

Simplified Fictions

by Bill Herbst

*Version 1.8 (posted on 1 June 2026)
© 2026 by the author, all rights reserved*

I want to write in this commentary about two very specific American assertions that have been popular over my lifetime of 76 years, the first earlier on and the second more recent. These assertions are essentially beliefs about our country that have been part of the mainstream narrative of American Exceptionalism. They are not the actual subject of the commentary, but they are examples of how the subject (simplified fictions) plays out.

1. "It Can't Happen Here"

Growing up in the second half of the 20th century as a TV kid who was interested in both history and war, I watched literally hundreds of documentaries about the two World Wars of the first half of the 20th century that had happened before my birth. Standouts in my memory include the unabashedly patriotic early 1950s documentaries, such as the NBC series "Victory at Sea," that celebrated the U.S. Navy's role in winning World War Two. The 1960s included ABC's series "The Valiant Years," about Winston Churchill, and the remarkable CBS News documentary series, "World War One." That show was brilliant, as was the equally monumental 1970s BBC docu-series "The World at War," which covered the entire Second World War from beginning to end.

By the 1980s an entire industry of video documentaries — usually cheaper and independently-produced — had emerged that was devoted to creating military and cultural documentary series about Hitler, the Nazis, and Germany. By the 1990s, some viewers jokingly referred to cable TV's History Channel as "The Hitler Channel," because of the sheer number of documentaries about Hitler and the Nazis being produced and aired.

Nearly every one of these series contained a common thread that ran through the narrative. All of them asked the viewer, either overtly or covertly, the same question: *How could a people as progressive, artistic, and cultured as the Germans of the 19th century have succumbed so completely in the 20th century to the profound evils of fascism?*

The answers given by each documentary series varied from one to another, but all of them seemed to carry a similar tone, namely, that some innate lean toward authoritarianism was probably present in the German psyche that had then been brought out dramatically by historical circumstances. The filmmakers

were rarely if ever certain or precise about all the various factors that had caused the German people to go crazy and embrace Hitler and the Nazis. None of these many documentaries made for cable TV were particularly nuanced or deep, their scholarship was sometimes questionable, and they preferred the sensational rather than the serious or sober. All of them, however, seemed to share two basic presumptions:

First, the fall from grace and descent into the madness of Hitler and Nazism that befell the German people was tied in some inexplicable way to qualities — we might say character flaws or delusional vulnerabilities — that were somehow inherent in and specific to the Germanic psyche. It might not have been quite right to say that they brought their downfall on themselves, but, in one way or another, what happened to the population of Germany was the result of who they were, and thus their own fault.

Second, the American psyche is good, just, and completely without such built-in flaws toward fascism and authoritarianism. Thus, what happened in Germany could never happen here in America. We Americans are inherently too good for that, or so the filmmakers assumed, and the combination of our sterling essential character along with the solid institutions of our democratic republic insure that something so terrible could never overtake us. These attitudes were characteristic of American Exceptionalism at its pinnacle, the entire “American century,” and the global Empire of economic and military dominance that went with America’s post-World War Two role as hegemonic superpower.

As I watched all the documentary series aired on American television over the last 70 years — from network TV in the mid-1950s through cable TV of the 1990s and into streaming TV of the 2020s — I became increasingly dubious about their basic presumptions and more and more convinced that their conclusions were simply wrong. Not only was the filmmakers’ lack of comprehension about mass psychology and moral oversimplifications glaring defects, but their comfortable certainty about American goodness was both naïve and incorrect.

So, that’s the first of the pair of simplified fictions I want to reference in this commentary, the belief that while the German people may have gone crazy, lost their minds, and succumbed to evil, we Americans did not need worry or be concerned, because that could never happen to us.

2. “This is not who we are.”

The second of my chosen pair of denials is more recent. Over the past decade, a period in American history that will no doubt bear Donald Trump’s name long after he is gone, a statement I heard, saw spoken, and read a thousand different times is “*This is not who we are.*”

Time and again, that assertion is offered in response to the actions, beliefs, intentions, and opinions of Donald Trump and his millions of minions in all the different shapes and identities they assume. Whenever Trump or his proxies express their racism, xenophobia, misogyny, or other hatred, someone from the “liberal” side of the country will attempt to draw a line in the sand by asserting that *“This is not who we are.”*

If the attitudes and beliefs of Trump and MAGA do not reflect “who we are,” then how did Trump get 77 million votes in the 2024 election? Although I wish it were true, *“This is not who we are”* is clearly a falsehood that I’m really tired of hearing. C’mon, if almost half the country believes something — no matter how shocking or seemingly outrageous it may be — then surely that belief is part of our character. Heck, 70% of Americans profess to believing in angels, but no one says, *“That’s not who we are.”*

Oh, I understand what those who protest that *“This is not who we are”* in response to Trump, MAGA, and the extreme right wing are trying to express. They’re referencing a certain strain of progressive American idealism, the kind that has been taught in elementary schools over the past century.

The problem here is that the full breadth of American reality is very hard to swallow without suffering the whiplash of cognitive dissonance. We are a people divided by the extremely different beliefs we hold dear, and that’s been true since our nation was founded.

Truth versus Fiction

The two assertions of beliefs presented so far — *“It Can’t Happen Here”* and *“This is not who we are”* — are offered as examples of the large number of fictions that Americans hold. Why do we believe them so passionately and sometimes obstinately?

The answer to that question involves the nature and relationship of Truth and Fiction. Truth is hard to understand. Fiction can be made easy to grasp and very convincing. Truth is complicated. Fiction is simple. Truth is elusive, mysterious, and often contradictory or paradoxical. Fiction can be shaped to appear plain, direct, and consistent.

Sometimes for individuals, but ALWAYS for collective humanity, simple is far preferable to complicated. Bold is preferable over nuanced. Black and white are preferable to gray scale. In the big bell curve of perception, opinion, and belief that describes many people together as a group, the middle of that bell curve — whether as a statistical mean, median, or mode — is inevitably a fictional compendium that passes for truth (but isn’t). Usually, the center of the curve is an oversimplified story that substitutes for the bewildering complexity of reality, giving us something we can understand and embrace, instead of leaving us confused and bewildered.

Truth is amazing and beautiful, but it does not take sides, nor promote human togetherness. Truth is messy and often harsh. The simplified fiction of our many delusions, however, acts as effective glue to hold people together, to bond us into group solidarity.

The set of delusions that made up the simplified fictions of western *liberalism* in its particularly American form was a story that held much of the world together for about 70 years following the end of World War Two. Liberalism's story promoted the idea that international cooperation and recognition of the commonality of all humans — a hallmark of the American experiment in government and society — could provide humanity with a better, more secure world — a civilization that would be safer for commerce and economic stability, and less likely to succumb to violent conflicts that might devolve into global violence.

America was in a unique position after the Second World War to enforce that story for the betterment of all humanity. As payment or "tribute" for making the world safer, America did not hesitate to skim some of the cream off the world's milk for itself. Establishing the dollar as the world's reserve currency carried huge benefits for America, and even our most generous undertakings (the Marshall Plan in Europe, the restoration of Germany and Japan, the NATO alliance and United Nations, safety of the oceans for commerce) always benefitted America at least as much and usually more than the recipients of our largesse.

Starting around 1970, however, another contrasting set of beliefs began to rise up from within America to challenge that status quo. This contrasting story held that *authoritarianism* — basically raw power concentrated within fixed social hierarchies — was a more effective system for organizing civilization. The simplified fiction was that global cooperation couldn't hold a candle to imperial domination. Fear was more potent than love. Hard nationalism and isolationist policies were presumed to be better for America.

That second set of oversimplified fictions was not new. It had always existed and, in fact, had been the most frequently told story throughout the 12,000-year history of civilization. Liberalism was merely a recent upstart that came into vogue after two world wars destroyed old empires and remapped the globe.

The United States has always been conflicted. Both liberal and authoritarian stories are part of the American psyche. Americans are drawn to and repelled by both stories, and the cognitive dissonance is inherent within us.

The downsides of liberalism include the difficulties of instilling empathy and compassion into society and governance. Love for strangers and generosity toward "the other" are not easy attitudes to inculcate within the general population. The downsides of authoritarianism (the "strong man" theory of society) include pronounced tendencies toward exclusionism and insensitivity,

which often lead to hatred, violence, and war. Even so, those drawn to the fictional delusions of authoritarian rule much prefer it to liberalism. Trying to convince them otherwise is probably a fool's errand, because people believe in and cling to stories rather than facts. We humans seem to prefer our delusions rather than truth.

Over the past 50 years, the steadily rising tide of authoritarianism from the far right in America had regained sufficiently widespread acceptance by 2016 to finally take back full control of the government and thus dominate an entire decade of American politics, much to the shock and displeasure of those who like the liberal story. Trump's second term has been a master class in how to destroy America's liberal history.

Recently, however, the authoritarian side currently in power has begun to fracture and lose steam. Two factors are causing this. First, Donald Trump's physical and mental health has gone into steep decline, and his behavior is now increasingly reckless. "Unhinged" is a word frequently used to describe Trump's behavior. More pragmatically, a failed war with Iran and a worsening economy are unforgivable to the American public, no matter which story they prefer. Scandal and corruption may have failed to derail the authoritarians, but the price of gas and groceries are doing that job.

A reckoning appears to loom ahead, with Americans needing to decide which story we will embrace going forward. I don't claim to know what the country will choose. Whichever story comes out on top will not magically erase the other story. Whatever happens, it's pretty clear that the way things were during the "American (20th) Century" are gone. We cannot return to those days and the stories we told ourselves.

It looks like something fundamentally different will have to emerge. I hope to write about that in future commentaries.

end commentary