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Abstract

American exceptionalism – the constitutive myth of American national identity – has been disseminated through literature, film, and foreign policy. This article analyzes another site: online comments in response to the *New York Times* coverage of the 2009 Fort Hood shooting. It is a site in which citizens participate in myth-making and maintenance. This article makes two broad claims. First, that readers' comments in response to the Fort Hood shootings constitute messages about American national identity, particularly American exceptionalism vis-a-vis the military – the military-idea, the symbol of a unified, coherent force is central to the myth of American exceptionalism. Second, events considered to be failures of the military threaten the coherence of American exceptionalism (by fracturing the military-idea). The Fort Hood incident was considered such a failure and one readers identified as part of a larger problematic involving the US's post-9/11 'war on terror'. In this mediated activity, readers put various discourses (e.g. Islamophobia, mental illness) into service to account for the military's failure and thus maintain the myth of American exceptionalism. Ultimately, these communications constitute an attempt to avoid the divisive consequences of 'another Vietnam', to which the US's post-9/11 military operations are increasingly compared.

Keywords

American exceptionalism, dissemination, Fort Hood, the military, national identity, war on terror

On the 5 November 2009, at approximately 1:34 p.m. local time, Major Nidal Malik Hasan, an army psychiatrist entered the Soldier Readiness Center at Fort Hood, Texas. He opened fire, killing 13 and wounding 31. Hasan, 39 years of age at the time of the

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shooting, joined the military out of high school, eventually earning a medical degree in psychiatry. Before the incident, he expressed reservations regarding his imminent deployment to Afghanistan, feeling this conflicted with his Muslim faith. He was later tied, via email exchanges, to Anwar al-Awlaki, an American-born cleric who was later killed by a US drone strike in Yemen in 2011 for his activities with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Even before this information became public knowledge, and as it did in the days that followed the shooting, *New York Times*' online articles, editorials and op-eds were inundated with readers' comments.¹ What these comments amount to is hardly dialogue, but a series of disseminations of arguments and stories concerning the event particularly and American collective identity generally. The comments sections were not only filled with the, perhaps all too expected, plethora of xenophobic remarks, but also a wide variety of issues that readers connected to this incident. On the face of it, the main disagreements concerned Muslims in the US military. However, there were more subtle points of contention, one of which touches upon two cornerstones of American national identity: American exceptionalism and the military.

National identity is communicated through a wide variety of media. American exceptionalism – the constitutive myth of American national identity (see Madsen, 1998; Smith, 2010) – has been disseminated through literature, film and foreign policy. This article analyzes another site: online comments in response to news coverage of an event where citizens disseminate opinions, messages and stories concerning volatile events. It is a site in which citizens participate in myth-making and maintenance. This article makes two broad claims. First, that readers' comments in response to the Fort Hood incident constitute messages about American national identity, particularly American exceptionalism vis-a-vis the military – the *military-idea*, the symbol of a unified, coherent force is central to the myth of American exceptionalism. In this mediated activity we see more recent issues and discourses (concerning Muslims in America, Islamophobia, mental illness, etc.) put into service for maintaining deeper-seeded ideological formations (i.e. American exceptionalism). Second, events considered to be failures of the military threaten the coherence of American exceptionalism by fracturing the *military-idea*. Not only was the Fort Hood incident considered such a failure but also one connected to a larger problematic involving the US's post-9/11 military operations. Ultimately, readers' messages regarding the military's failure constitute an attempt to maintain American exceptionalism and avoid the divisive consequences of 'another Vietnam', to which the US's post-9/11 military operations are increasingly compared.

A city upon a hill: American exceptionalism and the military(-idea)

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, "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 ... (Winthrop 1630, cited in Byers, 2001: 53, emphasis added)

John Winthrop's 1630 sermon, entitled 'A model of Christian charity', delivered aboard the *Arbella* en-route to the new world, is widely considered the founding speech of American exceptionalism, a cornerstone of American collective identity (Madsen, 1998). A sense of nationhood in the US was not built on 'a shared language, culture, common descent or historical territory' (McCriskin, 2003: 7) and thus required an alternative idea that would unite a nascent people (also see Hixson, 2008; Lipset, 1996). The myth of American exceptionalism provided a unifying idea by distinguishing those who came to the new world from those Europeans who did not; it is a narrative of 'difference and exception' (Ryan 2000, cited in McCrisken, 2003: 8).

The difference and exception put forward by this myth is of a particular character. Counter to Lipset (1996), American exceptionalism is not simply the belief that America is distinct; every nation is distinct.² Rather, America is unique in that it is superior (Byers, 2001). This conception is not limited to material power but includes the notion that the US is 'more virtuous than other nations' (Hodgson, 2004: 35); though the former, especially the country's military superiority, is translated into the latter. Thus, Americans are simply 'better' (McCriskin, 2003) and America is to be a model, a guide and a measure for other nations (Madsen, 1998). Regardless of the fact that the empirical claims associated with this myth have been a matter of debate, the belief in it persists (McCriskin, 2003) and it continues to be invoked by political leaders (Smith, 2010).

As a founding myth, American exceptionalism has an important place in American culture and political thought: 'American exceptionalism permeates every period of American history and is the single most powerful agent in a series of arguments that have been fought down the centuries concerning the identity of America and Americans' (Madsen, 1998: 1). This is not to suggest, however, that this idea has at any time been singular, unified or wholly accepted. McCrisken (2003) outlines two of the most important strands of American exceptionalism: the exemplar and missionary strands.

The exemplar strand posits an isolationist 'fortress America', which is 'too proud to fight' (Woodrow Wilson cited in Hoffmann, 2005: 226), home to a *diverse* group of people (stemming from the lack of common ancestry, territory, etc.) and leads the world 'by the force of her own example' (Fulbright 1966, cited in McCrisken, 2003: 35). The missionary strand, on the other hand, is associated with manifest destiny and modernization theory in which a 'crusading and militant' America plays an active, imperialist role in leading the world by spreading the ideals, values and institutions of liberal democracy (Hoffmann, 2005; McCrisken, 2003). These strands are not successive; they are overlapping and competing versions of exceptionalism. Regardless, they share several core assumptions: that America has a special role to play in the world; that America differs drastically from the 'old world'; and that, unlike previous great nations, America will never fall (McCriskin, 2003: 8–10). Both strands were invoked in the wake of the Fort Hood shooting. Explicit and implicit in many of the online comments examined here was not only America's special place in the world but also another concept that is central to both strands of exceptionalism in its generality, though it differs between them in how it is formulated: the military-idea.

Common to both strands of the myth is the central position of the military, or rather, following Philip Abrams' (1988) analysis of the state, the *military-idea*; that is, the ideological formation of a unified, coherent entity, that simplifies, or mythologizes the *military-system* – the structures, institutions and practices of the military apparatus – that are often 'volatile and confused' (1988: 79). Once the internal contradictions and failures of the system surface, the façade of the idea becomes unstable and may crack. The term 'ideological' here does not refer to ideology as false consciousness (though it could contain falsities), as the necessary product of economic and material conditions, or a collection of signifiers that creates socio-economic reality. Rather, as Eagleton (2007) explains, ideology is a matter of discourse, a discursive phenomenon that works on 'real' situations in transformative ways. Ideology here is not simply about discourses of interests (political or otherwise) but about the 'relation between an utterance and its material conditions of possibility' (2007: 223). In this sense it is a myth central to maintaining a particular form of social life. Thus, not only do utterances help to structure or maintain a particular material reality – though absolute 'closure' is never achieved – but 'real' situations can, as Abrams states, affect the ideas central to any system of meaning. The cracking of the military-idea by the Fort Hood shooting jeopardizes the myth of American exceptionalism due to the importance this idea plays within the myth.³ What constitutes American exceptionalism as ideology – an ideology in which various discourses of interest compete – is that in the debates highlighted below, the work being done on the real instance of the Fort Hood shooting is conducted within this system of meaning, to which the military-idea is central. The importance of the military-idea to the myth of exceptionalism is highlighted in three ways.

First, logically both strands require a superior military. The imperialist missionary strand makes this explicit. While the exemplar strand may eschew imperialism, 'fortress America' nonetheless requires an (exceptional) military to defend it ('ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies'). Historically, not only was this defensive need 'soon followed ... by an unbridled territorial growth' but also the 'fortress America' argument masks the fact that a nation with no historical claim to land must first take it; any claim to a non-imperialist exceptionalism is belied by a 'century of conquering republicanism on the North American continent' (Ricard, 1994: 74). Thus, whether the stated role is to 'project' or 'protect', not only do Americans have a particular role in history, they also have the means to satisfy it (a role acknowledged by many readers), and if they are a people of an exceptional character (Madsen, 1998), then, logically, so too is their military. Simply put, the ideological formation of exceptionalism requires another: the military-idea. Readers' comments in the case study below disseminated both formulations of the military. Some supported America's need to project their values with 'brutal action' if necessary (comment #42 in Mackey, 2009a), while others called for an end to 'needless' and 'foreign' wars (comment #2 in Mackey, 2009b and #235 in Johnston and Shane, 2009) (from here on in comments are cited by their number).

Second, just like American exceptionalism, the military (and war) has contributed greatly to 'forging a distinctive American identity' (Carp, 1986: 283): 'Americans' national identity has been shaped by a long history of military engagements sustained by a complex variety of experiences, attitudes, beliefs and myths [American exceptionalism?]' (Boggs and Pollard, 2007: 22). In fact, the historical success of America's military reinforced claims of exceptionalism (Madsen, 1998: 157) and these successes were

'culturally transmitted as [a sign] of cultural-moral superiority' (Gibson, 1989: 14). Counter to Hoffmann (2005), American exceptionalism was largely based on military domination long before the Bush Doctrine in 2002. As early as 1941 Henry Luce had called for the US to 'accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world ... to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence' (quoted in McCrisken, 2003: 20).

Last, just as military success buttressed the myth of exceptionalism, scholars posit the Vietnam War – the defeat of the US armed forces by a technologically inferior army – as, historically, the largest blow to the notion of American exceptionalism (Carter, 2001; Madsen, 1998; McCrisken, 2003). Due to the fact that American military superiority had long been used as a sign of overall superiority (Gibson, 1989) defeat in the Vietnam War also brought an end to America's 'moral exclusivity' and 'its manifest destiny' (Karnow 1983, cited in McCrisken, 2003: 26). The possibility that the 'war on terror' could have the same consequences – as shown in the Fort Hood incident – is highlighted by the shock it caused; a disbelief that the US military could be threatened in such a way (#23 in Mackey, 2009a).

The significance of Vietnam hints at how we can understand the ways in which the military-idea could be disrupted (and, subsequently, American exceptionalism destabilized). For Abrams (1988) the 'idea' always masks the fundamental contradictions and volatility of the 'system'. Conversely, the internal contradictions and failures of the system can jeopardize the coherence of the military-idea. For instance in 1992, the US military possessed more than double the amount of nuclear warheads deemed necessary for the country's defense by military experts (Schwartz, 1998). This seeming incoherence of the system did not threaten the coherence of the idea. The amount of atomic warheads could be understood by focusing on the structures and processes within the military: departmental growth/expansion and various branches of the military competing for contracts, jobs, prestige, etc. Thus, there are some consistent logics that can account for what may, in the first instance, seem like incoherence. However, when inconsistencies are tied to failures, the coherence of the ideal may indeed be threatened as in the case of the Vietnam War. During the war the US dropped more tons of bombs on Southeast Asia than it had on both theaters of the Second World War combined and, while this could also be explained by departmental competition, it remains shocking to citizens. This, combined with stories and images of soldier brutality, along with the failure to achieve victory disrupts any idea of a coherent unitary force – an idea central to American exceptionalism. The 'war on terror' and its associated military failures (of which the Fort Hood incident is one example) present the possibility of having a similar effect. The claim that two events decades apart could have a similar effect on an important tenet of American collective identity raises the question of how such myths are maintained.

Disseminating the myth

To remain central to national identity, the myth of American exceptionalism, like any national myth, must be continuously reiterated and at times reinvented (see Smith, 2010). Such reiteration depends on processes of communication. Particularly useful in understanding how citizens communicate this myth in the contemporary mediated moment is

'dissemination' (Peters, 1999, 2006) which refers to communication as imparting, as 'speaking into the air', as broadcasting to an imagined or invisible audience over which the sender has no control and receives no guarantee of recognition or response. Such communication is often a response to other messages or texts. In the present case, readers responded to articles – and, at times to other comments attached to those articles – that contained particular information and points of view. Thus, while such a practice does not constitute dialogue, messages and texts that are disseminated can almost always be characterized as 'loosely coupled'.

This mode of communication is an expressive act that signifies belonging, connects people across 'many places' and 'many times' (Peters, 2006: 213–14). It is not characterized by dialogue or reciprocity but by the *interpretation of traces*, which one responds to and which is a 'permanent kink in the human condition' (2006: 29). Moreover, this is also characteristic of many tactics associated with 'staging a nation' (García Canclini, 2005): monuments are erected, speeches are made, films are released, museum exhibits are commissioned and texts are written (see Anderson, 1983; Bennett, 1995; Conversi, 2000; Hobsbawm, 1992; Smith, 2008). These practices are neither mutual nor interactive in their formulation – though they are produced in response to other utterances or texts – but fundamentally about dissemination (which Peters compares to dropping a rose petal into the Grand Canyon). In other words, building a national identity is often performed through a wide array of non-interactive, loosely coupled disseminations and thus treating online comments as another site of dissemination – one available to ordinary citizens – provides a fruitful approach in examining the persistence of American exceptionalism.

The myth of American exceptionalism has been reiterated and disseminated in a variety of media: its persistence has been traced in literature, film and foreign policy (see Byers, 2001; Gibson, 1989; Hixson, 2008; Hodgson, 2004, 2009; Madsen, 1998). Echoing the centrality of the military-idea to exceptionalism, the US military's recruitment advertisements are another important site of myth dissemination. The army's slogans often reflect the idea of exceptionalism: 'An Army of One' and 'There's Strong. And then there's Army Strong.' The long-used slogan of the Marines is similar: 'The Few, the Proud, the Marines.' In these advertisements the exceptional and unified character of the military is clear. Connectedly, one recent US Air Force advertisement features futuristic, technology-based operations followed by the claim that, 'It's not science fiction. It's what we do everyday.' Such technological/material superiority, as stated above, is transmuted into cultural-moral superiority. In fact technologies have often acted as symbols of American exceptionalism (Nye, 1997): the atom bomb, the helicopter (Spark, 1989) and the Patriot missile. Decades after the Vietnam War, there were messages disseminated via a number of media which attempted to restore American exceptionalism: the *Rambo* movie series (Gibson, 1989; Madsen, 1998) and live video during the Persian Gulf War of Patriot missiles intercepting Iraqi Scud missiles are but two examples.⁴

In the immediate wake of the Fort Hood shooting, the online comments section of the articles examined provided a location for loosely coupled dissemination; that is, for messages, stories and discourses to be disseminated, often in response to or guided by the information or point of view in a given article, by citizens in order to maintain the myth of exceptionalism. The shooting brought attention to the internal contradictions of

the military-system – a soldier murdered his fellows on a military base. Reader comments acknowledged that the incident was a military failure while connecting it to the broader theater of the ‘war on terror’. Ostensibly, many of the comments were primarily concerned with Muslims in the military and the consequences of their presence for the unity of the military, a unity deemed necessary to fight effectively. However, regardless of one’s stance on this issue, there was an effort (concerted or implicit) to restore the military-idea. The arguments disseminated by readers echoed conceptualizations of the military and exceptionalism found in both strands of American exceptionalism outlined above. The Fort Hood incident is a fresh wound; no movies have been made, no extensive texts written. Online reader comments offer almost immediate post-event thoughts that highlight how quickly such occurrences are conceptualized as saying something important about American identity. Such commenting is a practice of dissemination, not dialogue, even if a few commentators explicitly respond to one another’s comments. Each has an imagined (if not illusory) audience affected by how the commentator herself views the *New York Times* (i.e. its political leanings) and also signifies the commentator’s belonging to a particular (political) group within the US.⁵ All of these comments may become ‘dead letters’ to use Peters’ (1999) words, but the tossing of all these rose petals into the Grand Canyon illustrates quite remarkably how immediately exclusionary discourses are put in the service of maintaining conceptions of exceptionalism, and thus how central this myth is to national identity – and to avoiding ‘another Vietnam’.

Project or protect: restoring the military-idea

This essay analyzes nine pieces: three articles, three op-eds, one editorial and two pieces in the Lede-Blog, the *New York Times* blog that deals with breaking news related to ‘News and Politics’. All but one were published between 5 November and 13 November 2009. Four provided general coverage (Baker and Krauss, 2009; Mackey, 2009a, 2009b; McKinley 2009), one described Hasan’s ties to al-Awlaki (Johnston and Shane, 2009), two tackled the issue of mental health in the military, taking opposite positions concerning how much mental health could explain the incident (Brooks, 2009; Herbert 2009). Friedman (2009) discussed the ‘narrative’ of ‘evil America’ used by other world leaders and an editorial (The horror at Fort Hood, 2009) urged readers not to jump to conclusions about an entire community given Hasan’s ethnicity and faith. These *New York Times* online articles were inundated with reader comments ($n = 3141$). This article utilizes a critical discourse analysis (CDA; Fairclough, 2006) that posits texts as a central component of wider social, cultural and political practices – particularly those of power. Here, the content of readers’ comments is analyzed in terms of how it services, reproduces and maintains the myth of American exceptionalism, since, as Eagleton (2007) states, ideology is a matter of discourse.

The arguments presented therein amount to a struggle to maintain the coherence of American national identity in the face of the failures and vicissitudes of the ‘war on terror’. Throughout readers’ comments, what remains constant is that America has a special role to play in the world – the exceptionalism central to their collective identity. This is asserted by disseminating arguments that aim to account for the military’s failure,

mitigate the contradictions in, and disunity of, the military-system, and to formulate a solution – to restore the military to its proper function, to its proper ideal. The dominant formulations echo those of the two strands of American exceptionalism (Missionary – Project, Exemplar – Protect) and, thus, readers did differ in how this exceptional role of America in the world is to be defined vis-a-vis the military-idea. These differences come to light in examining several key themes that arose in the comments of readers: the ‘Muslim question’, the cause of the incident/failure of the military and, subsequently, the question of ‘What is to be done?’ Just as these themes service the broader myth of exceptionalism, these comments were not limited to this single incident, but tied the incident itself to the larger theater of contemporary conflict: the US’s post-9/11 international military operations, its ‘war on terror.’

The missionary strand

The missionary strand of American exceptionalism is explicitly imperialistic and sees it as the US’s destiny to promote and project its superior values. With this strand I associate those readers who on the whole supported America’s intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq:

But what’s even more tragic is how the anti-war crowd is going to use this as an excuse for why we have to pull out ... [this is not] a reason to change the public debate on what our future in this country is. (#181 in Mackey, 2009a)

Here the country’s destiny is not to be questioned, and these wars are seen as necessary in achieving this destiny. For such readers, what was at issue was not that America was at war, but rather the nation’s resolve to fight. One reader expressed this with urgency: ‘we need to take brutal action against Islamic terrorism. No excuses here and no waffling’ (#42 in Mackey, 2009a). These readers’ comments clearly reflect the imperialist, militant conception of American exceptionalism that requires intervention (McCrisken, 2003).

For readers who echoed the missionary strand of exceptionalism, answers to the questions regarding the cause of the incident and of the military’s failure are closely tied to the ‘Muslim question’. Islam was the cause of the shooting and the failure of the military was due in part to ‘political correctness’. The conception of American exceptionalism that posits America’s role as spreading its values to inferior nations brings with it an anxiety regarding waves of immigration (McCrisken, 2003: 15), of ‘others.’ The ‘othering’ of Arabs and Muslims (often little distinction is made) in the West has a long history, as outlined in the work of Edward W. Said (1994 [1979], 1997), and took on a particular formation after the end of the Cold War (Semati, 2010). It suffices to say that the Orient (and Islam) has long been used to negatively define what is western: the Orient embodies all of what the West is *not*.

The case of Fort Hood highlights how this binary was maintained and put into service for the myth of exceptionalism: ‘Obama needs to decide what side he is on ... muslims [sic] or America’s’ (#18 in Mackey, 2009b). Even before Hasan’s faith was made public, when addressing the cause of the shooting some readers stated: ‘I think the name Malik

Nidal Hasan might give you a clue' (#43 in Mackey, 2009a; also see #42 in Johnston and Shane 2009). Once Hasan's religion was revealed, this position was only reinforced:

A Muslim American soldier kills American soldiers. I'm shocked. Shocked.

Yep, another one of those 'peaceful' muslims [sic] in action. (#257 and #252 in Mackey, 2009a)

Many wondered why the *New York Times* refused to refer this act as terrorism (see for example, #23 and #74 in Baker and Krauss, 2009; #163 in Johnston and Shane, 2009). 'Terrorism' was deemed the appropriate label because of Islam's inherently violent nature (#11 in The horror at Fort Hood, 2009; #246 in Johnston and Shane, 2009) and because for Muslims there is no separation of church and state (#100 in Johnston and Shane, 2009): 'He wasn't connected with a "terrorist" group! Actually, he was – it is called Islam' (#168 in Johnston and Shane, 2009). After Hasan's exchanges with the radical cleric al-Awlaki were made public, charges of extremism became more salient, but what is telling, is that before this revelation, it is Islam itself (rather than the political exploitation of it) – that which is antithetical to America – that is considered the cause.

This logic was pushed further by the claim that Islam had declared war on Christianity and Judaism (#14 in Friedman, 2009; #18 in Mackey, 2009b); America is fighting a Holy War whether 'we' acknowledge it or not (#240 in Johnston and Shane, 2009). Thus, those who are Muslim and devout are to be regarded as suspicious: suspicion of Hasan was justified due to his desire for a wife who prayed five times a day and wore a hijab. This kind of anxiousness regarding signs of Muslim devotion is not unheard of in the US. For example, in 2006, the first Muslim elected into the US Congress, Keith Ellison's request to be sworn in on Thomas Jefferson's copy of the Qur'an was seen by some as a threat to America's traditional values (Swarns, 2006). It is this line of paranoid reasoning that automatically posits Hasan as not crazy, but simply devout (#194 in Mackey, 2009a):

Calling guys like Nidal Hasan 'nuts' is like calling a member of the Nazi party a nut – its simplistic and overlooks the actual problem which is Islamic political ideology. (#20 in Friedman, 2009)

Furthermore, Hasan's use of 'Allahu Akbar' tied him to 'Jihadist Islam' and suggesting that his actions were those of an aware and calculating individual rather than those of a mentally unstable person (#24 and #59 in The horror at Fort Hood, 2009; #60 in Brooks, 2009); a conclusion justified by the assumption that Muslims do not separate church from state. What is telling – and this reinforces the binary Said outlines – is that a significant number of readers posted comments sending prayers to the wounded, asking 'God' to have mercy and ending their comments with 'God Bless America'. Only one reader mentioned the similarity between such invocations (#251 in Johnston and Shane, 2009). For some, God is safe, God is American. Allah is neither.

Given all this – and that for some, the battle against Islam was central to US foreign policy (Brooks, 2009) – these readers asked why the US military would deploy a 'devout Muslim' when most Muslims who kill Americans are among the most devout (#189 and #259 in Mackey, 2009a). It is here that the discourse of Islamophobia serves to repair the military-idea. For them, their arguments made clear that no devout Muslim (especially

one who identifies as a Palestinian) could serve loyally in the US military (#185 in McKinley, 2009):

What a split identity_-[sic] Arab (Muslim) American soldier (combatant). Talk about a person in a job for which they were not suited. (#33 in Mackey, 2009b)

This phobia is reflected in these readers' demands for the Muslim-American community to show their outrage publicly: 'If there are moderate Muslims, tell me where is the outcry? The mass protests?' (#451 in Mackey, 2009b). (In fact, there were plenty of these and some were even highlighted by other readers in the same comments section, which highlights the lack of 'dialogue'.) Thus, until Muslims made their allegiance clear, that is between the US or Islam, (#151 in Johnston and Shane, 2009), until they show their outrage (#54 in Baker and Krauss, 2009), until they gather in front of the Saudi embassy or the Lincoln Memorial (#201 in Mackey, 2009a) and until they stand up for the country (#1 in Baker and Krauss, 2009), they are not to be trusted and America should not be squeamish about purging them from the military; others went so far as to suggest internment similar to that imposed on Japanese-Americans during the Second World War (#240 in Johnston and Shane, 2009).

The binary of American/Muslim is naturalized in such arguments and thus any attempt to explain the shooting as a result of mental illness or the pressures of war was met with responses similar to the following:

Stress, right, that's the reason. Herby [Ron Herbert], do you believe your own baloney? He was an Islamic terrorist and acted like one, there is no mystery here. (#14 in Herbert, 2009)

Claims of mental illness were part of the problem for these readers, the result of '[p]olitical correctness run amuck' (#88 in McKinley, 2009; also see #39 and 74 in Mackey, 2009b). In other words, 'PC kills' (#23 in Johnston and Shane, 2009) and America had to 'wake up' (#190 in Johnston and Shane, 2009), because while America and the *New York Times* play 'diversity games, they [Muslims] will slit your throat' (#98 in The horror at Fort Hood, 2009).

For readers espousing the missionary strand of exceptionalism, the Fort Hood incident was caused by Hasan's faith and the endemic political correctness found in the military. Politically correct administrators allowed into the military a soldier who held beliefs inherently antithetical to the military's mission. This corrupted the military-system, its ability to be victorious and ultimately cracked the military-idea. Therefore, to restore the military-idea (the exceptional unified force), America had to cleanse politicians and bureaucrats of their political correctness (#133, in Johnston and Shane, 2009), call a 'spade a spade' (#22 in Friedman, 2009) and purge Muslims from the military (#298 in Johnston and Shane, 2009; also see Stein, 2009). Only then could 'the western civilized countries of the world ... [take] realistic approaches to the condition of cancer, Muslimism, existing in the world' (#231 in Johnston and Shane, 2009) and project modernity and freedom onto a people who practiced a faith antithetical to these values (#145 in Johnston and Shane, 2009; #94 in The horror at Fort Hood, 2009). America's destiny and purpose and the imperial means by which it is to achieve these are never

questioned; this is a matter of 'self preservation' and at stake is the 'future of the republic' (#193 and #65 in Mackey, 2009a).

The exemplar strand

The exemplar strand of American exceptionalism eschews imperialism in favor of an isolationist 'city upon a hill'. Deemed by President Woodrow Wilson as 'too proud to fight', even when forced to enter into conflict, the US would maintain only 'non-entangled alliances' (McCriskin, 2003: 2). This 'fortress America' is home to a *diverse* group of people and leads the world by example. This strand of American exceptionalism was also reflected in the comments of many readers and was characterized by a rejection of the suggestion that Islam was the cause of this incident. In answering the questions regarding the cause of the shooting, the failings of the military and what was to be done, these readers pointed to other factors at play. Key themes in comments that echo the exemplar strand of exceptionalism were the stresses of war caused by discrimination, the stigma of seeking help for mental health issues and, most importantly, America's involvement in imperialist, *foreign* wars. These readers urged returning America's military to its appropriate defensive function. Regardless of the contrast between this ad-hoc group's views and the views of those who espouse the missionary strand of exceptionalism, the underlying end goal remained the same: to restore the military-idea so central to American exceptionalism.

As the exemplar strand acknowledges and prizes the diversity of America, so too did many readers who rejected the claim that Islam motivated Hasan to carry out his crime. Even before it was known Hasan was in fact a Muslim, in response to those that pointed to his name as a clue, some readers responded:

I am utterly repulsed by the xenophobes and bigots who imagine they know anything know ANYTHING about ANYONE based on the pronunciation of their surname. (#89 in Mackey, 2009a, caps in original)

Does the name Timothy McVeigh give YOU a clue? Or how about Theodore Kaczynski? (#102 in Mackey, 2009a)

Even when Hasan's religion was made public these readers rejected holding the entire Arab- and Muslim-American communities responsible. As one reader put it:

So, I guess the time has come to make all Muslims in America wear yellow crescents on their lapels so we can identify them; force them out of business, so they can't send any money [sic] fund extremists; close their mosques [#298 in the same article suggests just that], because they are not places of worship, but recruitment centers, and possibly remove them to internment camps [another reader suggests this as well, see above]. (#268, Johnston and Shane, 2009)

These readers stated that there was no inherent reason that a Muslim could not serve the US military faithfully (e.g. #151 in The horror at Fort Hood, 2009). This is not to say that there were not obstacles for a Muslim who chooses to serve in the US military, but these were the result of prejudice within the military. Hasan himself had been called 'camel

jockey' by his fellow servicemen and women and other epithets such as 'haaji' and 'rag-head' have become part of soldiers' lexicon (Elliott, 2009). Militaries vilify their perceived enemy and due to both the use of 'Muslim' as a blanket term in much of the public rhetoric vis-a-vis the 'war on terror' in the US combined with fundamentalists' self-identification as 'true Muslims', this vilification often targets all Muslims; those who happen to be American and serving in the military are not exempt from such vilifying slurs.

In light of such concerns, it was important for these readers to maintain and respect diversity as it is a strength of the country and indeed, as stated by General George Casey Jr, a strength of the military (see Berger, 2009). If anything, this incident was a 'wake up call that America needs to be more inclusive than ever before' (#108 in Baker and Krauss, 2009). The call for diversity echoed the myth of a 'city upon a hill' where a *diverse* group of people led the world by example. Without respect for diversity soldiers would be subject to stresses in addition to those they already experience due to the structure of the US military and its overextension.

For many readers the stresses of war – in addition to those of being vilified by their own compatriots – result in mental disorder, which can in turn be the catalyst for an incident such as the one at Fort Hood (#121 in Mackey, 2009a; #6 in Herbert, 2009). Such problems are intensified by the fact that soldiers are often stigmatized for seeking psychological treatment (Herbert, 2009), as well as the existence of particular protocols (i.e. the possibility of mental health records losing confidentiality status) that act as barriers to soldiers seeking help (Dao and Frosch, 2009). The failure of the military to adequately identify and provide help for mentally unstable soldiers was one of the causes of this incident.

For many readers, such mental stress and instability was also a result of America's imperialistic tendencies (#60 in Mackey, 2009a), motivated either by the need for natural resources (#154 in Herbert, 2009) or the greed of the military-industrial complex (#71 in Herbert, 2009). Such imperialism could take the form of propping up unjust governments (#7 in Brooks, 2009) or involvement in – and/or initiation of – 'foreign wars' (#227 and 235 in Johnston and Shane, 2009). Several readers identified these as contrary to national interests (#12 in Herbert, 2009; #243 in Mackey, 2009a) and saw the prolonged involvement as unnecessary and having caused the type of stress that led to the Fort Hood incident:

I'm afraid that Major Hasan's mental implosion is just the most obvious sign that the gears of our military machine have been pretty thoroughly stripped over the past 8 years. (#130 in The horror at Fort Hood, 2009).

In effect, the errors of Vietnam were being repeated (#23 and #195 in Herbert, 2009). In addition, these foreign wars are not the examples through which America is to lead the world. These wars in fact, readers argued, made America less secure and created more enemies (#113 in Baker and Krauss, 2009). That is, America's aggression, leading by example, fosters aggression. While this showcases the ominous side of leading the world by example, it maintains America's exceptional position as *the* nation that leads.

Thus the solution for restoring the military-idea was twofold. First, for some, ‘the real problem lies in our not getting out of Afghanistan ... and in going into Iraq’ (#25 in Brooks, 2009), thus the US had to pull out of both theaters of war, get its priorities straight (#176 in Johnston and Shane, 2009), focus on domestic issues and re-build America (#18 in Friedman, 2009; #176 in Mackey, 2009a). This was the only effective way to set a proper example through which America could lead the world. In this example the military had to be a defensive force. Even though many of these readers were staunch opponents of the war, they maintained admiration for the soldiers (#84 in Baker and Krauss, 2009) and bemoaned the loss of a once great military (#270 in Mackey, 2009a). Thus, in addition to returning the military to its defensive function, there was a call to address the stresses of war. The second factor in restoring the military-idea was for the US government ‘to strengthen their support systems, not only for the soldiers, but for those who care for the soldiers, for those who come into constant contact with all of the soldiers’ troubles and fears, and their most horrifying memories’ (#87 in Mackey, 2009a). Only by maintaining its diversity (and that of the nation as a whole), reinstating its exclusively defensive function, and providing proper care for soldiers could the proper military-idea be restored; only then could America regain its exceptionalism, its position as city upon a hill.

Conclusion: avoiding ‘another Vietnam’

The incident at Fort Hood was not a lone catalyst of the attempts made by Americans to account for and posit ways to mitigate the effects of the vicissitudes and failures of the military-system. It is connected to a long line of events that make up the ‘war on terror’. This incident, and the subsequent dissemination of arguments by readers, provides an entry point into examining how citizens sought to do this. While there is much disagreement among readers regarding the details and causes of the incident, there is a common theme throughout: the urgent need to restore the military-idea. A central concept in American exceptionalism (outlined above), this ideal has a substantive connection to collective identity in the American context, a point not lost on readers. Those whose thoughts aligned with the function of the military found in the missionary strand reinforced the associated belief in America’s *duty* to spread particular values. Other readers, who sought to maintain the military’s primary function as defensive, maintained America’s (exceptional) position as the nation that leads by example. More importantly, these attempts to restore the military-idea (whether defensive or imperialist) through disseminating arguments – speaking stories into the air – regarding the vicissitudes of the military-system serve as a conduit for maintaining a coherent American identity; readers put various discourses (Islamophobia, mental illness, etc.) into service in order to maintain the myth of exceptionalism. This was not a dialogue, but the use of a mode of communication that brought many people in many places together – in the sense that they imparted their views via the same conduit, in response to the same event, and in service of the same underlying myth. These comments may become ‘dead letters’, but they provide insight into the immediate aftermath of such an incident and how citizens conceptualize them into broader imaginaries. The weight of these disseminations is best illustrated through what is now a common comparison.

The 'war on terror' has increasingly been compared to Vietnam – the readers' comments analyzed above also make this comparison. The parallels are telling: guerilla warfare, seemingly no foreseeable end, false pretenses for going to war and inhumane actions committed by American troops. America's defeat in Vietnam was the single largest blow to American exceptionalism, fracturing the military-idea and sharply dividing American society. The shooting at Fort Hood is but one incident that illustrates that the stakes in the 'war on terror' are similar; in this sense, attempts to maintain the military-idea are an attempt to avoid 'another Vietnam'. While the attempts to restore the military-idea can by no means completely mitigate the fracturing effects that this 'war' may (or already does) have on American collective identity, the position of the military-idea vis-a-vis American identity via the myth of exceptionalism highlights that such efforts are not unimportant and deserve attention. At stake in the Fort Hood shooting is not simply the crime of an individual or a failure of the military apparatus, but, tied to the larger context of the 'war on terror', a fundamental and constitutive tenet of American national identity and how it is to be imagined.

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Notes

1. The data consists of reader comments on articles, op-eds and editorials in the *New York Times* coverage of the Fort Hood incident; all but one published between 5 November and 13 November 2009. Readers' comments were posted on a moderated message board; the board remains open for 24–48 hours after the article is initially posted. The *New York Times* does not allow comments on all of its pieces. The pieces analyzed here ($n = 9$) garnered approximately 3141 comments. I performed a critical discourse analysis on these comments in order to identify the various terms used, and strands of argument made, in regard to – explicitly and implicitly – the military and American exceptionalism. This analysis does not and cannot cover every tangent and issue brought up by readers. Rather, I identify what I argue is a central and important issue within this discussion.
2. I reject Lipset's (1996) formulation of American exceptionalism as positing America as an 'outlier' not because it is inaccurate but because he approaches American exceptionalism as an empirical problem rather than an ideological one.
3. Claims regarding 'destabilizing American exceptionalism' made here are not concerned with the empirical reality of exceptionalism but rather with how the shootings affect the *idea* of exceptionalism via the military-idea.
4. The Patriot missile's abysmal success-rate highlights that while ideology should not be equated with 'false consciousness', it can include falsities.
5. On these two points. First, some readers did make explicit their concerns regarding the 'politics' of the *New York Times*. Second, readers positioned themselves politically, often through disparaging remarks about either President Obama and 'liberals' or former President Bush and 'conservatives'. Also, one can only speculate on the readers' choice of venue. The *New York Times* is a 'paper of record' and the comments are in fact archived along with the articles; in this sense they become part of the public record, though this is far from providing these disseminations a guarantee against becoming 'dead letters'.

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