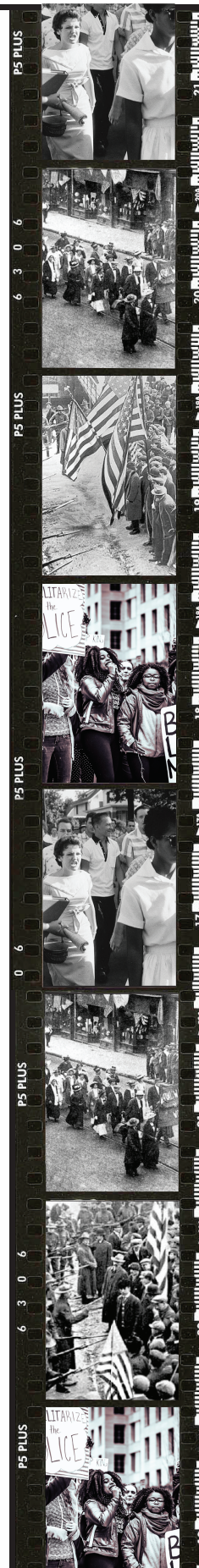


In the early days of this century, the great American studies theorist and teacher George Lipsitz located the field as existing in a “moment of danger,” one in which the task at hand was to discover “how we can use the experiences and understandings of the past to prepare ourselves adequately for the challenges that the future seems certain to present to us.” Now a quarter-century into that future, two things are clear: The United States has slid from a moment of danger to one of direct imperial decline, and the need to grasp the past in order to face the future is more fiercely urgent than ever. By way of introducing this set of conference papers, we will first survey several recent moments representative of US decline in order to argue that studying the United States from beyond its borders is now imperative. These conference proceedings cover an array of themes and expressions surrounding hero and villain characters and states. The articles compiled in this volume span different yet significantly inter-related topics ranging from superhero to anti-hero tropes in films tackling Marvel and political figures, challenging and reshaping the hero-villain dichotomy in American pop culture and politics. Some articles are endowed with an internationalist perspective on the creation of narratives positioning countries into hero/villain binaries reinforcing, and at times undermining, US Global Leadership and roles. Contributors to this volume also examined the conflicting narratives surrounding metaphors of heroism and villainy in the context of the American presidential elections and also explored visual, editorial, televised and theatrical representations of these elections providing a special insight into their impact on voter behavior. The contributors also dealt with historical and cultural manifestations of the hero-villain dichotomy in controversial representations of American presidents.

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HEROES AND VILLAINS IN AMERICAN CULTURE, HISTORY, AND POLITICS  
Tunis 2025



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Edited by:  
**Wassim Daghrir**  
University of Sousse

**John Munro**  
University of Birmingham

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# Introduction

## American Studies in a Moment of Imperial Decline

Yosra Amraoui and John Munro

In the early days of this century, the great American studies theorist and teacher George Lipsitz located the field as existing in a “moment of danger,” one in which the task at hand was to discover “how we can use the experiences and understandings of the past to prepare ourselves adequately for the challenges that the future seems certain to present to us.”<sup>1</sup> Now a quarter-century into that future, two things are clear: the United States has slid from a moment of danger to one of direct imperial decline, and the need to grasp the past in order to face the future is more fiercely urgent than ever. By way of introducing this set of conference papers, we will first survey several recent moments representative of US decline in order to argue that studying the United States from beyond its borders is now imperative.

Building on Immanuel Wallerstein’s identification of the US war against Vietnam, the rebellions of 1968, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the attacks of September 2001 as a sequence of symbols culminating in a situation where the US became “a lone superpower that lacks true power, a world leader nobody follows and few respect, and a nation drifting dangerously amidst a global chaos it cannot control,” we see a series of 21<sup>st</sup> century events as indicative of a more precipitous descent.<sup>2</sup> The first of these is, of course, the George W. Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq in 2003. “Operation Iraqi Freedom” killed countless innocent people, laid waste to civilian infrastructure already devastated by George H.W. Bush’s 1991 attack and Bill Clinton’s subsequent sanctions and created the conditions for the rise of ISIS. It was a shocking and awful demonstration of military might, but based on such mistruths as Saddam Hussein being linked to al-Qaeda or that the toppling of his regime would usher a wave of democratization across the Middle East or, most memorably, that Iraq possessed stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction,

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<sup>1</sup> George Lipsitz, *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001), xix.

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Decline of American Power* (Free Press, 2003), 17.



this assault and occupation revealed a lack of leadership in the world system, with even such regularly reliable allies as Canada or France declining to lend their support. The difference between the international collaboration evident in Bush the father's Desert Storm campaign and the imperial overreach in Bush the son's so-called "Coalition of the Willing" was itself irrefutable evidence of diminished standing. In 1991, the sudden absence of a Communist adversary seemed to augur a global system with the US at the center, surrounded by allies. By 2003, the nearly unilateral nature of US imperial aggression revealed cracks in the liberal international order. Somewhere in the sands of Iraq, the gap between the surety of US military dominance and global ideological hegemony had become ruptural.

Two years later, in an episode that demonstrated empire's impact on the metropole, a tropical cyclone that made landfall in the New Orleans region marked another devastating blow. While those with cars were mostly able to get themselves out of harm's way before Hurricane Katrina hit, the mostly impoverished African Americans without such transportation were left to their fate. Around 1,400 people lost their lives and many more were left homeless. The Federal Emergency Management Agency charged with addressing the crisis appeared at turns incompetent and indifferent, while the world looked on. 6,000 Louisiana National Guardsmen, who might have aided fellow residents of their home state, also witnessed Katrina's destruction, but only via screens from their Iraqi deployment 7,000 miles away.<sup>3</sup> As US forces were unable to prevail against the Iraqi resistance abroad, the fault lines of race and class were dramatically exposed at home. Bush's reputation never recovered, but as the clock ticked down on Republican rule during his second term, the 2008 campaign proved pivotal for the GOP in presidential nominee John McCain's decision to name Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate. Palin quickly became a laughing stock, thanks in no small part to Saturday Night Live comedian Tina Fey's use of verbatim Palin quotations as the basis for her parodic impersonations, but this VP run also marked something serious. Palin emboldened and embodied an unhinged element within Republican ranks, a political strain sometimes labelled "populist" but perhaps rendered more accurately as an expression of neoliberal individualism no longer tethered to any collective national or even ruling

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<sup>3</sup> Paul A. Kramer, "Desert, Storm," *Slate* (07 September 2016): Retrieved from <<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2016/09/how-the-iraq-war-set-the-stage-for-the-hurricane-katrina-disaster.html>> (accessed 21 April 2025)>.

class interests and often unrestrained in its racism and misogyny. Palin might now be fading from memory, but she represents more than a footnote in US political history: her candidacy helped reshape the Republican Party while further accelerating the overlap between the seemingly frivolous entertainment of, say, reality television or professional wrestling and formal politics in US public life.

John McCain's wager in courting the more radical elements within the Republican tent did not pay off for him personally, but nonetheless Democrat Barack Obama's presidency began less as a return of hegemonic stability and more as continuity of US decline within the international order. The relevant moment here was Obama's handling of the 2008 economic crisis already well underway as he assumed office. In contrast to Franklin Roosevelt's Depression-era strategy of using widespread anxiety and anger about economic inequality to legitimate a rebalancing of state and capital and thus ensure the relative equilibrium of the economic system, Obama's appointment of Lawrence Summers as director of the National Economic Council and Timothy Geithner to head up the Treasury amounted to an announcement that the scales of power would continue to tip in favor of the wealthiest. The very people who had championed a reregulation of the US economy toward removing restraints on the behavior of business were handed the reigns to deal with the aftermath of what Wall Street had wrought. Economic inequality unsurprisingly intensified, which—alongside revived racist and patriarchal reaction—helped enable Donald Trump to build a road to the White House paved with promises of making the country great again via an unlikely return of decently waged factory jobs.

Then, toward the end of the Biden interregnum, came the Hamas operation of October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, and Israel's annihilationist response. Hamas has few international supporters, but as people around the world were inundated, day in, day out, with abominable images of the maiming and massacring of communities, especially children, alongside portraits of gleeful barbarism on the part of the perpetrators, much of the world revulsed in horror and anguish. And the Biden administration supported Israel every step of the way, up to and including the billions of dollars in arms transfers that took place even in the period after the 2024 election but before Donald Trump took office for the second time. Since then, between tariff fiascos, foreign policy conducted by online chat group, Immigration and Customs Enforcement kidnappings, threats to the sovereignty of

Canada and Greenland, and a plan to turn a scene of genocide into a resort on Palestinian land, US credibility on the world stage is cratering as steeply as a Tesla sales graph.

This, then, is a glimpse into the state of affairs in which American studies currently operates. And yet to register the implosion of the US empire is not a call to retreat from the field. To the contrary! Among the reasons our collective need to study the United States is greater than ever, two stand out. On the one hand, imperial collapse is a dangerous, uncertain thing, not least in light of the unprecedented power of what remains human history's most powerful imperial formation. In a time of monsters, it behooves us all to understand what makes monsters tick. On the other hand, while it is essential that practitioners from multiple global locales engage in American studies in a world system in which an American center can no longer hold, we would be foolish to forget that the knowledge production that has the most to teach us in this moment of imperial decline emerges from within the United States itself. For "the history of American studies," as George Lipsitz also noted, is "a history of successive social movements."<sup>4</sup> One of the reasons why Lipsitz's work always rewards our returning to it is the way his insights are infused with and accompanied by social movement knowledges. Indeed, the quarter-century of decline we have gestured to here is also the era of mass opposition to the invasion of Iraq, of the Occupy Wall Street, of Me Too, of the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, of Black Lives Matter, of Palestine solidarity.

And so this, then, is also a glimpse into the state of affairs in which the newly formed Tunisian Association for American Cultural Studies (TAACS) held its first annual conference at the University of Sousse. The conference date of 7-8 November 2024 was a momentous one: the panels and the conversations they prompted were filtered through our reception of the US election results. Our location was a consequential one as well, located as we were on the Mediterranean coast 1,400 miles from Gaza. Onkwehón:we activist and intellectual Ellen Gabriel's insistence that "the parallels between Indigenous peoples and Palestinians is obvious" weighed upon the proceedings as we took up the topic of "Heroes and Villains in American Culture, History and Politics" from all manner of perspectives.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lipsitz, *American Studies*, xvi.

<sup>5</sup> Katsi'tsakwas Ellen Gabriel and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "To Palestine with Love – A Message for Peace from Turtle Island," *Indigenous Solidarity with Palestine*

The words “Heroes” and “Villains” that shape the content of this volume exist in all walks of life and frame a plethora of topics in cultural studies. Yet despite their paradoxical nature, they are deeply intertwined. These concepts inspire research on other terms, namely superhero, anti-hero and victim, and push us to think and maybe rethink the way they shape each other in their rhizomatic formations. The TAACS international “Heroes and Villains” conference met to discuss and deconstruct these very terms. This conference gathered international and Tunisian scholars, young researchers and American studies specialists around the possible manifestations and representations of heroism and villainy in the American context exploring, discussing and shaping the interplay between these two concepts in different ways. The present volume is a collection of a selection of papers that were presented during this conference.

Studying the way tropes of Heroes and Villains shape American identity, media and foreign policy is most likely to shed light on other levels of awareness underlying American psyche, concerns and motivations throughout history. American figures who blurred the lines between heroism and villainy have existed since the independence of the 13 colonies spilling ink on how to categorize these personalities and under what grounds. James Madison, one of the prominent drafters of the American Constitution and the Bill of Rights who is also a slave owner, Woodrow Wilson who created a body such as the League of Nations reshaping world order yet at the same time being a recognized segregationist, Vietnam war veterans at odds with anti-war activists, Civil Rights Movement leaders such as Malcom X and Martin Luther King and many others have been under the light as at times heroes and at times villains, but who gets to say the final word as to where to situate these public figures and how do we make sense of their historical roles? The present volume is an invitation to think about answers to these queries.

These conference proceedings cover an array of themes and expressions surrounding hero and villain characters and states. The articles compiled in this volume span different yet significantly inter-related topics ranging from superhero to anti-hero tropes in films tackling Marvel and political figures, challenging and reshaping the hero-villain dichotomy in American pop culture and politics. Some articles are endowed with an

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(retrieved from <<https://indigenousforpalestine.org/2023/12/18/to-palestine-with-love-a-message-for-peace-from-turtle-island/>>, accessed 19 April 2025). “Onkwehón:we” (“the original people”) refers to Ellen Gabriel’s Indigenous Mohawk identity.



internationalist perspective on the creation of narratives positioning countries into hero/villain binaries reinforcing, and at times undermining, US Global Leadership and roles.

Contributors to this volume also examined the conflicting narratives surrounding metaphors of heroism and villainy in the context of the American presidential elections and also explored visual, editorial, televised and theatrical representations of these elections providing a special insight into their impact on voter behavior. The contributors also dealt with historical and cultural manifestations of the hero-villain dichotomy in controversial representations of American presidents.

**Professor Gildas Le Voguer's** paper deals with Donald's Trump's resilience in the face of villainization and assassination attempts while thoroughly underpinning the success of the latter's tradition of demonizing his political opponents in the 2016 and 2024 elections as well as during his presidency notwithstanding his attempts at hiding the pressure he exercised on various government officials who did not align with his policies.

Understandably, **Professor Lowell Gustafson** addresses the US pro-Israeli lobby that produced a dichotomy of heroic protests and villainous policies and a rise in critical public opinion as well as a generational shift in perspectives with regards to the genocide in Gaza and its funding. Professor Gustafson's paper underscores the various rhetorical underpinnings that reinforce the Israeli Lobby in the US including Christian Zionism and pro-Israel media coverage despite a growing public opposition to Israeli genocide in Gaza, shedding light on recent pro-Palestinian protests in American campuses and the ways in which the US government is shaping its support to genocide into villainous policies.

From the American international scene to the domestic sphere, the concept of the White Man was thoroughly deconstructed by **Professor Sadok Damak** from the perspectives of people of color. This perception has been understudied in US culture and society, which underscores the added value of the fresh perspective provided by Professor Damak who provides significant insights on the evolving perceptions of the white man by communities of color in American society today placing the White Man in positions swaying between heroism and villainy.

Adopting a cinematic approach to the hero-villain binary, **Dr. Yosra Amraoui** and **Dr. Oussema Othmeni** address the anti-hero archetype in two different movie genres. While Amraoui tackles Marvel's underpinning of Deadpool as an anti-hero tracing the development of this comic and aggressive character within a villain-victim-anti-hero triad to ultimately position Deadpool as a hero, Othmeni examines the docudramatic configuration of the political figure Dick Cheney in the movie *Vice* (2018), a complex character that blurs the boundaries of the anti-hero archetype with his nonnegotiable family loyalty and political wit. The evolution of Deadpool and Cheney's characters in their respective cinematic representations proves that one can swiftly move beyond the hero-villain tropes in a way that entangles both character traits or moves beyond them depending on contexts, motivations and situations surrounding them.

**Ines Kayel** studies the character of president George W. Bush in different political crises which first placed him on the pedestal of accidental heroism then plunging him in the pit of villainy. She traces Bush's actions and claims in their rhizomatic development within a tumultuous context encompassing the 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror and later the War on Iraq.

**Fedi Abdelhamid Kantaoui's** paper deals with the dual portrayal of Woodrow Wilson as both a hero and a villain claiming that he is rather a complex figure and that categorizing a political figure in the confines of heroism or villainy is reductionist considering that presidents are complex figures prone to criticism and re-evaluation contending that context matters in understanding the premises for their actions.

**Hajer ben Ameer's** piece uses Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis and Social Actor Analysis to examine the trifecta of hero, anti-hero and villain roles played by Donald Trump and Kamala Harris as presidential candidates in the 2024 elections not only in their own but also in each other's campaigns underscoring the relevance of these archetypal roles in framing political and electoral discourse. Ben Ameer also underpins the practice of gerrymandering that further deepens existing political polarization.

And finally, **Lamia Omrane**'s use of Thematic Analysis in her paper on US intervention in the Gaza strip after October 7<sup>th</sup> 2023 crisis sheds light on president Joe Biden's pro-Israel discourse claiming to play the hero role encouraging the provision of humanitarian aid to Gazans while at the same time hampering, either through direct support of Israel's genocidal practices or through silence, any provision thereof.

What one understands from the variety of the above presented contributions is that heroism and villainy are subjective and context-dependent and that not only human beings can wear these masks but also countries and governments do. This realization is likely to shape contemporary understanding of what words such as hero and villain mean in specific contexts and more importantly in American culture, history and politics. We believe that the content of this volume has created an engaging invitation to readers to reflect on their own understanding of who a hero and a villain might be, raising awareness on a plethora of other strata of tropes that can exist in between, driving us to critically rethink our own perceptions which are not only shaped by our academic background but also by our own psyche, interests and motivations.

"Heroes and Villains" met to engage in the field of American studies in a moment of imperial decline. At such a moment, one in which existential, environmental issues hang in the balance, and in which the rapacity of those who own and who govern has planetary consequences, the way forward is to learn from and think with those social movements and insurgent traditions that have faced fascism, empire, enslavement, and genocide before. Our hope is that, in such a spirit, this volume makes a modest contribution to transiting from the world we inhabit to the one we want future generations to inherit in a system in which the United States no longer occupies the entire limelight. Other lights, lit in places like Tunisia, will now also show us how to get where we need to go.