

The horror at Fort Hood: disseminating American exceptionalism

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Abstract

American exceptionalism – the constitutive myth of American national identity – has been disseminated through literature, film, and foreign policy. This article analyzes another site: online comments in response to the New York Times coverage of the 2009 Fort Hood shooting. It is a site in which citizens participate in myth-making and maintenance. This article makes two broad claims. First, that readers' comments in response to the Fort Hood shootings constitute messages about American national identity, particularly American exceptionalism vis-a-vis the military – the military-idea, the symbol of a unified, coherent force is central to the myth of American exceptionalism. Second, events considered to be failures of the military threaten the coherence of American exceptionalism (by fracturing the military-idea). The Fort Hood incident was considered such a failure and one readers identified as part of a larger problematic involving the US's post-9/11 'war on terror'. In this mediated activity, readers put various discourses (e.g. Islamophobia, mental illness) into service to account for the military's failure and thus maintain the myth of American exceptionalism. Ultimately, these communications constitute an attempt to avoid the divisive consequences of 'another Vietnam', to which the US's post-9/11 military operations are increasingly compared.