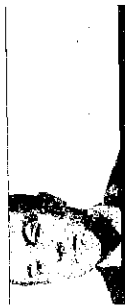


America's season of hollow hubris and jingoism



Edward Luce

Tucked into Mitt Romney's recent acceptance speech was a line that captured the hubristic side to America's 2012 campaign. Praising Neil Armstrong, Mr Romney said the astronaut personified the American character: "That unique blend of optimism, humility and the utter confidence that when the world needs someone to do the really big stuff, you need an American. Just so. And should we want to parachute the word 'humility' into enemy territory there could be no better vehicle than the Republican nominee. He added the obligatory line - also common among Democrats - that the US is "the greatest nation in the history of the world".

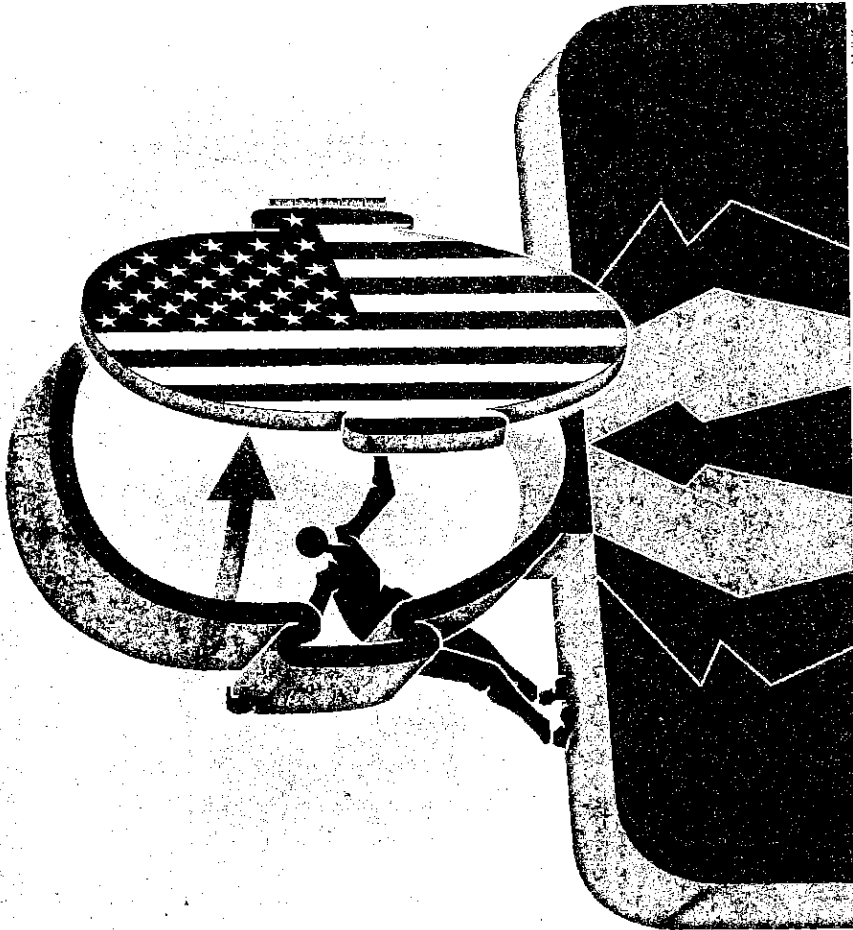
From the nation's birth, America's leaders have directed the hand of providence in its journey. But since the attacks of September 11 2001, oratorical jingoism has become blunter and more widespread. Alexis de Tocqueville said Americans lived in "the perpetual utterance of self-applause". To one degree or another most nations now share that impulse. But America has entered a new season of hollow boastfulness. From Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address that produced "government of the people, by the people, for the people" to Franklin Roosevelt's inaugural address in 1932 when Americans had "nothing to fear but fear itself", America's leaders used to beat their chests more sparingly. Lincoln once said America was the "last best hope of earth". He did not chant it like a mantra. John F. Kennedy's 1961

inauguration ("ask what you can do for your country") was exhortatory rather than self-congratulatory. Today's superlatives put even Ronald Reagan's "shining city on a hill" in the shade.

Democrats are only slightly less extravagant than Republicans. Michelle Obama said that "doing the impossible is who we are as Americans". Both the first lady and the president said they lived in "the greatest nation on earth". Democrats and Republicans also share a promise to return America to an earlier and better era somewhere around the 1950s. It is in the content of their restorations that they diverge. Democrats want to bring back economic opportunity and rising middle-class incomes from the heyday of the American dream. In contrast, most Republicans hark back to the social values of the 1950s. They also crave Dwight D. Eisenhower's defence budgets.

Each, with their different visions, is indulging in national denial. In the speech meant to frame his campaign, Barack Obama last week promised to return America to the land of opportunity, where "if you work hard and play by the rules you get ahead". In this society, everyone would have a fair shot, money would be banished from politics and Americans would again know that "providence is with us, and that we are surely blessed to be citizens of the greatest nation on earth".

Conspicuously absent from the rest of Mr Obama's speech was a credible explanation for how this would be achieved. In parts it sounded as though he were asking for sympathy: he called on Americans to "share faith with me" that a better future lay ahead. The road would be long and hard, but we will "leave no one behind". All in all, it was the speech of a nominee who does not want to take risks with his narrow lead - a shopping list of modest policy reforms shrouded in immodest



Matt Corryon

laid out in Tampa included taking on the trade cheats, which meant China, balancing America's budget, creating jobs for every American, freeing small businesses from bureaucracy and achieving full energy independence by 2020.

He added that he would ensure America's military would be so strong "no nation would ever dare to test it". Whatever the merits of his other pledges, it is hard to see how Mr Romney could embark on a trade war with China and control America's borrowing costs. Nor will it be possible to emulate China's annual double-digit defence spending increases. But then, Mr Romney knows this already, just as Mr Obama knows he is not about to free Washington of gridlock.

Mostly it is talk. On Saturday Nancy Pelosi denied reports that she once pressed the mute button while the president was on the line. Most Americans would probably have pleaded guilty whichever candidate was on the other end.

Whether you call it a one-way conversation or a dialogue of the deaf, campaign 2012 is steeped in denial.

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generalities about America. Yet in stacking to safe formulas, Mr Obama may in fact have made himself more vulnerable. Last Friday's bad jobs number did not help.

Mr Romney's language has a harder edge. The Republican nominee describes Mr Obama as an apologist-in-chief presiding over America's decline. Sometimes he depicts Mr Obama as un-American, a president who seeks, in Paul Ryan's words, to impose the "supervision and the sanctimony of the central planners". Since talk radio continues to air the "birther" theory of Mr Obama's origins - the notion, as Newt Gingrich put it, that his ideology is "Kenyan anti-colonial" - the Romney-Ryan language has a discomfiting undertone. During the 2008 campaign Mr Obama was attacked for falling to wear a flagpin. Mrs Obama was pilloried for lacking pride in America. Both have learnt their lesson in 2012. After "restoring the American dream", the most cited words in Tampa were "Osama bin Laden", followed often by chants of "USA, USA".

Mr Romney also uses boastfulness as a shield for what is unrealistic in his promises. The five-point plan he

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