

CONSTRUCTING “RIGHTS” AND “WRONGS” IN CLIMATE MEDIA DISCOURSE THROUGH THE PRISM OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I identify and discuss how images of apocalypse and allusions to well-known conflicts and crises in United States history—including the Great Depression, WWII, and the Cold War—are used to orient and steer media coverage of the climate crisis. I argue that these apocalyptic representations and historical allusions, while offering some productive signposts for navigating the present, are problematically forged via a paradigm of American exceptionalism that obscures the particularities of the climate crisis. Indeed, through a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of U.S. climate media, I find that the image of Manifest Destiny is used to transform universal claims to moral judgements, deeming responses to the climate crisis as either “right” or “wrong” regardless of whether or not they address the actual impacts and consequences of climate change. Ultimately, I contend that the myth of American exceptionalism limits the ways in which the threats of the climate crisis are represented and in turn, restricts the types of responses that are endorsed by prominent U.S. news and politics magazines.

INTRODUCTION

Now for the first time, the climate crisis is a popular issue that major United States media outlets have taken note of and are covering more often. Concerningly, though, a discursive paradigm is taking root that relies heavily on the notion of American exceptionalism and draws upon rhetorical mechanisms that distance rather than make visible the present and disparate threats of climate change. Through a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 20 special issues and cover stories dedicated to the climate crisis published between the years 2015-2020 across a selection of influential and politically diverse non-daily United States politics and news magazines, I argue that the image of Manifest Destiny limits the ways climate change is represented and interpreted by U.S. media through, in part, the stark binary of “moderation” and “extremism.” With clear “right” and “wrong” forms of climate politics delineated via the elevation of a moderate default subject position that either evacuates or erases positions deemed too extreme or militant, I argue that United States climate journalism risks endorsing responses that will make the crisis more as opposed to less severe.

UNIVERSAL TRUTH CLAIMS

During moments of profound societal crises—when shared beliefs and collective identities are vulnerable and apt for radical transformation—there is a risk of falling back onto established myths and familiar ways of knowing that entrench hierarchies and anti-democratic modes of governance. Foucault (1980, pp. 99, 112-113) speaks of how universalized discourses of “Humanity” and “History” tend to emerge during times of great uncertainty and upheaval—such as today in the U.S. following the election of President Trump and also at the time of Foucault’s writings in Europe during the Cold War following the devastation of WWII. Grand tales of national heroes, origins, and fate—like the myth of Manifest Destiny in the United States— are reanimated in an attempt to regain

a sense of equilibrium and reassert a stable “régime of truth” during unstable times wrought by crisis, war, and social conflict (Foucault, 1980, pp. 99, 112-113).

It is within this vein that “myths transform the messy complexities of history into the pristine gloss of nature” (Mosco, 2004, p. 30). Roland Barthes (1993, p. 122) defines “myths” as “the transformation of history into nature” and clarifies how when ways of knowing become so entrenched as to appear “natural” or “essential” or of “universal” truth, then the particularities of historical context become blurred to the point of erasure. Myths, according to Barthes, are therefore more powerful than norms because they underpin the very structures of logic and thought that norms emerge from. In other words, myths are “universal truth claims” that coalesce to build discursive paradigms in formation of institutions that operate to enforce societal, legal, and political norms (Krips, 1990, p. 171).

The notion of discursive formations takes on further relevance for discussions of climate politics with the work of decolonial scholars, such as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012), who show how grand narratives of the Eurocentric tradition tend to erase long histories of imperial oppression and trauma while upholding colonial institutions and extending anti-democratic modes of governance. Heather Davis and Zoe Todd (2017, p. 762) argue that “a logic of the universal” is often “structured to sever the relations between mind, body, and land” and to quell environmentalist, anti-capitalist, and anti-colonial resistance movements tied to particular places and specific grievances. This means that experiences of environmental destruction, violence, and harm among Indigenous and historically marginalized peoples are erased through the void of the “transhistorical,” in which no cause is decipherable or even relevant (LaCapra, 1999, p. 700). Within the timescale of an open and abstract History, accountability is impossible. Universal tales of Humanity, therefore, are often used to validate the way things are or to endorse absolutist claims of how they should be. In turn, established modes of governance are cast as natural, inevitable, unquestionable, and therefore

unchangeable—even as they perpetuate inequities and environmental devastation. For representations of climate change, this suggests that universal truth claims obscure the root causes of the crisis and obstruct the possibility for accountability and fundamental changes in governance.

AMERICA AS EXCEPTIONALLY MODERATE

Engagement with the climate crisis also suffers from moral judgement calls of “right” or “wrong,” which Chantal Mouffe (2005) argues took over discussions of crises more generally with the advent of globalization following the Cold War. Through all-encompassing claims of “Humanity” and “History,” a plurality of perspectives and experiences melded into one story of “good” vs “evil” told as a universal and global truth, gravely injuring radical politics and post/decolonial movements that demanded attention to specific and particular harms.¹ Pieter Maesele and Daniëlle Raeijmaekers (2017, p. 5) explain how “moralistic terms operate as discursive mechanisms of exclusion” because they limit the possibility for expressing and resolving historical grievances outside of a moral framework. As a result, conflicts are decontextualized and removed from larger and longer histories of systemic oppression. Calls for justice are directed away from corrupt political economies and are focused instead on “immoral” individuals and “immoral” behaviors or social “deviancies.”

Following from this, certain political ideologies and even entire nations are cast as either “good” or “bad” based on stereotypes that reduce complexities and contingent histories into brittle caricatures told within a universal tale of morality. Within the contexts of the Cold War, the United States and capitalism were naturalized as the default “good” and the Soviet Union and communism as the default “bad” in messages circulated by politicians, pundits, and journalists. Postcolonial liberation movements that espoused radical and socialist ideals during the post-war time period were therefore also cast in the latter category. Eric Foner (2013, n.p.) explains how:

¹ Many of which were perpetuated via exploitative systems of labor and mineral extraction established via neo-imperial post-war development institutions (Escobar, 1995; Nixon, 2011; Mitchell, 2011).

Cold War intellectuals provided historical justification, differentiating ‘good’ from ‘bad’ revolutions. In the 1950s, historians portrayed the American Revolution as a decorous constitutional debate among the educated elite, quite different from the class-based violence of revolutionary France and Russia, or Third World revolutions led by communists (even when, as in Vietnam, they invoked the American Declaration of Independence). As the historian Herbert Bolton complained many years ago, by treating the American past in isolation from the rest of the world, historians were helping to raise up ‘a nation of chauvinists.’

In other words, the reactivation of the myth of American exceptionalism during the Cold War discursively flattened multifaceted independence and liberation movements in the Global South through absolutist claims and morally-charged binary formations. Significantly, this flattening led to the quelling of different ways of governing through, in many cases, the forceful implementation of “models of democracy” and “models of development” that treated “nation-building” as a one-size-fits-all product or service that the United States could export to “unstable” nations (Mitchell, 2011; Escobar, 1995). Foner (2013, n.p.) clarifies that “the exceptionalist paradigm [...] homogenizes the rest of the world as having a single history” that is different and lesser than the United States and laments that this is “the deepest problem of American exceptionalism—the conviction that Americans have nothing to learn from the rest of the world.”

This hubris along with the notion of a uniquely “stable” polity, upholds and entrenches the myth of American exceptionalism. Significantly, during the Cold War the United States’ unparalleled “goodness” was understood as in no small part due to its supposed “moderateness” that distinguished it from *Other* “volatile” and “violent” places. America was “exceptional” because of its supposed immunity from “extremism” and largescale social upheaval. This championing of American moderation drew upon claims circulating since the Russian Revolution that the United States was unique in the fact that it wasn’t susceptible to Marxist ideology or socialist revolt because of its unparalleled economic (i.e., capitalist) and political (i.e., democratic) systems that ensured its moderation and stability (Foner, 2013; Frum 2017).

Todd Gitlin (1980) shows how this reverence for moderation during the Cold War was turned inwards and manipulated as a political strategy used by President Richard Nixon and later, as a discursive strategy used by journalists to delineate “good” from “bad” protestors in coverage of the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations. The antiwar protests and revolutionary politics within the United States during the 1960s/70s threatened to dampen this shining image of a moderate and stable nation that was used to justify interference in global affairs. President Nixon, according to Gitlin (1980), therefore tried to extinguish the antiwar movement by demarcating and generating fear of “militants.” In other words, Nixon drew upon the myth of American exceptionalism to cast an image of a dangerous “Other” who was infiltrating demonstrations and leftist political circles, to the detriment of the nation itself.² This “militant Other” was demonized in contrast with the supposedly “moderate American” who was cast as “good” and “right.” Gitlin (1980) makes the critical observation that this “official narrative” coming from the Oval Office soon began to shape media accounts of the protests—despite what was actually happening on the ground. He explains how “the frame of moderation-as-alternative-to-militancy was now brought into play, and more deliberately so over time” (Gitlin, 1980, p. 210). Gitlin (1980, p. 216) further discusses how:

By accenting the difference between legitimate and illegitimate movements, by elevating the former and disparaging and/or withdrawing attention from the latter, [the media] could work to restabilize American politics around a new moderate antiwar consensus, while remaining responsive to the administration’s definition of the situation both in Vietnam and at home.

Gitlin (1980, p. 231) criticizes how through this construction of the binary of militant versus moderate, “the subtleties of situations and processes [went] under.”

Moreover, with the institutionalization of the House Un-American Activities Committee (renamed the “House Committee on Internal Security” in 1969), this “Othering” had very real, material consequences for individuals who were cast as “militant” and therefore “socialist” and thus

² President Trump’s fearmongering of “Antifa” infiltrating the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests is a contemporary example of this same discursive strategy.

“un-American.” In particular, it is through this paradigm that Black activists were especially disparaged. Gitlin (1980, p. 212) discusses how:

At the [television news] networks, the 1968 moderation frame seems to have been imposed in stages. It is my impression—though only that—that it was clamped onto the black movement first; more research is needed to confirm or deny that the moderate-militant split became a standard component of reporting about the black movement, especially after the assassination of Martin Luther King and the riots of April.

Subsequent research proves Gitlin’s impression as correct. Racist undercurrents steer media representations of Black demonstrators—from the Civil Rights movement to Black Lives Matter—and cast protesters who are Black and Brown as “militant” and “violent” and therefore outside the limits of American moderation (Jackson, 2020). People of color are repeatedly cast as the default “militant Other” within this binary and subjected to invasive surveillance (Browne, 2015) and harsh policing tactics.³

Indigenous historian, Nick Estes, shows how this militant/moderate binary also steers coverage of the climate movement. Estes (2019) discusses how during the Standing Rock demonstrations, for example, journalists operationalized the stereotype of the “violent Indian” in North Dakota as distinct from the “peaceful” (and white) climate protestors elsewhere in the United States. In turn, protestors at Standing Rock were subjected to violent policing and were arrested in large numbers. Moreover, those who were arrested were subjected to humiliating strip searches and charged with acts of terrorism (Estes, 2019). This suggests that discursive processes of “Othering” in coverage of the climate movement problematically stem from and also entrench asymmetrical relations of power that are extended via the myth of American exceptionalism to the detriment of democratic politics.

³ This binary still guides media coverage today as seen with the clear distinction made between “violent looters” and “peaceful protestors” during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests.

RESEARCH DESIGN: ANALYZING DYNAMICS OF POWER AND REPRESENTATION IN
CLIMATE MEDIA DISCOURSE

Stuart Hall (1997) crucially points out that it is through these stereotypes of the “Other” that “mechanisms of power” can be gleaned and resisted. This implies that there are always weak spots and points of vulnerability in discursive paradigms that allow for the possibility of transformative social change through the contestation of binary ways of seeing (Hall, 1997; Bhabha, 1994; Escobar, 1995). Indeed, “both Foucault, at least in his later writings, and Gramsci, certainly as interpreted by Williams, have contended that power and resistance go together, producing and reproducing each other” (Dirks et al., 1994)—hegemony, therefore, is never totalizing nor permanent. This suggests that when confronting universal truth claims and binaries in climate discourse, there is an opportunity to reveal inequitable relations of power and move towards a different, more egalitarian form of politics.

Indigenous journalism scholar Candis Callison (2020, 2017) draws this issue into the fore by showing how accountability for climate change is impossible without recognition of the particular harms perpetuated by political, economic, and cultural *systems* of oppression that are upheld via imperial logics and myths. To this end, Callison (2020, 2017) highlights the important task of journalism to clarify and detail (as opposed to obscure and erase) the specifics of the climate crisis in order to keep a truthful public record (inclusive of and guided by Indigenous accounts), inform the public, and ensure accountability. Callison (2020, 2017) underscores, however, that journalism currently falls short of this critical task. She therefore urges journalism scholars to focus more critical attention on dynamics of power and historical inequities that pervade across climate coverage (Callison, 2020, 2017).

Heeding the critical interventions of Hall and Callison, in this paper I conduct an historically contextualized critical discourse analysis (CDA) to identify and interrogate dynamics of power and

predominant modes of representation in U.S. climate journalism. My corpus of analysis consists of 20 special issues and cover stories published between 2015—2020 (i.e., the “total crisis” years encompassing Trump’s campaign, election, and presidential term) dedicated specifically to climate change across a selection of influential and politically diverse non-daily US politics and news magazines (as indexed by ProQuest News & Newspapers and EBSCO Publications). The magazines include: *The New York Times Magazine*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *Dissent*, *Jacobin*, *The Nation*, *TIME*, *Mother Jones*, *New York Magazine*, *The New Republic*, *Newsweek*, *In These Times*, *Harper’s*, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, and *The Atlantic*.

Politics and news magazines are important publications because they are not restrained to daily “breaking news” coverage and instead provide reflection, interpretation, and commentary on current national events, affairs, and controversies as well as offer opinions on policy and response. The readership of politics and news magazines are assumed to have only a general understanding of climate change and cater to a broad national audience. Many politics and news magazines also curate a robust array of photographs, illustrations, and other images along with text. Additionally, each issue features a unique cover design. Special issues and cover stories dedicated solely to climate change are therefore particularly revealing because they reflect the writers’ and editorial board’s understanding of who and what is most important, central, illustrative, and authoritative on the topic for a national audience—therefore offering a rich and central node for the critical analysis of climate discourse, representation, and power in U.S. media.

ABSTRACTION THROUGH APOCALYPSE AND ALLUSION

Despite the distinct and increasingly apparent threats of climate change that vary with location, conditions, and contexts, I find from analysis that the trope of an all-encompassing apocalypse and aesthetics of a total war are widely used to represent climate change in U.S. media. Photos

with a fiery haze of complete destruction commonly appear alongside contemporary climate stories. Instead of reporting on the disparate impacts of climate change and detailing different experiences and responses, media discourse subsumes climate change within a paradigm of apocalypse and removes it from its present, proximate, and specific threats. Amidst these “total crisis” representations, however, there is an attempt to map out familiar terrain through allusions to influential historical periods including WWII and the Great Depression.

Climate change is specifically likened to WWII through visual and rhetorical cues that compare the scale and scope of destruction inflicted by the war with the climate crisis and the threats that both pose(d) to Western democracy and “civilization” writ large. These historical allusions to WWII are used as signposts to carve out a sense of direction during uncertain times. For example, the September 2016 issue of *The New Republic* (see figure 1) features a cover story by Bill McKibben that draws upon wartime rhetoric of “mobilization” to call for a similarly robust national response to climate change. To this point, the cover image of the September issue of *The New Republic* pictures the iconic Rosie the Riveter, with wind turbines and solar panels behind her supplanting the war equipment built for combat during WWII that was featured in the original image. The January/February 2020 issue of *Mother Jones* (see figure 2) also alludes to the necessity for a total war effort akin to the mobilization for WWII to “win” the battle against climate change. The cover of *Mother Jones* pictures an image of what appears to be a crumpled piece of paper with the declaration: “WARMING IS OVER!”. This image alludes to flyers announcing that the “WAR IS OVER!”, that were strewn across American cities following the end of WWII. Underneath this main headline on the cover of *Mother Jones* is written in smaller text: “IF WE PAY FOR IT” and “Only massive climate R&D can save us now.”



Figures 1 & 2: Cover images of the September 2016 issue of *The New Republic* & the January/February 2020 issue of *Mother Jones*

Interestingly, post-2016 America is also likened to the period collectively remembered as one of unparalleled national struggle and hardship just prior to WWII: The Great Depression. This allusion is more common in left-of-center publications such as *In These Times* (see figure 3) and *Jacobin* (see figures 4, 5, & 6), but it also appears in more centrist magazines including *Harper's* (see figure 7). In similar stride with allusions to WWII mobilization efforts, references to the Great Depression are leveraged to endorse the need for comprehensive changes to the United States government and economy in order to grapple with both climate change and a deeply damaged international reputation. Historical allusions and references to WWII and the Great Depression offer a sense of familiarity during presently fraught times. Representations of climate change as an all-encompassing apocalypse effectively evacuate the crisis of specificity and empty it of meaning. Within this contextless spectacle, references to WWII and the Great Depression offer a welcome lens to make sense of the present through the paradigm of American exceptionalism that elevates feelings of patriotism and a sense of purpose within the void. Moreover, these allusions provide a comforting reminder of a time when the federal government was (at least in name) committed to the public good and also addressed—as opposed to initiated and stoked—national and global crises as an uncontested

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leader and moral example. In particular, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) is reemerging as a celebrated national hero.

Two common visual projects used in contemporary climate change media allude to the New Deal and public works initiatives championed by FDR and are repeatedly referenced as a great feat of national unity and recovery during the Great Depression. They are (1) utopian planner/design aesthetics and (2) Works Progress Administration's (WPA) propaganda posters. These visual projects both surfaced during the Depression era and are now paired with articles calling for a "Green New Deal" as the way forward to counter climate change, rightwing extremism, and the embarrassment of a self-serving and hallowed out federal government during the reign of Trump.



Figure 3: May 2019 cover of the special climate issue of *In These Times*



Figures 4, 5, & 6: Summer 2017 covers of the special climate issue of *Jacobin*

The utopian planner/design aesthetic shares some similarities with the WPA posters but is also distinct in its vibrant use of color and very particular grid-like symmetry reflecting a well-planned city. The May 2019 cover of the special issue of *In These Times* dedicated to the Green New Deal (see figure 3), for instance, depicts the bright color pallet of blues and greens with splashes of red and purple color amidst a clean and orderly city with public transit, walking and bike paths, wind turbines, solar panels, and plenty of green space. This image reflects the utopian ideal championed by the New Deal during the Great Depression and today by the Green New Deal dedicated specifically to building a “green economy” through public jobs guarantees and federally-funded infrastructure projects. Indeed, the three cover images for *Jacobin*’s special issue dedicated to climate change in the Summer of 2017 (see figures 4, 5, & 6), specifically reflect—via a Depression era planner/design aesthetic—three possible future scenarios based on what responses are taken to address climate change today. The first image/scenario (see figure 4) shows a fire and brimstone doomsday-landscape of apocalypse if Trump’s presidency continues on into a second term. The second image/scenario (see figure 5) shows the destruction that would continue if business as usual continues—although this destruction is notably lesser in the event of an end to Trump’s reign. The third image/scenario (see

image 6) shows the utopic image of a future with the Green New Deal—with a thriving natural environment and city. As a contrast with the chaos and “total crisis” of Trump’s America, this utopic image presents an alternative vision for how the United States could save its reputation abroad—via robust, orderly, and well-planned climate policies at home. Moreover, within the overwhelming disarray of contemporary life and politics in the United States compounded by the seemingly total lack of human agency amidst an apocalyptic climate crisis, these clearly imagined future scenarios and clearly designed ways forward offer a comforting glimpse of a better and also familiar-looking future.

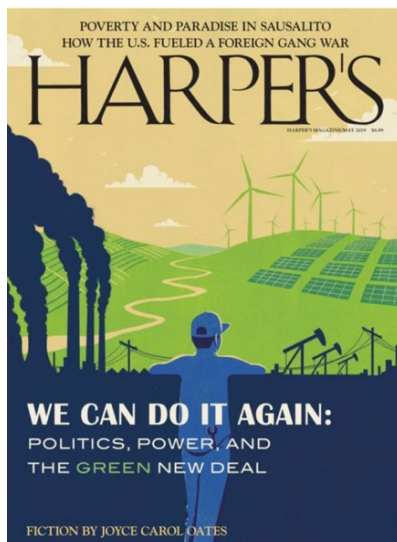


Figure 7: May 2019 cover of *Harper's*

The familiar aesthetic of WPA posters taught in high school history courses across the United States is leveraged in this way to accentuate the great promise of an alternative—but not totally unknown or radically new—way forward. The May 2019 cover of *Harper's* (see figure 7), for instance, features an adaptation of the WPA propaganda aesthetic with a headline featuring the Green New Deal. This cover design follows suit from Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's commissioned Green New Deal posters (see figure 8) that used the WPA aesthetic to campaign for the merits of and dire need for comprehensive economic and political reform—akin to the New Deal—to combat the chaos and suffering of the Trump era. Interestingly, the May 2019 cover of *Harper's*

mixes allusions to both the New Deal and also WWII mobilization efforts by stating the famous Rosie the Riveter poster's slogan of "We Can Do It!" but with the headline: "WE CAN DO IT AGAIN." The image and call back to well-proven ways out of past crises offers a promising vision that resonates with collectively shared memories and the myth of America exceptionalism.



Figure 8: Green New Deal posters designed on behalf of Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's policy campaign

This mix and match / hodgepodge of different historical references and allusions is an example of the inconsistency of collective memory and demonstrates how images and icons from the past are reactivated by the media and reanimated in certain ways for specific purposes and particular ends. Zelizer (1998, p. 5) clarifies how "collective-memory studies presume multiple, often conflicting accounts of the past" and therefore dissipate "the notion that one memory at one place and one time retains authority over all the others." More important than determining the most prominent historical allusion and memory that is re-activated to describe the present, the question of *why* "one construction has more staying power than its rivals" is pivotal for analysis (Zelizer, 1998,

p. 5). And it is through the cracks and fissure of these allusions that the myth of American exceptionalism and claims of Manifest Destiny appear as a keystone of contemporary climate media discourse.

2021 ACCORDING TO THE MEDIA: THE YEAR TO GET AMERICA'S MANIFEST DESTINY BACK ON TRACK

Particular responses to the climate crisis are marked as either “right” or “wrong” based on whether or not they are determined to be in or out of line with the “inevitable” Manifest Destiny of a uniquely “moderate” and fundamentally “good” United States. Calls to “mobilize to defeat climate change” and to “win the war on warming” reflect a longing for a time when enemies were clear (and elsewhere) and when American centrality and global leadership were more solid. As discussed earlier, before/during/after WWII, United States official and media narratives cast “Other” nations as unstable and either wrought by or at risk of social upheaval and “extremism.” With the corruption, violence, and incivility of the Trump presidency, this idea of an exceptional America was shaken to the core. Within the fray of a rattled sense of self, post-2016 media accounts reflect a desperate search for American identity. Crucially, this search focuses in on a longing for a sense of balance in order to reassert the long-believed uniqueness of United States moderation. This explains why public and media discourse turned to historical events and figures like WWII and FDR to call to the fore collective memories of times in the past when the United States demonstrated its unique leadership during times of hardship. Jake Sullivan demonstrates this memory work in a special issue of *The Atlantic* (January/February 2019) by claiming how “for centuries, European states waged war with grim regularity. The fact that the major powers have not returned to war with one another since 1945 is a remarkable achievement of American statecraft” (Sullivan, 2019, n.p.). These allusions to a glorified American past were brought forward to stoke rallying cries for, once more in the words of

President Joe Biden's newly appointed National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, "a new American exceptionalism" (Sullivan, 2019, n.p.).

Notably, following the election of Joe Biden in November 2020, the year 2021 came to be represented as a year of profound opportunity for this "new American exceptionalism" to take shape. Sullivan (2019, n.p.) states that

[...] reclaiming America's place in the world will be an extraordinary challenge. For decades, the country neglected needed updates to the international system. Now Donald Trump is blowing that system up. The saying goes that when a natural disaster hits, "build back better." The same applies to foreign policy. Not since 1945 has the U.S. had the chance to go back to basics and decide which parts to keep, which to scrap, and, above all, which to reinvent. After Trump, it can do just that.

Crucially, this renewal/reclamation/reinvention requires the United States to once again demonstrate that it is "an unusual power" through an "update[ed] purpose in a changing world" (Sullivan, 2019, n.p.). It is here, where American leadership on climate change is vociferously emerging as the area where this necessary "update" could occur. Concerningly, instead of detailing the contexts, causes, and disparate impacts of the crisis, however, climate change is cast as a strategic way for the United States to demonstrate its "new American exceptionalism" (Sullivan, 2019, n.p.).

It is significant to note that this critical opportunity to reassert the singularity and centrality of the United States via a "new American exceptionalism" is also described as fragile and at great risk of slipping away if the "wrong" responses to climate change are enacted by the "wrong" people. This binary of "right" and "wrong" / "good" and "bad" once more limits the possibility for different approaches that are informed by different national contexts and perspectives to guide responses to the climate crisis that may lie outside of the United States' limited purview and economic interests. Following from this and using the language of competition, the May/June 2017 special climate change issue for *Foreign Policy* urges economic and political leaders in the United States to: "Lean In to Climate Change To Maintain an Edge Against China." Similarly, in a feature article in the

special climate issue of *Foreign Affairs* published in May/June 2020, a headline makes “The Strategic Case for U.S. Climate Leadership: How Americans Can Win With a Pro-Market Solution” (see figure 9). *The New York Times Magazine* also makes a similar case in its December 20, 2020 cover story by claiming that both China and Russia currently have the edge and are “winning” on climate change. Across these and other publications, climate change is presented as a battle for power in an ever-constant and never-ending Cold War—a familiar line of logic for navigating complex global crises. By marking out clear and familiar enemies, these references to the Cold War offer an easy-to-understand tale of a crisis that is anything but.



Figure 9: Feature article in the special climate issue of *Foreign Affairs* published in May/June 2020

This Cold War allusion and subsequent framing of 2021 as a moment of great—but fragile—opportunity to “win” (and therefore beat Russia and China) and “not blow it” (by securing economic centrality in the global marketplace) is described by the International Monetary Fund’s Managing Director, Kristalina Georgieva, as a “new Bretton Woods ‘moment’”—effectively reaffirming the need for a return to a globalized/neoliberal, post-war economy via market-based “solutions” to climate change. This reference to the need for a new Bretton Woods System to combat climate

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change is widespread and growing across media from *The New York Times Magazine* to *Foreign Affairs* to *Bloomberg Businessweek*. For instance, from the Summer 2019 Special Issue on Climate Change, *Foreign Policy* claims that “central banks” and “global finance” will “save the planet.”

Furthermore, in the November 16, 2020 “New Economy” issue of *Bloomberg Businessweek*, Michael Bloomberg in an Opinion piece eagerly writes:

A global standard for climate reporting is critical, but it will not happen without U.S. leadership. Just as Franklin Roosevelt gathered financial representatives from the allied powers at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, to agree upon a set of monetary principles which have been the foundation for unprecedented global growth, we need a President Biden to convene a similar group for the purpose of adopting a set of climate-disclosure standards. If Biden seizes the opportunity, it may prove to be one of the most important turning points in the global fight against climate change.

Again, there is a palpable nostalgia and longing for a time when the United States was the great stabilizer / moderator of global affairs.

The Bretton Woods System, however, was and remains an incredibly problematic scheme that has been heavily critiqued by postcolonial and critical scholars (e.g., Escobar, 1995; Nixon, 2011). Along with the Marshall Plan, the Bretton Woods System was a part of the United States’ Cold War strategy and designed with the goal of fostering an open flow of capital investments into anti-communist enterprise and infrastructure abroad (Maier, 1977, p. 607). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) set stipulations and controls on exchange and trade that in name were meant to safeguard against risky investments, but in actuality were used to isolate communist nations and discourage post-war Europe and postcolonial Global South nations from joining the Soviet bloc (Frieden, 2006, p. 288). For example, the IMF and World Bank implemented “structural adjustment” policies whereby postcolonial nations, eager to jumpstart their economies, agreed to implement neoliberal policies through a weak state in order to receive loans (Frieden, 2006, p. 288). With the Bretton Woods Institutions and gold-backed dollar as

security, therefore, capital moved quickly into new global “development” ventures at the expense of both the environment and democracy (Frieden, 2006; Escobar, 1995).

In what Maier (1977, p. 607) terms the “politics of productivity,” American private investors and bankers “sought to isolate Communist parties and labor unions as adversaries of their priorities of production [...] and to transform political issues into problems of output, to adjourn class conflict for a consensus on growth” through post-war global institutions and a highly regulated sense of moderation and morality—as determined by “American values.” Greg Grandin (2019, pp. 3-4) explains how:

In the years after World War II, the ‘frontier’ became a central metaphor to capture a vision of a new kind of world order. Past empires established their dominance in an environment where resources were thought to be finite, extending their supremacy to capture as much of the world’s wealth as possible, to the detriment of their rivals. Now, though, the United States made a credible claim to be a different sort of global power, presiding over a world economy premised on endless growth. Washington, its leaders said, didn’t so much rule as help organize and stabilize an international community understood as liberal, universal, and multilateral. The promise of a limitless frontier meant that wealth wasn’t a zero-sum proposition. It could be shared by all. Borrowing frontier language by Andrew Jackson and his followers in the 1830s and 1840s, postwar planners said the United States would extend the world’s ‘area of freedom’ and enlarge its ‘circle of free institutions.’

In other words, the United States hoped to sustain an economic edge in the post-war market via the “force and fabulation” of capitalist enterprise and the idea of endless economic growth as a panacea for war, crisis, and conflicts of all kinds (Nixon, 2011, p. 75). This came, however, at the expense of both democratic governance and the climate—ironically ushering in a destabilizing force of great consequence. What is so insidious about calls for a “new American exceptionalism” and the nostalgic desire for the hegemony enjoyed by the United States following WWII, is the fact that these “politics of productivity” caused so much suffering and strife. Yet despite this, a new Bretton Woods System for the climate is celebrated as the “right” way forward once more today.

Ultimately, because of the lack of specificity and context in reporting on climate change, simple binaries of “good” and “bad” have taken root and bar accountability for particular and past harms. It is within this paradigm that only certain responses to the climate crisis are elevated as “right” or demonized as “wrong” based on whether or not they are determined to be a threat to or opportunity for regaining the United States’ standing as a global leader akin to its imagined post-WWII position. The Bretton Woods System—a familiar scheme with familiar mechanisms—is thusly portrayed as a “safe” bet and a route back to less “extreme” and more orderly times when the United States was the moderate and moral example. Within this simplistic binary, there is little room for critique and universal truth claims are advanced via “rights” and “wrongs” that obscure different histories, disparate experiences, and present conditions.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I argue that the myth of American exceptionalism is incredibly rigid and difficult to break in U.S. culture and media—impeding necessary movements towards equitable, just, and democratically developed responses to the climate crisis. An emergent question, therefore, is how to bring the political and historical into climate media discourse? How can images and words be used to *de-naturalize* neoliberal and neo-imperial approaches to “solving” the crisis? And moreover, how can climate journalism be more nuanced, detailed, and inclusive of an array of perspectives from women, Indigenous publics, and people of color from different geographical locations as distinct and full subjects as opposed to potentially dangerous and threatening “Others”? In following Stuart Hall’s (1997) call for revealing and contesting the brittle design of stereotypes and discursive processes of “Othering,” I argue that a paradigmatic shift in U.S. climate media discourse is required to foster different, more equitable, and robust forms of climate governance.

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