

# A Historian Explains Why America Will Probably Fail

The English author Paul Johnson opens his book [A History of the American People](#) (1997) by calling the United States “the greatest of all human adventures.”

While clearly a fan of America’s grand experiment, Johnson nonetheless expressed some doubt about whether the nation could succeed beyond the 20th century because of its dark past, which included the stain of slavery and the displacement of indigenous peoples.

“Can a nation rise above the injustices of its origins and, by its moral purpose and performance, atone for them?” Johnson asked.

For most nations, this task might be possible. But Johnson recognized that America is an exception to this rule for at least two reasons.

The first is the lofty goals, vision, and rhetoric woven into the fabric of America. A century and a half before there even was a United States, the idea of America as a “City on a Hill” was established by the Puritan John Winthrop in his famous sermon “[A Model of Christian Charity](#),” which concludes with the following lines:

*“We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, “may the Lord make it like that of New England.” For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the*

world.”

America was not just another nation. It was a spiritual endeavor, a new Jerusalem where God’s will would be done on Earth; it would be a land that would serve as a beacon for all humankind.

These ideals might seem, depending on one’s perspective, maudlin, brazen or foolhardy; but we should not forget that American history is steeped in this rhetoric. Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, Kennedy’s address to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Reagan’s farewell speech—these are just a few examples illustrating the idea that America is transcendent. The idea might be presumptuous, but it is nonetheless engrained in the American psyche and conscience.

Such ideals prompt an important question, however.

“Have [Americans] made good their audacious claims?” Johnson asks. “Have they indeed proved exemplars of humanity?”

It would be difficult for any people or nation to answer this question in the affirmative. But America’s task is made more difficult by a second problem. America was conceived in the full light of history, Johnson notes, and this presents unique challenges.

*“All nations are born in war, conquest, and crime, usually concealed by the obscurity of a distant past. The United States, from its earliest colonial times, won its title-deeds in the full blaze of recorded history, and the stains on them are there for all to see and censure: the dispossession of an indigenous people, and the securing of self-sufficiency through the sweat and pain of an enslaved race.”*

It bears asking if the lofty idea of America as an altruistic “City on a Hill” could ever mesh with the messy business of realpolitik, self-interest, and national interest that propels

nation-states. But this is particularly difficult since America's sins were done in the full light of history.

The injustices of slavery could not and cannot be hidden. They loom large not just in our documentaries and histories, but in our popular culture—films, music, novels, politics, and sports. Guilt over crimes of the past now pervade the American psyche, much like the idea of America as a “City on a Hill” once did.

The irony is that the judgment against America seems to be reaching a crescendo at a time when America's most radical ideal—“that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness”—has never been closer to being realized.

Slavery was destroyed—at the blood price of 620,000 Americans who perished. Jim Crow was defeated after years of court actions, challenges, protests, and sit-ins. A child born in Hawaii to a black father and white mother of humble means was twice elected to America's highest office by wide margins.

This is not to say that racism is dead; it still exists in the hearts of people. But it has seemingly been purged from America's institutions. Racial grievances today tend to be about equity, not equality—an idea that runs counter to America's grand experiment.

But, to come full circle to Johnson's original question, can America atone for its original sin in the eyes of the world?

The answer, based on the state of current political discourse, appears to be *no*. America's ideals might have been pure from the beginning, but its failure to see these ideas equally applied to all people left them exposed to the most damning of all charges: hypocrisy.

This inability to atone should not surprise us. There is

another quintessentially American idea that has not been mentioned: there is no escaping the past. It haunts us wherever we go.

“Shall we never never get rid of this Past?” Hawthorne once hauntingly asked. “It lies upon the Present like a giant’s dead body.”

Indeed.