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Madsen, Deborah Lea

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Witch-hunting American Exceptionalism and Global Terrorism

Deborah L. Madsen

for Charles Swann

INTRODUCTION

There has emerged in recent discussions of U.S. foreign policy a series of rhetorical dependences between American exceptionalism and the idea of global terrorism. President George W. Bush's image of the "empire of evil," to designate nation states that sponsor global political terrorism, is entirely consonant with the ideology of American Exceptionalism that posits the United States as a nation uniquely able, and charged with the mission, to oppose this kind of transcendent political evil. From the colonial founding of John Winthrop's "cittie upon a hill," the understanding of New England's exceptional destiny has depended upon the "visible sainthood" of Puritan leaders who led God's mission into the wilderness of the New World. However, this assumption of sainthood for some relied upon the conviction that others, within the colonial community, were diabolical agents, active agents of Satan, determined to destroy God's New England experiment. Indeed, as Chantal Mouffe has commented in relation to the constitution of the political community as a "social imaginary":

There will always be a "constitutive outside," an exterior to the community that is the very condition of its existence. It is crucial to recognize that, since to construct a "we" it is necessary to distinguish it from a "them," and since all forms of consensus are based on acts of exclusion, the condition of possibility of the political community is at the same time the condition of impossibility of its full realization. (Mouffe 1992, 30)

I take as my starting point this dark underside of American Exceptionalism—the rhetorical basis for the New World claim to an exceptional and divine status. The witchcraft hysteria of the later seventeenth century is relevant here, representing as it does the attempt to engage a force of supernatural evil (an "empire of evil") that lies outside human comprehension but which threatens the exceptional work of New England Puritanism. Later cultural productions engaging with this relationship between exceptional good and transcendent evil include Nathaniel Hawthorne's nineteenth-century narrative return to New England witchcraft, as well as Arthur Miller's use of the metaphor of the witch-hunt, and the recent film *Good Night, and Good Luck* that deals with the McCarthy-era anticommunist crusade. Popular treatments of witchcraft such as the TV series *Charmed*, and films like *Practical Magic* and *The Blair Witch Project* engage the complex representation of witches as alternatively threats of supernatural evil and also potential protectors against this invisible danger.

By offering a survey of this rhetoric of exceptional or "un-American" evil, from the seventeenth century to the present, in a range of cultural forms, I hope to stimulate discussion of the wider implications of the idea of American Exceptionalism for our thinking about the history and culture of the United States.

EXCEPTIONALISM "THEN"

Two influential but now discredited views of witchcraft assumed *either* that witches were in fact mentally disturbed persons who could not be diagnosed accurately by primitive early modern

medicine, or that witchcraft was a form of genocide practiced against women. In fact, witchcraft was, surprisingly, *not* connected with the perception of mental illness in the New England colonial period. John Demos, in *Entertaining Satan* (1982), and others, note that insanity was accepted as a mental disorder without reference to supernatural causes and that, inversely, witchcraft was not necessarily recognized as a sign of insanity.

Similarly, the idea that accusations of witchcraft expressed widespread misogyny, representing what some feminists have called a kind of genocide or “gynocide,” has also been disproved by subsequent researches that show, when taken over a period of centuries, that the number of people executed as witches does not disproportionately include women. Men were executed as witches too; in Salem in 1692, a substantial number of the victims were men. So if witches were neither insane nor the victims of women-hating, what were they?

Increasingly, connections between traumatic experiences and behavior that might lead to accusations of witchcraft are being made by scholars. I am thinking here particularly of Janice Knight’s groundbreaking work on Mercy Short who, in March 1690 at the age of fifteen, was taken captive during the French/Sokoki raid on the frontier town of Salmon Falls. She was held captive for nearly eight months. She witnessed the violent deaths of both her parents and three siblings before she was finally redeemed back into the society of Boston. Two years later, in 1692, she was placed under the care of Cotton Mather as he tried to cure her of demonic possession. Mather’s account of her afflictions and his efforts to cure her was published as *A Brand Pluck’d Out of the Burning*. Knight’s 2002 essay is a wonderfully readable account that makes the case for demonic possession as a kind of captivity, where the conventional description of possession enables the recovery of a history and the articulation of a degree of suffering that otherwise cannot be adequately expressed. Knight observes:

As with many of the Salem accusers, Short was single, young, female, and powerless, held captive and left orphaned as a result of the war on the Maine frontier. Karlson reports that of the 21 possessed women we can trace, “seventeen had lost one or both of their parents,” most often as a result of the war. . . . Like Short, these girls became refugees, arriving in Salem or Boston and, lacking financial or emotional support, they began a life of servitude. (Knight 2002, 226–30) Living under the governance of a family not their own, these women felt excluded, dependent, and subservient. As with many of these orphans, Short’s history of possession seems to replay her feelings of abandonment and isolation, and it returns her to the origins of her plight: the experience of captivity. (ibid., 42)

I have dwelt on this description because it seems to me that what is significant here is the status of Mercy Short, and others who were orphaned as a consequence of frontier conflicts, as *outsiders*: abandoned, isolated, excluded. They were made to feel their dependency upon and subservience to those who had not undergone the traumatizing experience of living out a dramatic failure of social protection.

To an extent, the logic of exceptionalist rhetoric demands that the failure of society to protect becomes a *refusal* of protection. For in order to have “saints,” we must have “sinners”; to have insiders, we must have the outsiders who define them by opposition; to have a protected coterie of those who belong, we have to have those who are denied the protection of belonging, whether that protection takes the form of military defense or the legal protection of civil rights. John Winthrop’s 1620 sermon “A Model of Christian Charity,” delivered to the passengers of the *Arabella*, probably on the eve of their departure for Massachusetts from Southampton, invokes the now-famous image of the “cittie upon a hill”:

[T]he eyes of all people are upon us; soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world, wee shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the ways of god and all professoures for Gods sake; wee shall shame the faces of many of gods worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into Curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land

whether wee are goeing...(Winthrop 2005, 317)

Winthrop's sermon is essentially a blueprint for the conduct of an ideal Christian society, the society that is to be the model for the rest of the world. However, he warns that failure to sustain this Christian ideal will result in the unloosing of un-Christian sentiment: "wee shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the ways of god" and this will result in the (at least spiritual) exile of these Puritan pioneers. These two warnings—against empowering the ungodly and against risking the loss of the land—are taken up but with rather different emphases by that spokesperson of the third generation of New Englanders, Cotton Mather.

Cotton Mather, in "The Wonders of the Invisible World" (1692), describes the land colonized by New Englanders as originally belonging to the Devil, who is just waiting to claim his lands back:

The New Englanders are a people of God settled in those, which were once the devil's territories; and it may easily be supposed that the devil was exceedingly disturbed, when he perceived such a people here accomplishing the promise of old made unto our blessed Jesus, that He should have the utmost parts of the earth for His possession. (Mather 2005, 509)

In these terms, the exceptional nature of New England lies in the ability to win back for Christians and for the Christian God, territory that is possessed by Satan. But in order to do this, those visible saints must engage in continuous combat with the invisible agents of Satan, who will use any means to retake what they believe is theirs. Mather declares: I believe that never were more satanical devices used for the unsettling of any people under the sun, than what have been employed for the extirpation of the vine which God has here planted, casting out the heathen, and preparing a room before it, and causing it to take deep root...(ibid., 510).

It is in the face of the success of the Puritan colonists, then, that the Salem events have been designed by Satan as a last-ditch effort to remove, or "unsettle" the settlers:

[T]he devil is now making one attempt more upon us; an attempt more difficult, more surprising, more snarled with unintelligible circumstances than any that we have hitherto encountered; an attempt so critical, that if we get well through, we shall soon enjoy halcyon days with all the vultures of hell trodden under our feet. (ibid., 510)

Both Winthrop and Mather express exceptionalist visions of New England, but the terms on which these visions are conceptualized are quite different: Winthrop posits a community of visible saints, where Mather envisions an army of invisible Satanic agents. They are similarly divided on the subject of America's exceptional mission: Winthrop's "errand into the wilderness" versus Mather's continual battle against a supernatural "axis of evil." They agree that the fulfillment of the divine mission upon which the New England colonists are embarked will result in a period of unimaginable bliss, but where Winthrop expresses a positive vision based on the realization of an ideal Christian community, Mather bases his vision on the decisive defeat of Satan and his demonic agents.

It is Mather's vision that informs contemporary expressions of exceptionalist rhetoric, such as the following: "States like [North Korea, Iran, Iraq], and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world...History has called America and our allies to action, and it is both our responsibility and our privilege to fight freedom's fight...some governments will be timid in the face of terror. And make no mistake about it; if they do not act, America will" (Bush 2002). Such proclamations come, of course, from President George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union address, but this kind of rhetoric characterizes much that is said by this administration. The 2002 address drew to a conclusion with the promise: "America will lead by defending liberty and justice because they are right and true and unchanging for all people

everywhere.”

In this vision, America is defined by its capacity to triumph over evil, to bring “liberty and justice” to everyone, to make “American” that which we might call “un-American.” But what is meant by this term *un-American*? If Americans live in America, do un-Americans live in un-America? Where would we locate this un-America? In a central scene of the film *The Blair Witch Project*, the three students find themselves more than just lost in the woods: they are lost in another “America”—un-America. This is the devil's territory, full of indeterminate threat and a place of fear. Above all, it is a place they stumble into, unexpectedly, though the film works to suggest that this alternative reality, this extra spatial dimension, has been there all along. The emphasis on the map that directs the students’ movements underlines this attention to physical and spiritual geography. The history of the Blair Witch, painstakingly built up through the movie and its supporting artifacts, is the history of vulnerable individuals who accidentally find themselves in this parallel dimension of evil.

Of course, this identification of the wilderness as Satan’s domain is hardly new: Mary Rowlandson, in her captivity narrative, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682)—published ten years before the witchcraft events in Salem—depicts the wilderness as a scene of spiritual desolation, inhabited by Native American Indians who are alternately the agents of a chastizing God or of the Devil. She describes her first night in captivity: “This was the dolefullest night that ever my eyes saw. Oh the roaring, and singing and dancing, and yelling of those black creatures in the night, which made the place a lively resemblance of hell” (Rowlandson 2005, 445). We should remember here Mercy Short’s experience of captivity; unlike Mary, who was an adult, Mercy was an adolescent when she was captured; Mary’s captivity lasted for nearly three months, Mercy’s for nearly eight; Mary was forcibly removed around New England but Mercy was taken as far as francophone Canada in the course of her captivity. Perhaps the most important difference between them is that the conditions of life that greeted their redemption were very different. Mary was finally reunited with her husband and surviving children in Boston where, she says:

In that poor, and distressed, and beggarly condition I was received in; I was kindly entertained in several houses. So much love I received from several (some of whom I knew, and others I knew not) that I am not capable to declare it. But the Lord knows them all by name. The Lord reward them sevenfold into their bosoms of His spirituals, for their temporals. The twenty pounds, the price of my redemption, was raised by some Boston gentlemen, and Mrs. Usher, whose bounty and religious charity, I would not forget to make mention of. Then Mr. Thomas Shepard of Charlestown received us into his house, where we continued eleven weeks; and a father and mother they were to us. And many more tender-hearted friends we met with in that place. (Rowlandson 2005, 465)

In contrast, Mercy Short was returned to Salem as an orphan, reduced to the “poor, and distressed, and beggarly condition” from which Mary's neighbors quickly relieved her. And yet, Mary confesses at the conclusion of her narrative that she suffered the consequences of her traumatic experience, as she lay awake at nights fearful that God might see fit to punish her again by removing her from the protections and comforts of colonial society.

Mary lives in fear of experiencing once again the sanctions imposed by the demands implicit in the exceptionalist American mission. As a member of the elect who risked failing to live up to her grand spiritual destiny as part of the colonial mission, she is acutely aware of the exclusion that awaits as punishment. Mercy Short, in contrast, experienced that exclusion from *within* the ostensible protection of Salem society. And Mercy never wrote her story; it was Cotton Mather who told the story of her suffering as a victim of demonic possession: he was able to give this traumatic experience an exceptionalist reading but, unlike Mary Rowlandson, we can never know what Mercy Short told herself about her experience. For Mather, the witchcraft episode was evidence of New England’s exceptional status: only in the place where God’s saints were actually creating that “city

on a hill” would Satan bother to deploy his diabolical spiritual agents. As in Rowlandson’s narrative, the degree of spiritual suffering is a measure of the degree of spiritual eminence that had been achieved in the colonies. But this parallel satanic world still exists as a constant threat and continual danger, as Satan seeks to win back what was once his.

EXCEPTIONALISM “NOW”

A similar sense of a parallel “un-America” is to be found in the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Although he represents a rather different evaluation of New England society, what we do find in *The Scarlet Letter* particularly, but elsewhere in his writing as well, is the suggestion that, unseen in the midst of everyday life, there is another kind of world. Hawthorne’s Mistress Hibbins invites Hester to join her in the forest, where she can write her name in the Devil’s book, evoking a sense that another community exists just beyond the limits of the town: a parallel “un-America” that exists beside the social world we think we know. The shattering of complacency by the irruption of an alternative America, for which the iconic historical moment is 1692, has been used symbolically to articulate the Red Scare and the McCarthy “witch-hunts.”

I want to comment briefly on the film *Good Night, And Good Luck*, which palimpsestically builds on this tradition to suggest that the current “War on Terror” can be seen as our very own contemporary witch-hunt. The movie addresses McCarthy’s anticommunist witch-hunt within the context of the role of the media. What the film focuses upon is the effort of “six extraordinary Americans” to challenge the silencing of television, specifically, by the effects of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s rhetoric and manipulative politics. However, it seems to me that the movie diverts attention away from the ways in which Hollywood is complicit with contemporary witch-hunts, not least in this movie through the subplot that involves the secret marriage of two of the reporters. The husband is reluctant to sign the loyalty oath that will secure his job; at the same time, he has violated the rule that CBS employees must not be married to each other. So he and his wife do in fact have something to hide: they are not Communists but they are disloyal and they are duplicitous. The film is ambivalent on this point, raising but refusing to answer the question: Can we ever assume that anyone is “innocent”?

The more important point that I want to make is that the film works to naturalize the exceptionalist vision of America. Here, McCarthy is represented as an aberration—recall the lock of his hair that waggles before the camera in a hysterically insane way as he rants at the public through the television screen. He is represented as the unfortunate consequence of America’s commitment to freedom of speech: the extremist who would deny the freedom of all others. And in contrast to him, we are presented with these “men of integrity” who are prepared to stand up for the American values of truth and justice. Their efforts result in the downfall of McCarthy and the restoration of order, normality, and the American Way. But I want to suggest that in fact the palimpsestic structure of the film presents a very different vision, where hysteria is the American norm and personal integrity is the exception. If not for Edward R. Murrow, this film suggests, McCarthy would have gone on unabated.

Salem, Washington, Guantánamo Bay: scenes where individuals are held accountable for unspecified crimes by private hearsay and secret testimony. Salem in the late seventeenth century was governed in large part by William Hathorne, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ancestor, and the father of Salem’s “Hanging Judge,” John Hathorne. William Hathorne, a longtime magistrate of Salem and assistant to the General Court at Boston, was notorious as a persecutor of Quakers in Essex County. He operated a system of spies and informers who reported to him individuals who neglected their church and civic duties. Failure to observe the Sabbath, absence from church on fast days and election days, and the like, were reported to William Hathorne who prosecuted such cases vigorously. Perhaps the most notorious case arose from Hathorne’s prosecution of a well-known and peaceful Salem family who were imprisoned for harboring Quakers at their home. When finally brought to trial, they were fined not only for the period during which they were guilty of harboring these Quakers but also for the period of their imprisonment while awaiting trial. When they were unable to pay the accumulated debt, Hathorne seized the couple’s children, intending to sell them

into slavery in the West Indies to offset their parents' debts. Only an intense outcry from the community of Salem, on behalf of the children and the severity of sentence, prevented Hathorne carrying out his scheme (Madsen 1999).

It was in this cultural context that John Hathorne, with Cotton Mather and others, imprisoned and executed the victims of the Salem hysteria. Here, and in the allegorizations of Salem by Arthur Miller in *The Crucible* and George Clooney in *Good Night, And Good Luck*, I think we have to question the extent to which hysteria is represented as something unusual, as opposed to representing the working out of exceptionalist sanctions against those who do not submit to the American Way. What Clooney and Miller, and perhaps even Mercy Short in her own manner, emphasize is the rarity of the individual who will place personal integrity before easy conformity, even at the risk of being demonized, rejected, and excluded.

Other contemporary media "witches" include the heroines of the television series *Charmed* and the characters of the 1998 film, *Practical Magic*, all of whom are ostracized as a result of their special powers, even though these powers are used to fight demonic agents. In the opening minutes of *Practical Magic* we are presented with two scenes: the historical exile of the ancestral witch, Maria, who proves impossible to execute and so is sent into an island exile; we also see a pair of young sisters, her contemporary descendants, being stoned by a group of children who chant malicious rhymes. In these scenes, we are shown that America is not only the world's policeman; America is America's policeman as well. *Practical Magic* is all about exclusion; from the original family curse uttered by the colonial witch Maria as she is banished, to the desire of Sally (Sandra Bullock) to live a "normal" life, as she explains to her aunt:

Sally Owens: All I want is a normal life.

Aunt Frances: My darling girl, when are you going to understand that being normal is not necessarily a virtue? It rather denotes a lack of courage!

Sally Owens: Well, it's what I want.

In a later scene (which could have come straight out of *The Scarlet Letter*), one of the aunts comments on the hidden sins of their neighbors as the witches pass them on the street. For the witches, normal life means exclusion and hysteria; they define by opposition the "normality" and sense of belonging of the rest of the community. In his 2002 book, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief*, Walter Stephens argues:

Witches were imagined as saboteurs or secret agents, and they were discussed to explain why the ideals of Christianity remained unfilled... When faith is impossible, doubt is incarnated as the Devil. But, precisely because doubt is the Devil, God is possible. Thanks to the Devil, God's presence can be inferred even when his works are imperceptible. Very late defenders of witch-hunting phrased this idea with terrifying lucidity: *Nullus Deus sine diabolo*. Without proof of a devil, there can be no proof of God. (Stephens 2002, 341)

Here we have the two "realities" that I mentioned earlier in connection with *The Blair Witch Project*. But now "un-America" exists visibly and necessarily side by side with America. So when a commentator such as Michael Moore asks, "Dude, where is my country?" this is a complex question to answer. Moore's proposition is that America has been hijacked by the Bush administration, which is taking advantage of post-9/11 terrorist hysteria:

[There is] no terrorist threat, only the terrorizing of the domestic population by the Bush govt... just because there are a few terrorists does not mean we are all in some exaggerated state of danger. Yet when they speak of terrorists, they speak of them as if they are in the *millions*, that they're *everywhere*, and they are never going away. Cheney has called this a "new normalcy," a condition that "will become permanent in American

life.” They only hope....Our leaders would have us believe this is a guerilla war, fought by thousands of foreign terrorist-soldiers hidden on our soil. But this is *not* what is taking place, and it is time to do a reality check. (Moore 2003, 96)

Chief among the hijackers of Michael Moore's America are the corporate powers of globalization and international Americanization, especially the organization “Project for the New American Century” (PNAC). One of the fundamental commitments of this project is the belief that “American leadership is good both for America and for the world; and that such leadership requires military strength, diplomatic energy and commitment to moral principle.”

The official statement of PNAC principles includes the need to significantly increase defense spending in order to honor the global responsibilities of the United States; to challenge those regimes that are hostile to U.S. interests and values; to promote internationally the cause of political and economic (but not individual) freedom abroad; and finally “to accept responsibility for America's unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to our security, our prosperity, and our principles.” The “Project for the New American Century” is, fundamentally, about exporting America to “un-America,” wherever that might be. Of course this process of exporting America is facilitated by the U.S. military; though since 2003 it is increasingly difficult to obtain clear information concerning military deployments. What a country-by-country accounting of U.S. military installations suggests, however, is that most of the world’s nations are in close proximity to a U.S. military presence, which may be seen alternately as protective or threatening.

This extensive global military presence, in conjunction with the ideology of (un-)American exceptionalism, serves to divide up the world in a way that writers such as Thomas Barnett, in his 2005 book *The Pentagon's New Map*, make plain. Barnett, a former professor in the Warfare Analysis and Research Department, at the U.S. Naval War College in Rhode Island, is also a senior advisor to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff Central Command, Special Operations Command, and Joint Forces Command. As the map to which his title refers indicates so dramatically, Barnett organizes the world into two parts: the “Core”—comprising the United States and its allies—and the “non-integrating Gap.” And as we know, what we do with gaps is try to fill them, as quickly and efficiently as possible. In the small print of Barnett’s map, we find the following three-pronged strategy designed to extend the “Core” into the “Gap”:

- 1) Increase the Core's immune system capabilities for responding to September 11-like system perturbations;
- 2) Work the seam states to firewall the Core from the Gap's worst exports, such as terror, drugs, and pandemics; and, most important,
- 3) Shrink the Gap (Barnett, 2003, 6).

When the Core finally has obliterated the Gap, through “regime change” and “nation building,” America will have become the world. The answer to Michael Moore’s question, “Dude, where’s my country?” then will become “here”...and...“here”...and “everywhere”! Moore's critique of corporate global America connects with criticisms, made by commentators such as Diane Alden, of Thomas Barnett’s vision of a globalized America. She asks:

When did corporate and collective interests take over the destiny and policy of the United States? Why are the morons we elect to office, the mainstream media and good people NOT screaming bloody murder about this attempt to redefine who we are and what kind of nation we want to be?

Why aren't MORE thoughtful people asking, When did it become our duty or RIGHT to charge around the world bringing “regime change” for any reason? Who in God's name thinks in terms of people as “commodities” to be used by rulers and governments for whatever purpose? (Alden 2006)

While I agree with her, my response is that American exceptionalism has always promoted forms of identity that are defined through corporate and collective interests: we need only think of the Puritan “federal covenant,” for example. Exceptionalism has always already redefined what Alden terms “who we are and what kind of nation we want to be” and American exceptionalism dictates that it is indeed “our duty or RIGHT to charge around the world bringing ‘regime change’ for any reason.”

We need only look again at that 2002 State of the Union address, where President Bush proclaimed:

America will lead by defending liberty and justice because they are right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere. No nation owns these aspirations, and no nation is exempt from them. We have no intention of imposing our culture. But America will always stand firm for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity: the rule of law; limits on the power of the state; respect for women; private property; free speech; equal justice; and religious tolerance. (Bush 2002)

It does remain for us, and especially those of us who are not Americans, to ask: the rule of WHOSE law? The power of WHOSE state? Whose private property? WHOSE speech? WHOSE justice?

CONCLUSION

American Exceptionalism is certainly an ideology of promise and of the American Dream. However, American Exceptionalism is also a punitive ideology of exclusion and demonization. American Exceptionalism signifies inclusion but it is also a powerful rhetoric of exclusion. Exceptionalism defines Americans by contrast with un-Americans; however, those “un-Americans” empower and validate the actions required by American exceptionalism to transform everyone into “American” subjects and everywhere into “America.” For those of us who are “un-Americans”—Canadians and Europeans alike—comes the great responsibility to ask the difficult questions. These are questions that should arise from a legitimate and appropriate fear.

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