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The left needs its own story of American greatness

An optimistic — and inclusive — narrative is key to reshaping America.

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October 17, 2018

The battle over Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation to the Supreme Court has mobilized voters in both parties, exposing the truth as we approach the midterm elections: This is a fight between two sides with very different visions for America's present and future.

The Kavanaugh hearings stirred such passion across the country because they represent in microcosm the contest for the story — and thus the soul — of America, a contest that will be on the ballot come November. Kavanaugh's sputtering rage at having his narrative of his life challenged is a mirror image of mounting rage in President Trump's America over what are seen as unwarranted assaults from within on America's good name.

Victory for the left will not just require votes at the ballot box in three weeks. It also demands the creation — or resurrection — of a national myth that stands counter to Make American Great Again.

Over the past 40 years, revisionist scholars have challenged the notion of American exceptionalism: the idea that America is a white, Christian nation with a special destiny as a beacon to the world. Their deconstruction of American mythology has reshaped academia and found comfortable acceptance in the secular left, but it has also created a significant void. We have not replaced this mythology with one that reflects the stories we have uncovered.

This failure brings peril. Humans have always resorted to myths — narrative stories — to understand collective identity, and if academics are not writing them, then Fox News will.

Fifty years ago, the civil rights movement, women's movement, American Indian Movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement divided Americans politically and culturally over questions of racial and gender equality. These movements also galvanized a new generation of scholars to rewrite history in order to right its wrongs. They did this in two ways: by proclaiming that non-white, non-male, non-Christian peoples matter and by seeking the roots of beliefs that they didn't. They were successful in dismantling that narrative of exceptionalism, showing that freedom and democracy were always restricted by race and gender.

This scholarship has fundamentally reshaped university life. Campuses are now dotted with departments for gender studies, Asian American studies, African American studies and the like, providing a kaleidoscopic vision of the American social landscape. But these scholars (and activists aligned with them) have paid too little attention to what comes after the dismantling and have failed to capitalize on the opportunity to craft a new national myth, one that combined America's soaring

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This is the author's version of the work published as:

Wheeler, R. (2018, October 17). The left needs its own story of American greatness. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/10/17/left-needs-its-own-story-american-greatness/

principles with its painful and routine failure to live up to them. Part of this failure stemmed from uncertainty: Just how do we give meaning to the deeply painful currents of our social fabric as we construct our narratives about who or what America was, is and might become?

Christian theologian Sallie McFague, a scholar from the Vietnam generation, provides a model for such a reworking. Like her contemporaries in American history departments, she too was exploring the damaging legacy of an entrenched mythology. Rather than abandoning Christianity as hopelessly and intrinsically patriarchal, McFague fought for a more expansive vision of God.

She did so by turning to models and metaphors. Talking about God the Father constrained Christians' understanding of God by forcing it to conform to the logic and language of patriarchy. It was time, McFague argued, for Christians to employ other models and metaphors that would expand their imagination and experience of previously hidden qualities of the divine. For example, McFague urged Christians to view the earth as the body — the incarnation — of God, a shift that could transform human relationships to the environment.

Such ideas matter today. American exceptionalism, rooted in white Christian nationalism, has exacted a devastating toll: in the treatment of Native peoples, ongoing racial inequalities, overconsumption of natural resources and hostility to new immigrants.

But the answer does not lie in abandoning national narratives. Rather, we must expand our vision of America. We have the materials now to do this work: Generations of scholars have provided rich histories of women, African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, immigrants, the poor, the laity. Their experiences as non-elite, non-white, non-male and sometimes non-Christian bestowed on them a clear understanding of America's failings and also a vision of a future America that might do better — and might live up to America's most promising principles.

To cite but one example: In the 1790s, Stockbridge Mohican chief Hendrick Aupaumut invoked Christian Republicanism (which, in his rendering borrowed from traditional Mohican social and political structures) in order to hold white, Christian Americans accountable to their native brethren and sisters. He envisioned a time when "there will be no distinction between the different tribes, whether white, red or black." In his Republican vision — reflecting native notions of imagined kinship — communities remained sovereign and distinct but were pledged to each other for mutual aid and protection.

While Aupaumut's vision has yet to be realized, it continues to be embraced among his descendants who live on a reservation in Wisconsin far from the Stockbridge, Mass., of Aupaumut's birth. Members of the Mohican Veterans Association, for instance, vow to "safeguard and transmit to posterity, the principles of justice, freedom and democracy; to consecrate and sanctify our comradeship as the Mohican Veterans by our devotion to mutual helpfulness."

Many indigenous peoples and their allies have understandably abandoned any hope that modern nation states can transcend the legacy of empire and genocide. But others have articulated an inspiring vision of America absent the willful naivete or outright supremacism of American exceptionalism: Aupaumut, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr., James Baldwin and now Christine Blasey Ford. All spoke painful truths challenging powerful national (or personal) narratives. Historians can weave new narratives of America's history that center these stories as profoundly and admirably American.

The confirmation of Kavanaugh struck a blow at the central claim of the left: that social identity should not be the arbiter of truth. Kavanaugh and his supporters again and again pointed to his status as father, coach, longtime judge as proof that he could not have done what was alleged.

It is too soon of course to estimate the historical significance of the Kavanaugh hearings and his tenure on the Supreme Court. It is, however, a good time to think about its relation to our history. The treatment of Ford during the hearings is clear evidence of an enduring misogyny. But the women who have been inspired by Ford to come forward and tell their stories are examples of American civic virtue and courage. Ford brought forward from her own painful history an account that challenged Kavanaugh's personal mythology.

We as a country need to do the same.

The public response to the hearings makes clear that a vast swath of Americans feels their stories are not heard or represented in the halls of power, while another swath feels Kavanaugh's — and America's — good name is under illegitimate attack. While many of us in the first camp want to disown America today, we must remain to bear witness that the women and men telling their #MeToo stories are also America, and if we do not succumb to despair, and continue to fight for justice, perhaps one day historians will look back on this moment as the birth-pangs of a new America where the humanity and dignity of all is affirmed, the culmination of a long line of Americans who have fought for these ideals.