

PAT BUCHANAN, DICK CHENEY, AND AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Back when Dick Cheney was being hailed for calling out Donald Trump's racism, I noted one aspect of that radio interview that largely escaped notice: his embrace of the myth that the American continent was empty when his Puritan ancestors got here.

Cheney didn't stop there. He then emphasized that one of his ancestors arrived as a religious refugee, a Puritan. "A lot of people, my ancestors got here, because they were Puritans." Cheney suggested, then, that the place was empty when William Cheney arrived in the 17th century. "There wasn't anybody here, then, when they came."

There has been little recognition that, in speaking out against the ban on all Muslims, Cheney either unintentionally or intentionally propagated another racist myth, that there "wasn't anybody here" when the Puritans came.

It's unclear whether Cheney meant there was no formal state to exclude the Puritan refugees, or whether he really meant – which is what it sounds like – that the continent was empty in the 17th century.

But it seems like a very subtle dog whistle, the kind Republicans used to limit themselves to, suggesting that it is OK for white men to colonize a previously occupied space, even while espousing a kind of tolerance for what we would recognize as religion. By claiming "there wasn't anybody here" when colonists first came to America,

Cheney normalizes conquest, the same kind of conquest he demanded in the Middle East a decade ago, which has so badly exacerbated extremism and continued to make us insecure.

The degree to which Cheney's perpetuation of that "empty America" myth went largely unnoticed is worth remembering as you read this Pat Buchanan piece, which complains that middle aged whites are killing themselves because their children are learning that America wasn't actually empty.

A lost generation is growing up all around us.

In the popular culture of the '40s and '50s, white men were role models. They were the detectives and cops who ran down gangsters and the heroes who won World War II on the battlefields of Europe and in the islands of the Pacific.

They were doctors, journalists, lawyers, architects and clergy. White males were our skilled workers and craftsmen – carpenters, painters, plumbers, bricklayers, machinists, mechanics.

They were the Founding Fathers, Washington, Adams, Jefferson and Hamilton, and the statesmen, Webster, Clay and Calhoun.

[snip]

The world has been turned upside-down for white children. In our schools the history books have been rewritten and old heroes blotted out, as their statues are taken down and their flags are put away.

Children are being taught that America was "discovered" by genocidal white racists, who murdered the native peoples of color, enslaved Africans to do the

labor they refused to do, then went out and brutalized and colonized indigenous peoples all over the world.

In Hollywood films and TV shows, working-class white males are regularly portrayed as what was once disparaged as “white trash.”

Unlike Cheney’s embrace of the empty America myth, Buchanan’s is (rightly) getting a lot of attention. I obviously don’t endorse his views, but I do think they explain the strength of Trump. Buchanan not only talks about declining economic prospects of white working class men, the relatively improved fortunes of people of color, but especially about the plight of white men losing their myths of superiority, losing the myth that white men made this country and led the world without the often-coerced labor and deaths of lots of brown people.

Trump’s lies, Buchanan suggests, permit these white men to believe their myth again, the myth of white American exceptionalism.

Here’s the thing. A lot of people are linking Buchanan’s post are pointing just to those far right nutjobs whose enthusiasm has fueled Trump’s rise this year.

But – as the example of Dick Cheney perpetuating the very same myths, even while criticizing Trump’s overt racism – that underlying myth extends well beyond the far right nutjobs, well into mainstream Republican and even Democratic ideology.

America has a Donald Trump problem – one that its diversity will probably defeat, at least in the short term. But underlying that Donald Trump problem is a desperate insistence on clinging to the myth of American exceptionalism, with its more offensive parts even embraced in the mainstream. For the sake of the white men who’ve relied on those myths for their sense of dignity, but also to prevent future Trumps, it is time to start replacing that exceptionalist

myth with something else.