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# The Four American Narratives

David Brooks    MAY 26, 2017

America has always been a divided, sprawling country, but for most of its history it was held together by a unifying national story. As I noted a couple of months ago, it was an Exodus story. It was the story of leaving the oppressions of the Old World, venturing into a wilderness and creating a new promised land. In this story, America was the fulfillment of human history, the last best hope of earth.

That story rested upon an amazing level of national self-confidence. It was an explicitly Judeo-Christian story, built on a certain view of God's providential plan.

But that civic mythology no longer unifies. American confidence is in tatters and we live in a secular culture. As a result, we're suffering through a national identity crisis. Different groups see themselves living out different national stories and often feel they are living in different nations.

In a superbly clarifying speech to the think tank New America, the writer George Packer recently argued that there are four rival narratives in America today.

First, there is the libertarian narrative that dominates the G.O.P. America is a land

of free individuals responsible for their own fate. This story celebrates the dynamism of the free market. Its prime value is freedom. Packer wrote that "the libertarian idea in its current shape regards Americans as consumers, entrepreneurs, workers, taxpayers — indeed everything except citizens."

Second, there is the narrative of globalized America. This is the narrative dominant in Silicon Valley and beyond. "We're all lifelong learners and work for the start-up of you, and a more open and connected world is always a better world." This story "comes with an exhilarating ideology of flattening hierarchies, disrupting systems, discarding old elites and empowering individuals."

But in real life when you disrupt old structures you end up concentrating power in fewer hands. This narrative works out well for people who went to Stanford, but not so well for most others.

Third, there is the story of multicultural America. "It sees Americans as members of groups, whose status is largely determined by the sins of the past and present," Packer observed. "During the Obama years it became a largely unexamined dogma among cultural elites."

The multicultural narrative dominates America's classrooms, from elementary school through university: "It makes the products of these educations — the students — less able or less willing to think in terms larger than their own identity group — a kind of intellectual narcissism — which means they can't find common ground or effective arguments that can reach people of different backgrounds and views."

As Packer noted, it values inclusion but doesn't answer the question, Included into what? What is the national identity all these subgroups add up into?

Finally, there is the narrative of America First, the narrative Donald Trump told last year, and which resonated with many voters. "America First is the conviction that the country has lost its traditional identity because of contamination and weakness — the contamination of others, foreigners, immigrants, Muslims; the weakness of elites who have no allegiance to the country

because they've been globalized."

This story is backward-looking and pessimistic. In practice, Packer concluded, "This narrative has contempt for democratic norms and liberal values, and it has an autocratic character. It personalizes power, routinizes corruption and destabilizes the very idea of objective truth."

Personally, I don't think any of these narratives is a viable basis for successful governance in the 21st century. I've just read Michael Lind's fascinating essay "The New Class War" in American Affairs, and under its influence I'd say the future of American politics will be a competition between two other stories, which are sort of descended from the existing four.

The first is the mercantilist model, which sees America not as the culmination of history but as one major power in competition with rival powers, like China, Russia, Europe and so on. In this, to be American is to be a member of the tribe, and the ideal American is the burly protector of his tribe.

America's government and corporations should work closely together to "protect our jobs" and beat back rival powers. Immigration and trade should be closely controlled and foreign entanglements reduced. America's elites would have an incentive to share wealth with America's workers because they need them to fight off their common foes.

The second is the talented community. This story sees America as history's greatest laboratory for the cultivation of human abilities. This model welcomes diversity, meritocracy, immigration and open trade for all the dynamism these things unleash. But this model also invests massively in human capital, especially the young and those who suffer from the downsides of creative destruction.

In this community, the poor boy and girl are enmeshed in care and cultivation. Everything is designed to arouse energy and propel social mobility.

The mercantilist model sees America as a new Rome, a mighty fortress in a dangerous world. The talented community sees America as a new Athens, a

creative crossroads leading an open and fundamentally harmonious world. It's an Exodus story for an information age.

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