

SARAH CHURCHWELL

# BEHOLD, AMERICA

A History of America First and the American Dream

Story on Page 8



In July 1937, the Board of Directors of Camp Northland, in Andover, New Jersey, where Hitler held an audience of 12,000 that the organization stood "for American principles, America for America." On the left, standing before a group of Hitler salutes, Hitler addressed an audience of 10,000 at Camp Siegfried, Long Island, New York, in August 1937. "Which government is going to give us a chance to live?" Hitler asked. "The American government is not giving us a chance to live. We are not allowed to live. We are not allowed to live in America." (Courtesy 20th Century-Fox Film Corporation)

S. L. O O M S H U R Y

## Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream

*Sarah Churchwell*

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Sarah Churchwell

**Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream** Sarah Churchwell  
'Enormously entertaining' *Sunday Times*  
'Fascinating' *New Statesman*  
'An enthralling book' *Guardian*

'The American dream is dead,' Donald Trump said when announcing his candidacy for president in 2015.

How would he revive it? By putting 'America First'.

The 'American Dream' and 'America First' are two of the most loaded phrases in America today, and also two of the most misunderstood. The American Dream began as a pledge for equality rather than as a dream of supremacy and 'making it big'. America First has not just served as an isolationist term, but as an early slogan of the Ku Klux Klan with surprising links to the present. In 1927, a KKK riot led to the arrest of seven men – among them a certain Fred C. Trump.

Both phrases were born nearly a century ago and instantly tangled over capitalism, democracy and race, coming to embody opposing views in the battle to define the soul of the nation. *Behold, America* recounts the unknown history of these two expressions using the voices that helped shape that debate, from Capitol Hill to the newsroom of the *New York Times*, students to senators, dreamers to dissenters. As America struggles again to project a shared vision, to itself and to the world, Sarah Churchwell argues that the meanings and history of these terms need to be understood afresh so that the true spirit of America can be reclaimed.

Insightful and revelatory, *Behold, America* overturns everything we thought we knew about the American dream, America First and the battle for the identity of modern America.

## Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream Details

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**Dream Sarah Churchwell**

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# From Reader Review Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream for online ebook

## Steve says

Another ... depressing, difficult, disconcerting ... but thought-provoking and, most importantly, *informative book of our times* that is well worth reading. For all of my education and degrees (yes, yes, we are who we are), I never cease to be amazed by how much history I don't know, what we weren't taught (in high school, in college), and ... sadly, but most importantly, what we just didn't want to know or didn't want to hear. So, if you (as I aspire to be) are troubled by current events, but are open to new information and willing to rethink basic assumptions (or challenge things you've taken for granted ... well ... forever), I suggest you add this list to your reading pile.

Sadly, the book grabs the reader by both ears and makes the reader stare reality in the face, forcing the reader to acknowledge the ugly underbelly of American history (and dreams), particularly with regard to widespread (patent and latent) racism and Antisemitism. [Yes, Virginia, reading about the KKK (and fascists and Nazis) and its (their) lengthy history in our nation, is never pretty.] And, sadly, understanding this is so terribly important today .... Along those lines, you should definitely consider reading this if you enjoyed, for example, King's prize-winning *Devil in the Grove*, Grann's popular *Killers of the Flower Moon*, or I dunno, Isabel Wilkerson's monumental/epic *Warmth of Other Suns*... (that's just to name a few... and a handful of others that come to mind in other contexts are referenced below....)

Due primarily to my interest/background in defense/military aviation and weapons production, my general familiarity with Charles Lindbergh and Henry Ford as celebrity and industrialist *American Firsters* (or Nazi sympathizers or anti-Semites ... you decide for yourself) was typically consumed in the context of their (Lindbergh and Ford's) otherwise impressive (often extraordinary) and laudable achievements. While there are innumerable biographies of both, they're brought together in AJ Baime's (informative, but, frankly, strangely constructed), *The Arsenal of Democracy: FDR, Detroit, and an Epic Quest to Arm America at War*, which I review at some length here: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1....> Obviously, this is a more fulsome, organized, and thoughtful exposition on America First (and, of course, the American Dream).

Among other things, the book did a splendid job convincing me I need to read more by (and more about) Dorothy Thompson, whose words ... in 1941 ... seem spot on, if not prescient, today. Sadly, the book also presents one of the most compelling *the apple doesn't fall far from the tree* explanations of Donald Trump's instincts, biases, blind spots, actions, and behaviors, including everything from racism and dog-whistling to disinformation.

*Reader's nit:* The book isn't necessarily an easy or a quick read, and ... given how much of the meat of the story is about words, phrases, and minor tweaks and modifications to definitions and usage and interpretation, the book requires more concentration that is required in, say, serial detective fiction (which, obviously, this isn't). I expect for many readers, this could become a slog (but I didn't find it to be so; indeed, I plowed through it rather quickly). By way of comparison, since it might appeal to a similar readership, I found the pages turned much (much) more quickly in, say, Frum's *Trumpocracy*, or Snyder's (slim but elegant and extremely worthwhile) *On Tyranny* than they did here. All I mean to say is that it's a serious book on a serious topic and, accordingly, it requires serious attention to appreciate it.

Also, I haven't read Churchwell before, and my sense is that this book (project, and research) isn't necessarily in the center of her wheelhouse.... And, periodically, I felt it was a strange book ... and I wasn't even sure

what I was reading or where it was going (although I got over that relatively quickly) ... because, in some ways, it was more history of language and usage than history, but that's not quite right. Because it is history, and the overall endeavor represents a staggering amount ... and a unique brand ... of research, with extensive identification and description of speeches, books, essays, radio shows, reporting, op-eds, and ... well, you get the idea. And this isn't modest history ... no, rather, it embraces a lengthy period of time, but pulls it all together and presents the research in a cohesive, and, more importantly, compelling manner.

I strongly recommend it (and applaud the author). Well done.

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### **Sorrento says**

Sarah Churchwell's timely book was a real eye opener for me. Whilst I knew of some of America's shameful past including slavery the KKK and Charles Lindberg's support for the Nazis, I didn't really know about the significant proportion of the American public who supported fascist and Nazi ideas by attending Nazi rallies uniting around the slogan America First (the campaign slogan of Donald Trump). I was also sickened to learn that the American state condoned the abhorrent cruel torture and murder of black people, called lynching, until the late 1930s.

Churchwell's well researched book quoting extensively from news reports of the time also discusses what the meaning of the American dream has meant to successive generations of Americans. Is it a materialistic everyone can get rich and be president dream or a dream of a more equal, tolerant, less fearful, democratic society?

Churchwell quotes extensively from journalists and authors who vehemently opposed the America firsters fascists and who had a more liberal egalitarian view of the American Dream including the newspaper columns of Dorothy Thompson and the fiction of Scott Fitzgerald and John Steinbeck.

Towards the end of the book there is a discussion of how these ideas of the American Dream and America First are being expressed in America's politics today and particularly by the Trump administration. Fred Trump Donald's racist father we learn was KKK member.

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### **Biblio Files (takingadayoff) says**

The first surprise in Sarah Churchwell's book about America First and the American Dream is that the phrase "American Dream" only started to be used in the 1930s. Even then, its meaning was fluid, signifying different dreams at different times. Another surprise is that at the same time American Dream was taking shape as a shorthand for the potential of America, "America First" was already being used by political candidates and newspaper editors calling for the exclusion of "hyphenated" Americans. At that time, almost anyone who did not have roots in England was considered hyphenated and suspiciously foreign.

Churchwell's history is fascinating, well-researched, and pertinent to our own times.

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### **Alex Taylor says**

This is fascinating and frightening in equal measure.

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### **Stephanie Wasek says**

Stunning, timely, relevant interrogation. Still absolutely reeling. Should go on every civics syllabus.

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### **Athena\_reads says**

In her enlightening book *Behold America*, Sarah Churchwell looks into the history of these two phrases and explores how their evolution, both their myths and their truths, had shaped reality in ways that are not yet fully understood. She looks into how people used these phrases in the past across the U.S., how they emerged, about the same time, a hundred years ago, in 1916, and how they both became part of the American political conversation in different ways, not as ideas but as catchphrases.

The way a phrase evolves and the chains of association that are formed intuitively or unconsciously as one idea, define the political and social realities. It is surprising and instructive to see how these associations explain the situation that the U.S. is now.

In order to fight the danger of resurgence of fascism, you need to know the history. Fascists are masters of political theatre, they feed on peoples' grievances; they demonize groups of people, and they present themselves as national saviours. They seek to subvert and eliminate liberal institutions. With her book *Behold America*, Sarah Churchwell reminds us of the danger that U.S. is facing and presents arguments to fight back against authoritarianism and white nationalist policies.

Read the full review at [Maquina Lectora](#)

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### **Peter Geyer says**

My professional life has been spent in a field where history has had little purchase. People ignore the past and say that the future will be different, so ignoring the ideas and events that are represented or have caused current issues. Curiosity about names and labels in this field – their origins, intent, meanings and contradictions – has been mostly absent, at least from my position as a lover and valuer of history for what it can tell us about the here and now and what might come.

Sarah Churchwell goes down the historian's road to investigate two currently prominent slogans in American politics – America First and the American Dream. The varieties of meaning attached to them, the kinds of people and views attached to specific meanings including the entanglements of white supremacists and various sectarianisms, Ku Klux Klan, pro-Nazi groups, democracy, immigration, race and anti-Semitism, materialism, corporatism, the free market and so on. There are committees, newspaper articles and editorials, commentators, novels, rallies and lynchings. Intermittently, she refers to the current situation in American Politics, notably Donald Trump and his origins.

The period of history is essentially the first half of the 20th century, although there are forays into other times when required, and Churchwell finishes up in the present day. She writes well and her interjections and comments are pertinent, particularly in untangling the multiple meanings of the phrases that form the theme

of her book. In some respects, an underlying theme is how little people appear to investigate meaning and definition, and also how different circumstances and times throw up different interpretations. Her work also implicitly criticises the sloppy investigation of these terms over the past few years.

The first part of the 20th century is of professional interest to me, particularly around psychology, personality, eugenics and so on and I found this book extremely informative regarding context, whilst also creating new questions or avenues of discovery. My understanding of the racial history of the United States, for want of a better term, has also been enhanced.

I would recommend this book to anyone. .

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### **Lori says**

Behold America by Sarah Churchwell, Published by Perseus Books on 9 October 2018

I received a free egalley of this title for review via NetGalley.

This book is so my jam. I have a Master's in History. At my first committee meeting, one of the members asked for a list of every history class I had taken. Upon furnishing the list, he told me I needed to venture out of the 20th century. I sadly did so in my remaining semesters. BUT I love 20th century American history. I keep returning to it. I think the century is rich in topics to study. I think that this is a great topic because of how timely it is.

The subtitle of this book is "The Entangled History of 'America First' and 'The American Dream.'" Two phrases that are thrown around like beads at Mardi Gras nowadays. Churchwell examines the origins of these phrases and how they have changed meaning over time as different groups have adopted them and used them. Spoiler—today their usage bears little resemblance to their initial meaning. The concept of "America first" has historically been tied to white nationalist groups. The "American dream" initially had little to do with personal, individual prosperity, but focused on the ability to live a more generous life. Churchwell traces these changes in meaning from their earliest usages in the Gilded Age up through today.

Churchwell takes the perfect approach in her study. She uses the words of ordinary people as opposed to the words of politicians or writers, which better highlights the widespread understanding and meaning of these phrases over time. Their meaning for ordinary people shows why they are used by politicians. Politicians use phrases that either prey on the fears of their followers or inspire them to action. For me, this approach helps make the connection of why politicians keep turning to these phrases. This use of primary source material creates a much stronger basis for her arguments.

Her writing is extremely accessible. I hate wading through incredibly dense histories. Fortunately, though a heavy topic, Churchwell wrote about it in an engaging way. I would recommend this book to anyone who likes history or likes reading about current events. I appreciate how she kept tying together the parallels between the past and current events. In order to create a better future for the country, we have to know where we came from.

Bottom line—I really enjoyed this book. It's the kind of history book I enjoy reading. It's the kind of history book I went to grad school to write. It's very informative and it's very timely. Read it.

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## **Gary Beauregard Bottomley says**

This is a well researched book with academic rigor written for a wide audience. I used to think that fascism couldn't take hold in America. I was wrong. This book shows the morphing of the American Dream to an American First style of fascism until 1942 and with a little post script added for its recent history.

The KKK is irrelevant today. They're too extreme in their hate and exclusive in their thought. In 1924, when Mussolini took over, they were very relevant and the NYT saw them as America's Fascists which ended up having to re-brand themselves into various forms of American First. The hate had to recode itself beyond the hate espoused in 1924 by that Indiana senator in Munster Indiana with his hateful speech about everyone who was not 100% American, or the similar letters posted to the Chicago Tribune. (BTW, Barack Obama's last campaign speech in 2008 was given in Munster Indiana. I wonder if that Indiana Senator turned in his grave. I can only hope.)

At its core the hate morphs in to different labels, but in substance it always has three components: someone not a member of the self-appointed privileged tribe must be feared, traditional values must be reclaimed, and equality is not necessary for liberty since fairness to the privileged is all that is required.

The author spoke about 'the myth of the lost cause' three times in this book. That's the belief that the Civil War was really a war of independence and they were fighting for a noble cause and only lost because they were betrayed. If the absurdity of that belief is not obvious to you, I would recommend 'The Myth of the Lost Cause' by Bonekemper III. At the core of the American style of fascism is a requirement of a mythical betrayal of the past. It can label itself 'make America great again' because it's in search of a past that never should have been, and where their hate of gays, blacks, browns or non-Christians made them bigger only because they made the others smaller.

I knew Fred C. Trump, the father of the current President, was strongly supportive of the KKK in his day, but I did not know the 'C' stood for Christ. So, when the President gives a speech in the Oval office and he has his father picture facing towards the nation, he has an avid racist and Christ in the back ground.

The book quoted somebody to the effect that for fascism to succeed in America it will wrap itself in a flag (have you ever seen Trump hug the flag, I have; it is creepy) and will come with a bible and a cry for a return of 'traditional values' (or in other words: make America great again). Also, as someone else was quoted to have said, it will need its own newspaper or network. William Randolph Hearst provided that in those days and gave the American brand of fascism the coherence they needed to almost succeed. Dorothy Thompson, who I'm embarrassed to say that I did not know about, provided some of the intellectual bulwark against the American fascist and she is often quoted throughout this book.

Dorothy Thompson pointed out how Hitler laid out what he was in his speeches and in his book 'Mein Kampf' and nobody should have been surprised by what he did and those who enabled that are responsible for that.

Iowa comes out looking presciently. Be it the Des Moines Register with their warnings against Charles Lindbergh and American fascism or the University of Iowa putting the final nail in American fascism after Lindbergh's December 11, 1941 speech. It's somewhat ironic that they have a racist congressman today who channels those same American first principals.

The author notes that what we know about history is couched in the myths that we believe about the past. In order for us to understand who we are today sometimes we need to unveil the myths so that the same tragedies don't repeat themselves.

This is an incredibly well researched book that unveils our past and is relevant to who we are today, and as always, shows why learning about the past is vital, because it almost happened here in the past and it can happen here in the present.

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### **Kelly says**

Everything old is new again. Sarah Churchwell lays out the history of the phrases “America First” and the “American Dream,” and the result is a relentlessly grim accounting of racism, bigotry, isolationist bombast, and intellectual vulgarity. Churchwell knows her stuff. This is a scholarly book, sandwiched between a prologue and an epilogue that seethe with disgust for its context—the *raison d'être* of the book’s genesis: the ascendance of Trumpist “alt-right” nonsense in the American political landscape.

Surprisingly, there is something calming—even therapeutic—about taking this trip down memory lane. Monstrousness is made less menacing when you learn that it is not new. A phrase we hear so much nowadays is “We’ve never seen anything like this!” That is flatly untrue, as Churchwell explains. What is dispiriting is that we are likely going to keep seeing it, generation after generation.

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### **Ben Cullimore says**

With Donald Trump in the White House and the United States of America dangerously divided along ideological and ethical lines, *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream* is a timely study of what those two important terms mean and where exactly they came from.

Tracing them back to their earliest origins, Sarah Churchwell brilliantly examines the way in which they have transformed over time; both in response to the natural evolution of society and, more worryingly, in the service of corrupt and hateful figures. “America First” is a phrase often utilised by Trump and adopted by his followers, and Churchwell explains how it is inexplicably related to white supremacist ideas from the early twentieth century. Used to justify racism, isolationism and nativism, “America First” is an incredibly dangerous phrase with a dark past, and its return to the political lexicon is a serious worry.

Churchwell’s study of what constitutes the “American dream” is equally riveting, and it is here that *Behold, America: The History of America First and the American Dream* is arguably at its best. Her examination - bolstered by dozens of examples from newspaper articles, books and speeches - highlights the way in which the phrase has evolved, with each successive period reimagining it for their own time. It is fascinating to read how, in its earliest form, the meaning behind the “American dream” was closer to social democracy than ideas of individual wealth and success, and how this has unfortunately been lost to a far more selfishly libertarian interpretation.

*Behold, America: The History of America First and the American Dream* is well-researched and brilliantly presented, and it represents an eye-opening account of two misused and abused phrases that continue to be adopted for nefarious purposes.

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## **Jeffrey Ogden Thomas says**

A Very Comprehensive historical review of the origins -- and adaptations -- of two popular stereotyped concepts: America First, made recently famous by the current president's campaign, and The American Dream. America First has a more obvious core nationalistic meaning, if only because it was actually the name of several committees and organizations in the mid-twentieth century. Yet the author details how it was claimed by several viewpoints in an effort to support their cause. After all, if we want America to be First in the world, then it could be first in engagement, thus more heavily involved in international activities! However, the primary nationalistic use became so closely associated with Lindbergh and Hearst's fascism-supporting views, it is what we all learn in US history class now. Those of us who remember history class have definite reactions to the phrase. The current president evidently does not remember much of any class, so he can speak ignorantly with his gut.

The American Dream is a more malleable concept -- here the author's contribution is more important, as she points out the early associations with The American Dream focused on equality and justice; only after WW2 did it symbolize home-ownership.

Three short sections reviewing the stunning shameful history of lynching, particularly shameful as it extended into the 1930s, actually disturbed my sleep: Read this in the daytime!

There are also a few intriguing Britishisms inserted: spelling, word choice, and grammar, that actually give the book a more objective feel, as if an outsider were viewing our bleak history.

The book is unforgettable, especially now, as it is clearly aimed at current year 2018, with many references to Trump and his father. It is also chockablock with primary sources and references to beat any doctoral dissertation -- the use of obscure newspapers and resources is a thicket: for example, is the Ironwood Daily Globe a reliable source? Overall, an excellent resource for a History class, and a good read for current history buffs. And the descriptions of lynching are really powerful as well, particularly when connected to the 100% American movement...truly American, indeed.

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## **Gram says**

This book traces the origins of two phrases - "The American Dream" and "America First", showing how they have featured in American life - as political slogans, news editorials, essay topics and in literature good and bad - for more than 100 years. During that time, both have meant different things to different people and the author, Dr Sarah Churchwell, suggests that it's time to rediscover what they now mean to the people of a nation she believes has lost its' way.

Early in the 20th Century, people had to decide the role the USA would play in the struggle between democracy and totalitarianism. Both the American Dream and America First were employed in all of these battles. The latter slogan is nothing new. Thousands of politicians, journalists, writers and rabble rousers used it long before Donald Trump decided to take up politics.

From the late 19th Century, to the present day, "America First" has been used in the name of a vast variety of causes, some good some bad, depending on your point of view. It was, and still is, invoked by the Ku Klux Klan as well as American Nazis in the 1930's and 1940's and the promoters of the "Red Scare" which surface with monotonous regularity in American history.

From 1910 to 1920, it was used by isolationists who wanted to prevent Americans fighting in the First World

War and again at the war's end when the League of Nations was formed. It has been used to enforce regulations against immigrants and the subjugation of others, particularly the country's black population. There were those who used the slogan to justify anti-Semitism, attacks on German-Americans during World War I and then Japanese-Americans in World War 2. It was used to give credence to extremes of racism, particularly ideas of the superiority of the white race and the public lynching and burning of thousands of black men and women during the 1st half of the 20th Century. Many American politicians were members of the Ku Klax Klan and filibustered an anti-lynching bill (first introduced in 1918) and similar legislation was halted until the 1930s. Between 1890 and 1952, 7 US Presidents asked Congress to pass a federal law." Not one bill was approved by the Senate mainly because of the powerful opposition of the Southern Democratic voting bloc.

Meanwhile "The American Dream" has been used to symbolise everything from Liberalism, social equality and social democracy to rampant capitalism and the worst excesses of the robber barons, along with the industrialisation of America which many believe destroyed the ideals of a nation which some wished would mean a country with a gentler, agrarian-based economy and its ethos of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. In 1900 The New York Post stated that millionaires constituted the greatest threat to the USA and that seemed to be a popular sentiment at the time. Later in the 20th Century, economic "experts" argued that the pursuit of vast wealth was no vice - greed was good.

In 1921, there were "America First" societies spread throughout the USA, advocating the boycotting of British and European goods. Sound familiar? It just goes to show there's nothing new in politics. Opponents constantly argued this stance, asking the question: "America First? - For Whom?"

Many believed that the dogged pursuit of wealth did not symbolise the American Dream, but rather valued property rights above human rights. Not surprisingly, use of the words, "The American Dream" seem to lessen during years of financial crisis.

With details from hundreds of articles from newspapers large and small, excerpts from books, varying from the works of Nelson Alger to Sinclair Lewis and even a play written by F. Scott Fitzgerald, mixed in alongside speeches made by politicians and other prominent and lesser known figures, this history shows how the meaning of both phrases have been altered to suit the ideas of whoever quotes them. Donald Trump's "slash and burn" approach to politics might seem shocking, but his constant sloganizing about making America great again has been heard countless times before.

My main criticism of this book is that I found the continual use of a myriad of written sources for these two slogans too repetitive as the author hammered her points home. Sometimes - even in a history book - there can just be too much information and too many minute details. Certainly it's not a book for the casual reader, but it is one which will definitely reward those who make a closer study of its arguments.

My thanks to Netgalley and Bloomsbury Publishing for the chance to read this book in exchange for an unbiased review.

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### **gnarlyhiker says**

the introduction, prologue and epilogue makes for a solid read. the in-between is borderline filler-up.

do recommend a short documentary by Marshall Curry. link below & summary:

In 1939, 20,000 Americans rallied in New York's Madison Square Garden to celebrate the rise of Nazism. *A Night at the Garden*, made entirely from archival footage filmed that night, transports audiences to this chilling gathering and shines a light on the power of demagoguery and anti-Semitism in the United States.

<https://fieldofvision.org/a-night-at-...>

good luck

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### **Jo Stafford says**

As Sarah Churchwell demonstrates in this fascinating survey of the uses of the expressions 'the American dream' and 'America first' during the first half of the 20th century, the phrases have acquired different meanings over time.

In recounting the history of these phrases, Churchwell takes the reader into some dark places, particularly when she links 'America first' to ideologies of white supremacy, nativism, and eugenics. Although Churchwell ends her inquiry in the 1940s, it seems the current political situation in the United States under Donald Trump is never far from her mind. Indeed, at times it felt like she wrote *Behold, America* to remind us that Trump is the latest manifestation of a strain of xenophobia and racism that has long been part of the body politic.

I found the sections on the shifting definitions of 'the American dream' especially interesting. I'd always thought of it as referring solely to aspirations of individual wealth and success. Learning that the American dream once encompassed broader visions of democracy and the collective good was eye-opening.

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