

## AMERICA VS THE UNITED STATES: MARKETING THE AMERICAN DREAM

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### Abstract

*The present paper focuses on a universally accepted confusion between two syntagms used to define the country: “America” and “The United States of America”. While the latter name, the official one, is used in more or less formal occasions dealing with practical issues, the former, “America”, does not reflect a geographically defined country, but rather a utopian illusion whose roots go back to the first American settlers and which is deeply connected to religion.*

The drive which led to this paper resides in a child’s naïve, therefore explainable simplistic outlook on the world: America does not exist. It is an invented space, maybe the product of a television station, broadcasting daily shows on fictional characters and stories. Or it can be a successful company, America Ltd, selling chewing-gum, Coca-Cola and, top of the sales commodity, dreams. It is designed to entertain the masses, and more. Its main function is to give real people all over the world faith in the existence of an earthly paradise and the promise that it can be achieved in our own lifetimes. We are, after all, a media - formed society and about 75% of adults genuinely believe in Santa Claus, according to polls. If a product is moderately well marketed, we buy it. Why not buy a product called America?

I kept these opinions strictly to myself, especially since the childhood excuse no longer functioned and moreover, the world as we know it had become americanized in so many ways and to such an extent that not acknowledging the existence of America would be a sign of insanity.

To my great surprise and satisfaction, I recently found companionship, so the perspective of my mental abilities being questioned is not so threatening anymore, as I will share this with highly respected American scholars.

The idea that America is anything but a country comes from a misinterpretation of the country’s name: geographically, politically and historically, there is no country called America. There is a constant, deliberate confusion perpetuated in all circles and at all levels between the nation – state and

an idea about the nation – state. America is regularly invoked as the name of the country, but “America” is a whole continent, including South, Central, North America and Canada, so a place simply called “America” does not exist.

Why do they claim an entire continent, instead of using the correct and real name of the country, “The United States of America”? The confusion and ambiguity is so embedded in the language that people do not even acknowledge it. Moreover, countries all over the world have adopted this language and use it when referring to the United States of America. The best illustration is the media: try watching the news on TV and count the number of times the word “America” is used, as compared to the correct syntagm “The United States of America”. The results are overwhelmingly in favor of “America”, though we never mean by it “Chile” or “Peru” or, God forbid, “Cuba”. Then, the question arises: why two names for the same country? Some may argue that “America” is a short version of the full official name, just as we rarely say, for example, “The “People’s Republic of China”, but we simply say “China”. The essential difference between these two situations is that the People’s Republic of China lies in “Asia”, and not in “China”, whereas the United States of America are situated in America.

The ambiguity does not stop here. Of the four words making up the name of the country - the United States of America - the most important one is the word “*of*”. If the name had been “The United States *in* America”, it would have been more truthful to the geographical reality behind the name. The possessive “OF” is an arrogant claim of the whole continent, whereas “IN” would have meant a political union of states “inside”, “a part of”. The United States of America should be a union of Argentina, Ecuador, Brazil etc, but instead, it is a union of Florida, Georgia, Nebraska...

The European history and culture share a great deal of the responsibility for this confusion. Europeans **created** America, they created the name and the dream, starting with the first colonizers, and they perpetuate this myth by contrastingly referring to “Europe” and “America” as if these were two comparable notions. America as it was originally conceived, in the feminine, is the Europeans’ name for the utopian dream, it reflects Europeans’ ideal of liberty, of success, of earthly paradise. America is referred to as “she” by American presidents when they want to enforce the myth, and not the state, but they prefer the term “United States” when referring to purely factual representations of life such as economic issues or formal policies. Plenty of presidential speeches are the proof of that.

When it replaces a person’s idea about the geographical space, America is a mythical, ideological and quasi-religious dream. It stops defining space, it defines ideals. It is not real, it is imaginary, it is everybody’s personal ideal. There are millions and millions of Americas; but

realistically speaking there is none. Only when we turn to the United States of America do we come back to the realms of reality.

The process by which America came to represent a dream instead of a country is a profoundly religious one and it goes back to the Puritan period, rooted in the Protestant ethic. The religiosity of the Americans is beyond any doubt; it has always characterized the nation and has deeply marked all aspects of life. Through a unique process, religion and national identity have always gone hand in glove with the Americans. As Professor Gabriel Moran put it, “the people’s religion is American, and their citizenship is USA”. America is identified with the religious dream of utopian freedom that the first colonists wanted to fulfill; therefore, religion plays a crucial role in understanding the country. Similarly, G.K. Chesterton asserted in “What I saw in America” that “*America is a nation with the soul of a church*” and that it is “*the only nation founded on a creed*”.

America was the immigrants’ dream of the Promised Land given to them by God, after crossing an ocean of biblical dimensions (this could not be easy in the 17<sup>th</sup> century), it was their promise of delivery and their divine purpose. But, before they could touch America, they had to deal with the United States first. For many of them, this was much too real and hard, so they returned to Europe. But those who left struggled hard to achieve the dream, to fulfill the promise and to prove themselves worthy of having been the chosen people of God to build “a City upon a Hill”. The whole essence of the proverbial American dream is rooted in these people’s beliefs.

America can be a beautiful dream or a terrible nightmare, but in neither case is it a country. America is broadcasted by TV stations, it is popularized by Hollywood, but the reality is that outside the TV studio is the United States. However, people want to be deceived, if the deceit is a sweet one, so they continue to buy “America”. America is the leaders’ greatest ace in the sleeve, which they use when “The United States” are not so convincing. And it still seems to be working just fine. People love the idea of America, they fervently and religiously believe in it, and they patriotically respond to all demands in the name of America, which they would probably not do for the United States. And the reality is that without America, the United States would not have absorbed the successive immigrant waves, survived the Civil War, or, perhaps, gained support for the military intervention in wars. These feelings of patriotism mixed with fervent religion are meticulously exploited by leaders when they want citizens’ support. Here is just an example taken from President Coolidge’s inaugural address in 1925:

*America seeks no earthly empire built on blood and force. No ambition, no temptation, lures her to thought of foreign dominions. The legions which she sends forth are armed, not with the sword,*

*but with the cross. The higher state to which she seeks the allegiance of all mankind is not of human, but of divine origin. She cherishes no purpose save to merit the favor of Almighty God.*

This excerpt seems highly representative of the idea of the unreal America both in terms of language and of the meaning conveyed. “Her”, “she” are examples of rhetorical personification reminding of “mother-country”, meant to endow the inexistent country with human-like, heroic attributes which presumably have a great echo in the minds and especially in the hearts of the American people. Moreover, the pervasive religion pathos alludes to heavenly places, of divine inspiration and origin, which have nothing whatsoever in common with a physical territory called The United States of America. Doesn’t this sound strangely familiar? President Bush’s contemporary speeches on the war in Iraq make use of the same idea of the crusading spirit and messianic duty of the American nation as guardian of world peace and democratic principles.

In order to find a justification of this theory of an America semantically different from the United States, I analyzed presidential inaugural addresses in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Apart from striking similarities in content, in terms of the American nation as a messianic force with a religious duty to perform in the world, I counted the occurrences of the word “America” as opposed to the “United States” and I noticed the difference in context. The result was no surprise: “America” appeared 157 times, while “The United States” only 28 times! There were 77 references to God, and only four presidents did not end their speeches with the famous “God bless America”: Eisenhower in 1957, L.B. Johnson in 1965, Carter in 1977, and Reagan in 1981, although virtually all presidents alluded to God in their speeches. American inaugural speeches are traditionally emotional discourses, meant to go to people’s hearts and to exacerbate patriotism and national pride. They are less technical, less informative, they are primarily intended to reinforce ideas that American hold dear, such as liberty, rights, democracy, the American supremacy in the world, the American dream. This is what is expected from these speeches and this is what they give people: they give people America.

This is what people’s America looks like:

*Today, we do more than celebrate America; we rededicate ourselves to the idea of America. An idea born in Revolution and renewed through two centuries of challenge. An idea. An idea tempered by the knowledge that, but for fate, we -- the fortunate and the unfortunate -- might have been each other. An idea enabled by the faith that our nation can summon from its myriad diversity the deepest measure of measure of unity. An idea infused with the conviction that America's long heroic journey must go forever upward. (...)America stands alone as the world's indispensable*

*nation. (...)We will sustain America's journey. The promise we sought in a new land we will find again in a land of new promise. (...)Let us build our bridge. A bridge wide enough and strong enough for every American to cross over to a blessed land of new promise. (...)May those generations whose faces we cannot yet see, whose names we may never know, say of us here that we led our beloved land into a new century with the American Dream alive for all her children; with the American promise of a more perfect union a reality for all her people; with America's bright flame of freedom spreading throughout all the world. (Bill Clinton)*

*The greatest honor history can bestow is the title of peacemaker. This honor now beckons America--the chance to help lead the world at last out of the valley of turmoil, and onto that high ground of peace that man has dreamed of since the dawn of civilization. (Richard Nixon)*

*It requires our best effort, and our willingness to believe in ourselves and to believe in our capacity to perform great deeds; to believe that together, with God's help, we can and will resolve the problems which now confront us.*

*And, after all, why shouldn't we believe that? We are Americans.*

*Our Nation is poised for greatness. We must do what we know is right and do it with all our might. Let history say of us, "These were golden years--when the American Revolution was reborn, when freedom gained new life, when America reached for her best." (Ronald Reagan)*

The examples could go on forever; the same patriotic tone celebrating American uniqueness prevails in all speeches. Always intertwined with religious connotations, patriotism of this type, enthusiastic and understandable as it is, can sometimes get tiring, or at least repetitive. This is what Alexis de Tocqueville noted on American patriotism in his famous "Democracy in America": "*A more intrusive and garrulous patriotism would be hard to imagine. It wearies even those who respect it*". But it is the very essence of America; therefore there can never be too much of it. Leaders know the art of persuasion only too well; they are aware that people may not be familiar with highly technical discourses, on specific themes, and they are also aware that people will always be sensitive and alert about America, about mythical America.

The multitude of the religious allusions in the presidential speeches is a proof that conceiving America as the land of promise in everybody's mind can never be done outside religion. Consequently, there will never be an American president who is not religious, or who does not pretend

to be. In order to gain support to rule the USA, each presidency must “sell” America to people first, and God is a great mediator.

The importance of religion in the mythical America is obvious. No other country manages to mix religion with almost every aspect of society, even with the most secular ones. No other country has a reference to God on such mundane and pragmatic things as the national currency. “In God We Trust” is not only a declaration of faith of a religious people, but it is also a manifestation of the enduring values and moral principles which have guided the American experience since the beginnings.

If one wants to have a measure of the extent to which religious feelings are used in running the country, a glimpse at the results of the last American elections would suffice. Religion has been a central factor in the 2000 and 2004 elections, perhaps more than in any other elections in American history. According to Wilfred McClay, *“ever since the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976, the taboo on the expression of religious sentiments by American political leaders seems to have been steadily eroding, to the extent that the presidential candidates in the current (2000) campaign have been invoking God and Jesus Christ at a pace not seen since the days of William Jennings Bryan”*. The candidates’ speeches actually responded to the demands of a public who expected from their leaders a sense of religion in accordance with their own. Here is an example of this type of speech from the actual president George W. Bush, during a national television show. When asked who his favorite political philosopher was, he answered: *“Christ, because he changed my heart... When you turn your heart and your life over to Christ, when you accept Christ as a Savior, it changes your heart. It changes your life. And that’s what happened to me.”*

He was probably eloquent enough, as the results of the election showed that he was preponderantly given the votes of the believers. According to an exit poll reported by CNN, the profile of the Bush voters is highly religious:

<b>Frequency of religious attendance</b>	<b>Bush</b>	<b>Gore</b>
More than weekly	63%	36%
Weekly	57	40
Monthly	46	51
Seldom	42	54
Never	32	61

Source: Exit poll by Voter News Service reported by CNN at <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2000/epolls/US/P000.html>.

Why was George W. Bush re-elected, in spite of the growing discontent from the part of the American public in the context of the growing unpopularity of the war that America embarked on in Iraq? Because he knew how to “sell” the war to the Americans by calling it a “crusade” against evil, and by constantly alluding to religion. Let’s be serious: the average American hardly knows where Iraq lies, not to mention any political arguments. But Americans do know their idea of America, who is great and right, and whose duty and God-given privilege is to be vigilant and extend her greatness abroad. This is a lesson well learnt throughout history, and if they hear what they want to hear, they will support any war – or rather any crusade – initiated by the government.

The same thing happened in 2004: with two exceptions (Centrist Catholics and Centrist Mainline Protestants) a majority of Bush’s religious constituencies reported that their faith was more important to their voting decisions than other factors. On the other hand, a majority of Kerry’s religious constituencies reported that their faith was less important or not at all important to their voting decisions.

Coming back to the contrast between America and the United States, it sounds reasonable to assert that George W. Bush represented America, an ideal, imaginary state in people’s mind, which he managed to re-create by skilful speeches and excellent campaign officers. John Kerry seems to have represented the United States, having a more pragmatic approach, more realistic, lacking the enthusiasm and the religious pathos in Bush’s speeches. And he lost, because the United States could never be won without America, without the dream. This is simply a case of different marketing strategies: he who gives the consumers what they want will win.

The issues emerging out of the terminological ambiguity also addresses people living outside the American borders. Our main source of information about the USA is the media. How accurate is the media in reflecting the real country, and not the Hollywood-made American dream? How much resemblance to the truth does our image about the country bear? Is the mythical fascination exerted upon us by America enough to compensate for US realities? The image that we get is, if not distorted, at least one-sided. But image is everything in advertising, and it does take a good campaign to promote dreams in order to maintain the status of world superpower.

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