

DISPUTATION CLV

November 10, 2016

Dearest Peucinians,

Last week we looked off into the distance to contemplate a question that future generations will inevitably encounter, and we decided that we should not genetically engineer our children. Since then, our political world has experienced a tectonic shift. Undoubtedly arising from a national mood of ineffable discontent, we are on course to abandon that which is familiar for a future that all of us, no matter how we voted on Tuesday, can agree is uncertain. Whether we decide to embrace this future or resist it enviably turns on how we understand the American tradition and the features, if any, that make it unique. In the spirit of free inquiry, we must examine our angels and our demons as we struggle to understand how and why this election cycle played out as it did.

RESOLVED: AMERICA IS EXCEPTIONAL

Affirmative: Ezra Rice '19

Negative: Henrik Ibsen '18

Long before we participated in and received the results of this world-historic election, the question of American exceptionalism has haunted our political actors. This resolved statement has been in the foreground of every presidential election in recent memory, although the party that lays claim to America's greatness constantly changes. Claims of our peculiar combination of moral, economic, and military superiority have been used to justify foreign interventions and domestic spending projects: because we are exceptional, we must either defend other peoples in need or guarantee healthcare to our own people, depending on who is speaking. Members of the same political party may argue all at once that America has lost its greatness, retains its greatness, or aspires to greatness. Still others say that America has never been great, and shows no signs of improvement. But what might this greatness consist of?

As Hamilton famously notes in *The Federalist Papers*, "It has been frequently remarked that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force." This great endeavor, the construction of institutions upon a particular understanding of our rights and duties, had no precedent in history but now seems to be commonplace to the point of triviality in the West. Do we have any right to take credit for this development? Even if we do, can we today call ourselves a shining city upon a hill?

Even in this contingent and complex world in which we live, Presidents and Prime Ministers still seek our leadership and cooperation on issues ranging from nuclear disarmament, multi-national climate change agreements, and international terrorism. We have, it seems, an indispensable role to play on the world stage. But we must also note that our history is peppered with atrocities and hypocrisies that undoubtedly erode our moral strength and our standing with our allies: imperialism, racism, genocide, sexism, religious persecution, etc. What are we to make of these stains on our history? How are we to balance them against our achievements?

At this moment of uncertainty, I have found it a great comfort to engage in candid, thoughtful, and respectful conversation about the aims and prospects of democracy, American values, and how these things fit in with this campaign season. Particularly now, we must ask ourselves: are the American people the source of our

greatness, or merely the keepers of it? Does it derive from our deeds or our character? Against what standards do we measure our achievements?

*Thursday November 10th, **8:15 PM***
3rd Floor of Massachusetts Hall
Semi-Formal Attire

Yours,
μὲνω - Meno

Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus