

THE SATURDAY ESSAY

What Makes an American Hero?

In a country divided over how to understand its past, the American legacy of democratic heroism can still inspire extraordinary deeds by ordinary citizens.

By Adam Kirsch

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Last month, as the U.S. observed the 20th anniversary of 9/11, many Americans mourned the loss not only of thousands of lives but of the feeling of national unity that followed the attacks. “Unity is what makes us who we are, America at its best. To me, that’s the central lesson of September 11th,” said President Joe Biden in a recorded address.

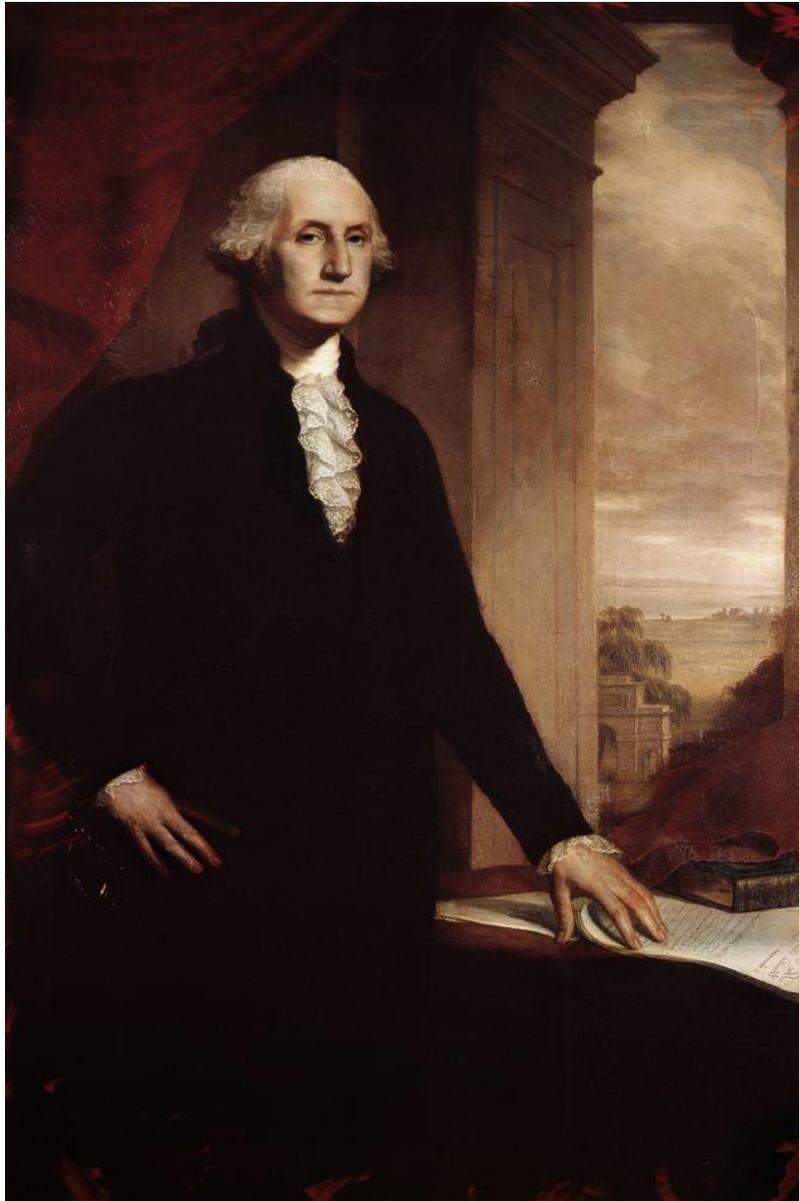
In truth, national divisions hardly disappeared after 9/11. Today we think of our political discourse as polarized and venomous in an unprecedented way, but in the days after 9/11, the left-wing filmmaker Michael Moore suggested on his website that the hijackers had picked the wrong targets: “If someone did this to get back at Bush, then they did so by killing thousands of people who DID NOT VOTE for him. Boston, New York, D.C., and the planes’ destination of California—these were the places that voted AGAINST Bush.”

Meanwhile, televangelists Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell agreed on “The 700 Club” that the attacks were a sign of God’s anger at “the feminists and the gays and the lesbians,” as well as the American Civil Liberties Union.

Perhaps the one thing all Americans agreed on was admiration for the heroes who emerged on 9/11. The firefighters who charged up the stairs of the burning World Trade Center towers, like the passengers who charged the cockpit on United Flight 93, demonstrated a kind of American heroism that we are especially in need of today, when the question of

who counts as a hero feels inescapably political. In navigating debates over which statues should be dismantled and whose stories should be told in history books, we can be guided by one of America's proudest contributions to the modern world: a new kind of democratic heroism, in which firefighters can be greater than princes, and glory and power matter less than moral courage and sacrifice.

When asked to name our heroes, Americans have a tendency to think first of presidents. Since 1946, the Gallup Poll has asked Americans which living man they most admire; in 60 of those 74 years, the number one answer has been the incumbent president. In 2020 Donald Trump topped the list, with Barack Obama coming second after leading the poll for 12 consecutive years.



A posthumous portrait of George Washington by John Vanderlyn, 1834.

PHOTO: SUPERSTOCK/EVERETT COLLECTION

But when presidents leave office and the influence of celebrity and partisanship fades, very few are remembered in heroic terms, and those who are, like **George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, are admired for reasons that are peculiarly and revealingly American. In 1783, the American poet Philip Freneau wrote an ode to Washington**, noting that he was now world famous: “Remotes realms admiring stand, / And hail the Hero of our land.” **Plenty of generals had won bigger and more dramatic battles than Washington. What amazed people was his refusal to seize the power that was his for the taking**, instead retiring to his farm like the ancient Roman statesman Cincinnatus. **As Freneau put it, “Heroes arose — but none like you/ Could save our lives and freedom too.”**

**In preferring the title of citizen to that of king,
Washington rejected the classic definition of the hero.**

In preferring the title of citizen to that of king, Washington rejected the classic definition of the hero as someone who insists on being, and being recognized as, superior to everyone else. In the Iliad, Homer’s epic poem about the Trojan War, many characters are heroes, but Achilles is the most heroic of all, the Greeks’ greatest warrior. When the king, Agamemnon, pulls rank on him by taking away the Trojan girl he has been awarded as a spoil of war, Achilles is so infuriated that he refuses to return to the battlefield, sulking in his tent as hundreds of his comrades are killed. “You will gnaw the heart within you, in anger that you did no honor to the best of the Achaeans,” he declares. Modern readers usually find Achilles appallingly childish, but to the ancient Greeks his behavior made perfect sense. What makes a hero isn’t a sense of responsibility or maturity, but being number one.

It’s a sign of the American difference that we seldom find our heroes on the battlefield. Not that American soldiers have been deficient in courage, of course; but attempts to build

national legends around combat feats have never taken root. Few Americans today would recognize the name of Sergeant Alvin York, who became a celebrity due to his heroics in World War I: leading a handful of men, he captured a German machine gun nest and took 132 prisoners.



World War I hero Sergeant Alvin York, 1919.

PHOTO: DEPARTMENT OF U.S. ARMY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

At the time, what made York the perfect American hero was that he was a reluctant one. Born to a devoutly Christian family in Tennessee, he initially claimed conscientious objector status: “I didn’t want to go and kill. I believed in my Bible,” York later recalled. He eventually changed his mind, but he was an inconspicuous soldier until the day of his Medal of Honor-winning exploit. Significantly, he was known as “Sergeant York”— the title of a 1941 movie about his life— emphasizing that he was an ordinary enlisted man. This was a striking contrast with Germany’s most celebrated World War I hero. Manfred von Richthofen, the ace pilot known as the Red Baron, was an aristocrat who flew solo, a knight of the air. York was a G.I., and the point of his legend was that any American could step up at the right moment and become a hero.

The best-known American war hero of recent times is honored not for what he did on the battlefield but for what he endured in captivity. John McCain, a naval aviator in the Vietnam War, was shot down over Hanoi in October 1967 and taken prisoner, subjected to torture and solitary confinement. In 1968, McCain’s father, an admiral, was named commander of American forces in Vietnam, and the North Vietnamese offered to let McCain go to score a propaganda victory. But he refused to be released before American POWs captured earlier, and remained a prisoner until 1973. McCain’s story reflects **something essential about American heroism: the idea that a hero isn’t the same thing as a winner. Villains win wealth, fame, and power all the time. A hero is someone who is willing to give up these things, and more, to do what’s right.**

Americans’ preference for reluctant fighters and principled everymen helps to explain why Robert E. Lee has always sat uncomfortably in the national pantheon. When the state of Virginia took down a statue of Lee in Richmond last month, it was of course because he represented the racist, slaveholding Confederacy. But a 61-foot-tall statue of an aristocratic general on horseback is un-American for other reasons, too. It represents an Old World ideal of what a commander should be, a vision of chivalry, dash and personal charisma.

Contrast Lee on horseback with the monument to the hero of the Union, the Lincoln Memorial. Here a civilian leader is shown in an unwarlike pose, seated, with a thoughtful and resolute expression—an icon of responsibility. The north wall of the Memorial is inscribed with the words of Lincoln’s second inaugural address, in which he called on the nation to take responsibility for the Civil War as God’s righteous punishment for the sin of American slavery: “He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came.”



The statue of Abraham Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., by sculptor Daniel Chester French.

PHOTO: LEIGH VOGEL/GETTY IMAGES FOR THE CANADIAN AMERICAN BUSINESS COUNCIL

It’s impossible to imagine such an inscription on European monuments like Nelson’s Column or the Arc de Triomphe. Indeed, a key European criticism of the United States from the start was that its democratic culture left no room for the heroic. “Do you want to give the human spirit a certain nobility, a generous fashion of envisioning the things of this world?”

Do you want poetry, fame, and glory?” asked Alexis de Tocqueville in his classic 1835 book “Democracy in America.” If so, the French aristocrat warned, “do not opt for the government of democracy; it would not lead you surely to the goal.” American equality was calculated “not to create heroic virtues, but peaceful habits.”

What Tocqueville didn’t foresee was that America would create a new kind of heroism. Like classical heroism, the democratic version involves an element of the spectacular, a larger- than-life achievement that inspires imagination and imitation. It isn’t the same thing as perfect virtue or political infallibility, and if we demand those things of our heroes, few if any will make the grade—a point often overlooked in our age of revisionism. **What is distinctively American is the idea that you don’t have to look like a hero to be a hero. Lincoln was a perfect example: Born in backwoods poverty, entirely self-educated, often mocked by Easterners for his lack of polish, he emerged at the critical moment as the one man capable of ending slavery and saving the Union.**

The idea that heroism isn’t the monopoly of an elite, that it has nothing to do with lineage or rank, contains within itself the idea that it has nothing to do with race or gender. Indeed, the pantheon of American heroes has always been more diverse and inclusive than the American establishment. Every signer of the Declaration of Independence was a white man, most of them wealthy and prominent. But the heroes of the Revolution included Crispus Attucks, a sailor of African-American and Native American descent who was killed in the Boston Massacre in 1770, and Betsy Ross, the Philadelphia woman long credited (perhaps inaccurately) with sewing the first American flag.



Marine Sgt. Nicole Gee holding a baby during the evacuation of Kabul Airport in August, days before she was killed in a suicide bombing.

PHOTO: SGT. ISIAH CAMPBELL/U.S. MARINE CORPS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Because heroism is extraordinary by definition, it has the power to disrupt apparently immovable hierarchies. Until very recently, it was taken for granted that only men like Sergeant York could be military heroes. But this summer, a viral photo introduced Americans to Sergeant Nicole Gee, a 23-year-old Marine killed in a suicide bombing at the Kabul airport while helping to evacuate refugees. **In the 1830s, Martin Van Buren was president and Cornelius Vanderbilt was on his way to becoming America's richest man, while Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman were enslaved. Who is admired today and who is a footnote?** And what unknown, perhaps despised person will end up an American hero a century from now, when Joe Biden and Bill Gates are footnotes?

The difference is owed to the simple fact that, long after they are gone, heroes keep giving us something we need. No one profits from a fortune that's been spent, but **a story of long-ago heroism can still provoke admiration and emulation.** **The 19th-century British thinker Thomas Carlyle considered hero-worship a crucial part of our moral education: "Great Men, taken up in any way, are profitable company. We cannot look, however imperfectly, upon a great man, without gaining something by him," Carlyle wrote.**

This idea, highly influential in the Victorian era, was discredited in the 20th century, when Carlyle's "worship" of Napoleon and Oliver Cromwell seemed to anticipate the cult of personality around dictators like Stalin and Hitler. But the "Great Men" Carlyle wrote about in his 1841 book "On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History" also included religious figures like Luther and Muhammad and poets like Dante and Shakespeare, and his definition of greatness wasn't simply about power. Rather, **Carlyle believed that in contemplating the heights human beings can reach, we learn what it means to say that we are created in God's image.** "We are the miracle of miracles,—the great

inscrutable mystery of God. We cannot understand it, we know not how to speak of it; but we may feel and know, if we like, that it is verily so,” he writes.



From heroes to superheroes: Tobey Maguire as Spider-Man in ‘Spider-Man 2’ (2004).

PHOTO: COLUMBIA PICTURES/EVERETT COLLECTION

If so, then **it’s troubling that many Americans now know less about heroes from history than superheroes from movies and comic books. Super heroism is itself an American invention: the idea that ordinary people like Clark Kent and Peter Parker are capable of becoming Superman and Spider-Man, using their powers for good while refusing personal glory, is highly democratic.** Achilles would never have kept his identity secret.

Yet the notion that being a hero requires superpowers—the ability to fly, withstand bullets, shoot webs—is also discouraging, since we know that we ourselves will never have them. The people of Gotham and Metropolis are always needing to be saved, looking hopefully up at the sky. But America’s real heroes show us that, at our best and bravest, we are able to save ourselves.

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