeenth century *A Model of Christian Charity*, which proclaimed the unique covenant the settlers of New England entered into with God. Faith in this covenant fostered the idea of a common destiny driven by God and a certain uniqueness existing among the settlers whom God selected to uphold such a covenant. With this divine ordination, New England becomes the "city upon a hill," an example for its successors to follow. Winthrop's emphasis on his people's divinely-anointed exceptionality is reinforced in his depiction of the natural social hierarchy as an innate feature of God's will. Winthrop claims, "[God's] most holy and wise providence hath so disposed of the condition of mankind as in all times some must be rich, some poor; some high and eminent in power and dignity, others mean in subjection."¹ Winthrop does employ this hierarchy to put forth a model of "brotherly affection" and reciprocity; while he instructs that according to God's decree, "the rich and mighty should not eat up the poor," by this same token, the poor ought not to "rise up against their superiors and shake off their yoke."² In reinforcing a divine hierarchy, it becomes easy to

believe that a select few maintain superiority over others as a function of God's will. *A Model of Christian Charity* lays the foundation for the prevailing American mentality that the nation's people hold firm faith in the unequivocal greatness of their homeland. The notion of exceptionality evolved, becoming intrinsically linked with American citizenship, and is now so ingrained in the nation's culture that a questioning or challenging of this exceptionality is automatically deemed as un-patriotic or un-American.

What Makes America Exceptional

Generally, there lacks a common consensus on what ascribes to the United States of America its exceptionality. However, most estimations consider the nation as deviating from some accepted standard. According to Justin Litke, author of *Twilight of the Republic: Empire and Exceptionalism in the American Political Tradition*, American exceptionalism can be regarded in two senses: a comparative sense and a unique sense.³ The comparative sense contends that America stands as an exception from an established norm or dominant pattern, in terms of both empirical and ideological comparisons.⁴ According to Litke, the comparative sense “revolves around the assertion that there is a general model of societal progression for developed nations in the world—and the U.S. does not fit this model.”⁵ On the other hand, the unique sense of American exceptionality bears connotations of idiosyncrasy and religious foundations.⁶ This sense of exceptionalism contains three subsenses and is typically the definition that provides a glimpse into the motivation for certain political action.

The first subsense is an exemplary definition of exceptionalism, grounded in John Winthrop's *A Model of Christian Charity*.⁷ As aforementioned, Winthrop and the Puritan colonists were called upon by God to establish a standard of living according to their covenant that ought to shine as an example for succeeding civilizations. Alexis de Tocqueville—the man

who coined American exceptionalism—introduced the second subsense of unique exceptionalism, which is the understanding of an institutional or cultural uniqueness by Americans.⁸ The American *Federalists* were viewed as models of this exceptionality, and this sense ties America's uniqueness to religion, which is frequently present in contemporary political arguments.⁹ The third and final subsense of unique exceptionalism is imperial exceptionalism, where it is thought that America's mission is to educate, civilize, and dominate the world economically and politically.¹⁰ This is the primary sense in which exceptionalism operates politically and bears the most prominent practical consequence.¹¹ As America is believed to stand as an exception to some regular pattern, there are various facets of and beliefs underpinning American society that fuse to create this exceptionality. These senses of exceptionalism provide a foundation upon which Americans form their perception of self and others, largely guiding the interaction of America with the rest of the world.

The Foundations of the American Jeremiad

Similarly derived from the puritan beliefs of early settlers is the prevalence of “covenant theology” in the American mentality. The American jeremiad was born as a result of the prominence of the biblical prophet Jeremiah and the style of Puritan sermon, thereby forming a public rhetoric grounded in a yearning to return to a “clean” past that invokes a kind of public lament. Originally, the jeremiad mentality was a consequence of the belief that God had withdrawn his favor from “the chosen people” due to failure of those people to uphold God's commandments, resulting in tragic occurrences such as disease or attacks by Native Americans.¹² This desire to return the nation to a state of greater spiritual and moral health to regain the favor of God has extended into the more secular modern American identity, especially in times of crisis. Rhetoric of the jeremiad has retained cultural power and has a historical tradition of being

invoked by pious prophets and secular reformers alike that have held anxiety regarding the state of souls or the fate of the nation.¹³ Consequently, while European thinkers are noted for their composition of manifestos, Americans are driven towards writing jeremiads. As Harvard scholar Sacvan Bercovitch notes, “American writers have tended to see themselves as outcasts and isolates, prophets crying in the wilderness. So they have been, as a rule: American Jeremiahs, simultaneously lamenting a declension and celebrating a national dream.”¹⁴ While perhaps a true belief by those who appeal to this spiritual reversion, creating an atmosphere of anxiety and inciting fear within a people can simultaneously be a useful political tool to generate a greater compliance with desired policy action. The American jeremiad—the bemoaning of a deterioration and revering of a national ideal—guides the mentality of Americans and the belief in how their nation ought to act, especially in circumstances of crisis. Bercovitch holds the notion that the jeremiad has pervaded American public rhetoric to such an extent that both its spokesmen and audience have become unconscious of the genre and its “inherent intentions.”¹⁵ It is easy to exploit the psychology of the jeremiad that is inherent within the American psyche, and employ it to justify actions that will secure the aforementioned national dream.

The Jeremiad in American Political Discourse

Contemporary public figures, in the twentieth and twenty-first century have retrieved the trope of the jeremiad often for the purpose of uniting the public towards a goal. For example, in Carter’s famous “Crisis of Confidence” speech, the president emphasized that only by keeping in mind one’s own sinfulness and selfishness could Americans then discover the correct sense of humility to persevere and achieve a “rebirth of American spirit.”¹⁶ Similarly, President Obama’s first inaugural address discussed the nation’s atmosphere of “crisis” to dissect the recession his administration inherited.¹⁷ By instilling within the American psyche an air of apprehension and

desire to attain a pre-held moral standard, it becomes easier for politicians to rally their constituents behind an action that will apparently mitigate the source of this apprehension. When considering the contemporary role of the jeremiad in the more secular political dialogue, one can clearly see that the rhetoric of Donald Trump heavily draws upon the appeal of reaching a certain national ideal. With his signature motto, “make America great again,” Trump insinuates the idea that somewhere along the line, America went wrong and there must be action to revive the “great” state of the country that existed prior to this wrongdoing. This notion is further perpetuated by Trump’s “doomsday” rhetoric that paints a picture of “American carnage” and works to characterize America in an almost apocalyptic light.¹⁸ With regard to the state of a multitude of Americans, Trump proclaims,

Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system flushed with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge; and the crime and the gangs and the drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential.¹⁹

As vital to the language of the jeremiad, Trump laments a declension of the nation, creating a “hellish” portrait of America. Trump frequently points to the dire circumstances under which the America and the world persist, describing the United States as being in a “moment of crisis” in his speech at the Republican nomination convention, and in 2017 tweeting that the world was “a horrible mess!”²⁰ With dialogue of this nature, politicians generate a yearning for the reversal to a superior national condition, and therefore influence citizens to look favorably upon policies that are proclaimed to do so. The provocation of a national sentiment of angst can be a treacherous path to follow; in times of crisis, individuals often act in protection of themselves from the imminent threat.

An American Conception of The Other

Since the inception of America, there has existed the notion of a racial, ethnic, and religious *other* that constitutes our greatest threat. Often for Americans, the *other* becomes a manifestation of their fears and the primary menace to their identity and existence. This conception of the *other* exists in accordance with Todorov's understanding that "discovery of self makes the other," where the *other* is relative to self-awareness.²¹ To expand on this point, Stephen Frosh points to "projective identification," where one projects their personal hatred and feared elements into the identity of the *other*.²²

The looming fear of those who are perceived to be fundamentally different from the accepted American identity can be explained, at least in part, in terms of American exceptionalism and the jeremiad. As Litke explains, exceptionalism in the lens of American uniqueness is to a certain extent derived from a sense of institutional or cultural distinctiveness.²³ As a tenet of this perspective, the perceived superiority of American culture comes under attack when an individual that is not envisioned to fit our understanding of the fundamental American identity permeates society. If this individual is irreconcilable with the predominant ideological consensus and by any token seems to degrade the nation's exceptionality, they are deemed to be a threat to the basic American way of life. In terms of the jeremiad, America is a nation of people "chosen" by God that act as agents of God's decree, and are committed to achieving a national ideal. Conversely, the jeremiad bemoans the deterioration of the nation which distances it from this ideal. This concern regarding America's exceptional status, when married with the jeremiad's notion of a divine righteousness, is exasperated by and itself exasperates, the "us" versus "them" mentality. Thus, the popular American rhetoric of the jeremiad heightens the fear that is associated with the *other*. Since America is a unique and exemplary nation, selected as the

“chosen people” of God to obtain a certain ideal, if outsiders apparently fail, or are unable to, contribute to the maintenance of this superior distinction, naturally then, they are a menace to it.

The Conquest of America

The creation of the *other* and the extent to which this identification has taken hold of the American public can be traced back to the conquest of America and subjugation of the native people by European conquistadors. With the example of imperialism in the New World, one can see that the *other* is shaped from cultural difference and valuation. While to an extent they do appreciate and even admire native culture, the conquistadors are quick to regard the people and their culture as inferior. This manufacturing of the *other* in the New World is in part what enabled such large-scale massacre to ensue with ease. According to Todorov, massacre occurs in the circumstance of the deterioration of moral principles that at some point had assured the coherence of the group.²⁴ Therefore, massacre is performed in some remote place where the law is only vaguely recognized, and where the victims are also remote and alien.²⁵ As a result, the victim is butchered with no remorse and identified with animals; the identity of a massacre victim is irrelevant, otherwise the death would be classified as a murder.²⁶ The act of *othering* the native people led colonists to degrade the value of their existence, ultimately enabling them to conduct massacre. The creation of the *other* in the conquest of America set the foundation for this identification to remain prevalent within the American mentality. The native people were deemed as barbaric, uncivilized, and heathenous by the Europeans, and thus could contribute to the greatness of their conquestors in no way other than through the natural resources their land had to offer. Consequently, these people became the inferior *other* that in no way could be adopted by the blossoming American identity.

Anxiety in Relation to the “Other”

Within the contemporary American mentality, the *other* is a prevalent source of unease. *Otherness* is a critical factor that fuels the growing divisiveness in American political culture, creating the “us” versus “them” frame of mind. Especially when considering Donald Trump’s 2016 political campaign and subsequent presidency, one can see that the concept of the *other* has been used to instill within constituents a certain anxiety and feeling of threat posed by those regarded as outsiders. Trump has exploited and deepened this anxiety to rally support, emphasizing the importance of protecting the nation from outsiders are characterized as criminal and inhuman, and calling for a border wall and so-called “Muslim ban.”

Islamophobia in America

Even before the age of Trumpian rhetoric, Islamophobia has pervaded American society. Erik Bleich defines Islamophobia in *Defining and Researching Islamophobia*, as, "a widespread mindset and fear-laden discourse in which people make blanket judgments of Islam as the enemy, as the *other*, as a dangerous and unchanged, monolithic bloc that is the natural subject of well-deserved hostility from Westerners."²⁷ With this definition it is noted that Islam is often perceived as rigid and static, devoid of diversity, flexibility, and internal distinctions or disagreements.²⁸ A natural feature of this understanding of Islam is that all Muslims are the same, which becomes a dangerous thought in the wake of an Islamic terrorist attack in the West. The belief in the rigidity of Islam, in conjunction with overwhelmingly negative media coverage, encourages the Western conclusion that *all* of Islam and its followers are inherently violent and dangerous.

Our notion of *otherness* can be considered in terms of exceptionalism, and so too can Islamophobia in America. A common Western perception is held that there are no common

values among Islam and those found in Judaism and Christianity, or, Western culture.²⁹ Islam is denoted as an inferior religion, barbaric, irrational, and sexist, in contrast to the civilized, enlightened, and gender-equal West.³⁰ The cultural sense of American exceptionalism, as defined by Likte in the frame of uniqueness, serves to further *other* those that are part of the Islamic faith and culture. Since all Muslims are ostensibly the same, and their religion is supposedly the exact antithesis of Western religious and cultural ideals, they pose a threat to the fundamental, exceptional tenets of American society.

Islamophobia can be regarded in a sense of “cultural racism,” defined as the “hatred and hostility of others based on religious beliefs, cultural traditions, and ethnicity.”³¹ This cultural racism when placed into context, makes perfect sense within the frame of America’s history with racism. The act of *othering* those whose culture and fundamental identity is different from your own has been prevalent within America since the arrival of the conquistadors in the thirteenth century. Currents of racism as a product of deeming people as an *other* have run unceasingly through the veins of American social and institutional culture. The American perception of Islam is no exception. Consequently, the modern definition and impression of terrorism equates and limits this form of violence to Islam. On the other hand, despite the emphasis on the separation between church and state, America has largely been shaped by Christian values that remain prevalent in the nation’s identity and politics. Since Christianity is such an essential part of American identification, whether this is conscious or not, its people struggle to associate the cross with terrorism. When the actor is white and Christian, someone that is not distinct from the “true” American identity, white Christians *are* not perceived as a threat to national security or the coveted exceptionality of America by the public. Christianity is the foundational component of

American exceptionalism, as the nation is distinct in its unique covenant with God, it cannot be seen as a threat to it.

Immigration

Throughout history, there has been a certain rhetoric against immigrants in America that is deepened by the fundamental principles of the American jeremiad and exceptionalism. This rhetoric has largely depicted immigrants as inherently dangerous and criminal, capable of endangering the general well-being of Americans. Since the language of the jeremiad is grounded in the existence of a unique covenant with God that necessitates the maintenance of a moral standard and national ideal, the incorporation of these apparently delinquent and menacing immigrants into American society make upholding this covenant troublesome, if not impossible. American television commentator Lou Dobbs contends that that there exists many enemies to the middle class, the worst being illegal immigrants, because they supposedly steal jobs, depress wages, and endanger our lives.³² On his 2005 television program, Dobbs aired a report by CNN correspondent Christine Romans about how “the invasion of illegal aliens is threatening the health of many Americans,” based on false facts of a dramatic increase in cases of leprosy in the early two thousands.³³

This rhetoric has been particularly prevalent in American discourse since the candidacy and presidency of Donald Trump. He exploited American anxiety regarding immigration—specifically from Latin America—as a mode through which to attract support. Trump presented immigrants to his country in a way that denotes them as inhuman criminals, tweeting, “[Democrats] don’t care about crime and want illegal immigrants...to pour into and infest our country.”³⁴ Moreover, in discussion of immigrants, Trump asserted, “you wouldn’t believe how bad these people are. These aren’t people, they’re animals.”³⁵ This language depicts immigrants

as criminal beings of inhuman nature that come to America merely to overrun the nation. In opposition to this rhetoric, there is little evidence that finds that immigration from Latin America is linked to crime in the United States.³⁶ On the contrary, research from the Public Policy Institute of California on the make-up of inmates in California Prisons has found that there is a dramatic underrepresentation of Mexican immigrants in the state prison system.³⁷ Moreover, El Paso, Texas, a city with one of the highest proportions of immigrants among U.S. cities, and a population that is 80 percent Hispanic, a large portion of which are immigrants, also happens to be one of the safest cities in the U.S.³⁸ The small handful of cities in America that have a lower homicide rate than El Paso also have substantial Hispanic populations.³⁹ So what is the cause or purpose for the association of Hispanic immigrants to crime in the United States? As contested by Todorov in *Conquest of America*, dehumanization of one's subjects is an enabler for massacre to ensue. As Trump ascribes to immigrants an identity of inhuman criminals, the "us" versus "them" mentality that has already been introduced by the rhetoric of the jeremiad is further exasperated. With a greater sentiment of anxiety and cognizance of the exceptionality of the "true" American identity, there is a greater emphasis to defend and preserve America's divine superiority. Here is where Todorov's characterization of the subjugation of the *other* is inapplicable to modern America. In the case of America, Todorov's claim that massacre can only be carried out in a foreign and remote place where there is a degradation of the moral principles that at some point assured the coherence of the group is false. Rather, in America, the ability for one to slaughter others has been a result of the consolidation of such principles and their reintegration into public discourse.

Conflation of American Exceptionalism and The American Jeremiad

The ideals historically drawn from both the American jeremiad and exceptionalism have in many ways fused together, informing, and supplementing each other to shape Americans' perception of self and *other*. In considering massacre as a result of the reinforcement rather than a deterioration of principles, one can see that perhaps individuals that inflict domestic terror are not in fact contrary to America, but rather a growth from the historic example America as a nation has set. The United States has upheld a pattern in which the status as an exceptional nation has enabled them to defend their principles at all costs, and uphold the moral standard proffered by the jeremiad, especially in times of national angst.

With the conflation of the jeremiad and exceptionalism, implicit religion becomes an integral part of the American discourse. Implicit religion refers to religiosity in general where, "people talk about issues they think are really important to them in terms which are also used by religious people."⁴⁰ This implicit religion has factored into the dialogue of the American people, often containing hints of exceptionalist-esque language. A prime example of this is that according to President Lincoln, esteem for the "Constitution and laws" of the nation was to be America's "political religion."⁴¹ By this frame of mind, Americans were to be unified by virtue of patriotism grounded in the ideals enumerated in the Constitution.⁴² Due to America's supposed exceptional status and the jeremiad yearning to achieve some prior standard of greatness or morality, this Constitutional patriotism serves as a tool for the nation to maintain its hegemony. Consequently, beyond functioning as a declaration of common principles among Americans, the Constitution has come to be seen as "a cudgel with which to attack their enemies."⁴³ As a result of the belief in a cultural and institutional exceptionalism, Americans hold the Constitution as the pinnacle of democracy that ought to be spread elsewhere or else the

greatness of the nation will be threatened. This feeds into the notion of imperial exceptionalism which fuels America's effort to assert dominance and influence over foreign entities.

As Todorov takes note when examining the tragic conquest of America, according to the conquistadors, the salvation of one was enough to justify the death of thousands.⁴⁴ For these men, the life and death of an individual functioned as a "personal good," while the religious ideal being pushed upon their subjects was an absolute or "social good."⁴⁵ In order to uphold exceptionality and the morality as ordained by the jeremiad, America has justified violence. America in this sense, however, is not unique in its narrative of religious violence. Genocide justified by religious conquest has recurred throughout history; take the Holocaust and the ongoing Rohingya genocide in Myanmar for example. This violence ensues especially in periods of anxiety where the status of the nation is perceived to be regress, therefore introducing a reaffirmation of American principles. Religion tends to create a clear divide between the troubles of an individual or group, fostering a simplified notion of the contest between two absolutes: good and evil.⁴⁶ In this case, America's implicit political religion helps cultivate this simplification, where Americans are regarded as "good," and those that are *other*, even if they are citizens, are regarded as "evil." This is supported by the presumptions of both exceptionalism and the jeremiad in that America is unique, especially in its covenantal relationship with God. Through this relationship, as outlined in Winthrop's *A Model of Christian Charity*, God employs humans and earthly events as agents of his will, where "this great King will have many stewards counting Himself more honored in dispensing his gifts to man by man than if He did it by His own immediate hand."⁴⁷ As a result of this unique link to God, it can be seen that self-righteousness regarding one's state is a consequence of tragedy. Tragedy can foster a verification, or in the case of America, a reaffirmation, of one's unique place in the world. With

this self-righteousness sprouts two distinct conclusions from the phrase “never again”; the first being that never again should this happen to my people, and the second that never again should this happen to any people.⁴⁸ As aforementioned, according to the covenantal relationship between America and God, tragic incidents are the manifestation of God’s punishment for sinfulness. In the wake of tragedy, the prevailing public rhetoric necessitates a revival of a pre-held moral condition to restore America’s divine covenant, resulting in a fortification of the nation’s principles that justify actions to institute this restoration.

After 9/11, the method of American warfare in the Middle East shifted from low-intensity to high-intensity direct warfare with the goal of squashing militant nationalism and instituting a “regime change,” or, “democratization.”⁴⁹ The implicit political religion in America that is drawn from the doctrines of exceptionalism and the jeremiad, in the case of the September eleventh attacks, created the aforementioned simplification between good and evil in the American mentality. The resulting consolidation of American principles as a consequence of tragedy enabled the nation to institute a war against the so-called “axis of evil” and usher in a “democratic revolution,” switching from the previously held constructive engagement and low-intensity conflict in the Middle East to full-blown warfare.

Understanding Terrorism

The contemporary western conception of terrorism intrinsically links Islam to terror. As explained prior, Islam is understood as monolithic, thus it becomes easy for Westerners to assume that when an attack is made by a single Islamic terrorist group, all Muslims are inherently violent. The same people struggle to associate whiteness or Christianity with terrorism. Since the institutions and traditions of America are marked by Christian influence and in the eyes of Americans, the nation is seen as being exceptional, Americans are incapable of

using violent acts by Christians to characterize the faith as a whole, as they do with Islam.

However, terrorists identified as American act in accordance to the example their nation has set in justifying violence to defend the nation's exceptional status and achieve the jeremiad's national ideal. Therefore, if we were to immediately and genuinely deem these domestic carriers of violence as terrorists or part of the true American identity, we would be forced to acknowledge the potential harm in our foundational national principles.

Contextualization of Terrorism

Contextualizing terrorism is valuable for understanding the circumstances in which such violence arises. To properly understand the self-conception of a people, it is critical to understand the origins of those people. Frequently, however, distinct groups are contextualized disproportionately. Oftentimes, Islamic terrorist organizations are discussed and analyzed in the frame of their foundational history and relationships with outside forces, providing an understanding of the circumstances in which such violence could arise, and even presenting the possibility that others in a similar or the same situation would naturally be violent too. Yet, in the case of white supremacist terrorists or other terrorist organizations in America, these groups are often thought of as existing on the fringe of American society, remaining untouched and uninfluential. However, when analyzing the origins and prevailing ideologies of American terrorists, the influence their nation has had on the actions of these people is clear. Domestic terror in America has often occurred in instances where the language of the jeremiad holds greater prominence in public discourse, and when fear of the *other* is heightened. Domestic terrorists in America have taken the example their nation has set and used this model to inform their own actions.

As an example of this contrast in contextualization, one can look at the difference in contextualization between Palestinians and the CSA—The Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord, an American cult. The conflict between Israel and Palestine is a result of a long-held and seemingly unrelenting tension. Consequently, one side's hate for the other may be thought to be a natural part of their identity, tied what it means to be Israeli or Palestinian. Thus, it can be assumed that an inclination towards violence stemming from hatred for the opposing side is intrinsic in their character. In juxtaposition with this characterization is the characterization of the CSA. Jessica Stern in *Terror in the Name of God*, depicts CSA as an anomaly existing on the outskirts of American society with minimal outside influence. However, when placing the mentality of CSA within the frame of American history, one can clearly discern the nation's influence. The group's acronym alone is a nod to the Confederate States of America, and they have had close relations with other white supremacist organizations such as the Klu Klux Klan and the Aryan Nations.⁵⁰ Both of these groups are very much a part of American history, contributing to the national sentiment of fear towards the *other*. Moreover, by far the greatest number of terrorist attacks on United States soil have been carried out by Christian terrorist groups in the past fifteen years.⁵¹ Despite this, only Muslims are thought to be driven by their religious affiliation to commit acts of violence, while others apparently act on account of a variety of reasons whether they be political, social, psychological, physiological, or economic.⁵² By under-contextualizing white Christian terrorist groups, it becomes easy to regard them as inconsistent and an oddity within American, thereby forcing a separation between violence through terror and the American identity.

American Perception of Threat

Since rhetoric against the *other* has been intertwined with and heightened the anxiety resulting from the rhetoric of the jeremiad, Americans have largely perceived either terror to strictly be carried out by the *other*, or terror against the *other* to not truly be terrorism. A prime example of this was the effort to Islamize Seung-Hui Cho, the student who violently attacked Virginia Tech University in 2007. Upon the incidence of the shooting at Virginia Tech, there was an immediate theorization by some journalists that Cho was a Muslim acting in accordance to the “tradition” of Islamic terrorism, in part due to his pseudonym, “Ishmael.”⁵³ Editor-at-large of *The National Review Online*, Jonah Goldberg, posted a third-party blog after the attack proclaiming, “Islam has become the tribe of choice of those who hate American society. I’m not talking about people who grew up as Muslims... I’m talking about the angry, malignant, narcissist loners who want to reject their community utterly, to throw out their ‘slave name’ and represent the downtrodden of the earth by shooting their friends and neighbors.”⁵⁴ Goldberg’s comments are a clear depiction of the immediate association of violence and terror with Islam that is common in America, as well as the notion of outsiders, as a significant threat. In the aftermath of this shooting at Virginia Tech, the media attempted to *other* Cho and characterize him as a violent Muslim acting in accordance to his religion because that was the only plausible way America could understand the event that ensued. While Cho was also not distinctly acting on the part of Christianity, there was no way he could have been accepted as anything other than Muslim. The *other*, and in this case specifically, the Muslim *other*, is often perceived as the nation’s greatest threat, thus there is no imaginable way that a “true” American could have committed such a horrific act.

Recent acts of terror in America are primarily characterized by acts of violence against what is considered to be the *other*. This violence can be considered as a consequence of the growing prevalence of the jeremiad within the nation's discourse and an effort to criminalize and dehumanize immigrants, stimulating feelings of fear and anxiety among the American people. This sense of alarm has largely been fueled by the discourse pioneered by Donald Trump. Violence by white supremacist and other far-right attackers has increased since the Obama administration, and surged since the election of Trump.⁵⁵ With "renewed national focus on hate-driven violence," the Anti-Defamation League documented a 57 percent upsurge in anti-Semitic incidents in 2017, and FBI statistics exhibit that in the same year, hate crimes climbed 17 percent.⁵⁶ The aforementioned rhetoric of Trump regarding the apparently disheveled state of the nation and eminent threat of illegal and Muslim immigrants has incited a heavy revival of the jeremiad that fuels violence due to feelings of fearfulness. This resurrection of fundamental American principles has in the minds of the individuals justified their violence, as it has for the American nation in the past. As proclaimed by Gary LaFree, criminology chairman at the University of Maryland and founding director of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, "If you have politicians saying things like our nation is under attack, that there are these marauding bands of immigrants coming into the country, that plays into this right-wing narrative. They begin to think it's okay to use violence."⁵⁷

This recent violence has for the most part been carried out against groups regarded as an ethnic, racial, or religious *other*; a white gunman shot eleven congregants after shouting "All Jews must die!" in the 2018 Tree of Life synagogue shooting; the gunman in the racially motivated attack outside a Kentucky grocery store that killed two Black customers in 2018 proclaimed white supremacist and anti-black views, proclaiming, "whites don't shoot whites";

the shooter in El Paso, Texas posted a manifesto before the shooting in 2019 that articulated a “Hispanic invasion of Texas.”⁵⁸ These instances embody terrorism as first, acts of violence, and second, inspired or promoted by a specific ideology.⁵⁹ Yet, the words “terror” or “terrorism” were barely used in describing these events.⁶⁰ Moreover, White actors are frequently labeled simply as “lone wolves” or “violent gunman.”⁶¹ With this characterization of terror, or lack thereof, whiteness becomes exempt from the charge or assumption of terrorism. This violence, however, is a reflection of a state of deep concern with the state and future of America as incited with a strong revival of jeremiad language. This form of terror is conducted to protect the nation from invasion by the *other* that ultimately threatens America’s divinely exceptional existence.

Conclusion

The prominence of the American jeremiad and exceptionalism in the nation’s psyche have extensively shaped the perception of otherness and self. Rather than existing as an anomaly to the greater American identity, terrorism in United States is informed by principles held dear to the nation. America has historically drawn upon the jeremiad to procure a state of exceptionality and necessitate the maintenance of this exceptionality via the defense of some moral standard. The national public discourse has exploited this necessity to instill within its people a sense of apprehension when the morality or exceptionality of the country is perceived to be under threat. This perception of threat is intensified by a general fear and anxiety towards the *other*, and its supposed ability to degrade the state of the nation. The American nation has employed the language of the jeremiad to justify actions, typically violent, often in the wake of some tragic incidence. Thus, terrorists in America have likewise reacted to revivals of the jeremiad within public rhetoric with violence against the dangerous *other*, using the actions of their nation as an example on which to base their own actions. Thus, America defies Todorov’s claim that

massacre occurs in a foreign and remote place where there is a degradation of the principles that bind a group together. Rather, America massacres when there is a consolidation of their national principles that reemphasizes the American identity as White, Christian, and exceptional. While the most recent violence in the United States has been inflicted by White supremacist, or other right-wing groups, due to a heavy rejuvenation of jeremiad rhetoric, there has been difficulty to label these acts of violence as terrorism by the public. This hesitance, or even inability, is because if Americans were to sincerely deem these incidences as acts of terror, they would be acknowledging, even if not directly, the danger of the de facto principles of the nation. These very principles enabled America to carry out actions that have bestowed upon the nation its perceived status as exceptional. The ability of these principles to incite such violence necessitates a reimagination of the jeremiad, yet, this may only be done when we first understand this violence in America as terrorism as a people.

ENDNOTES

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