AMERICA LOVES AN UNDERDOG

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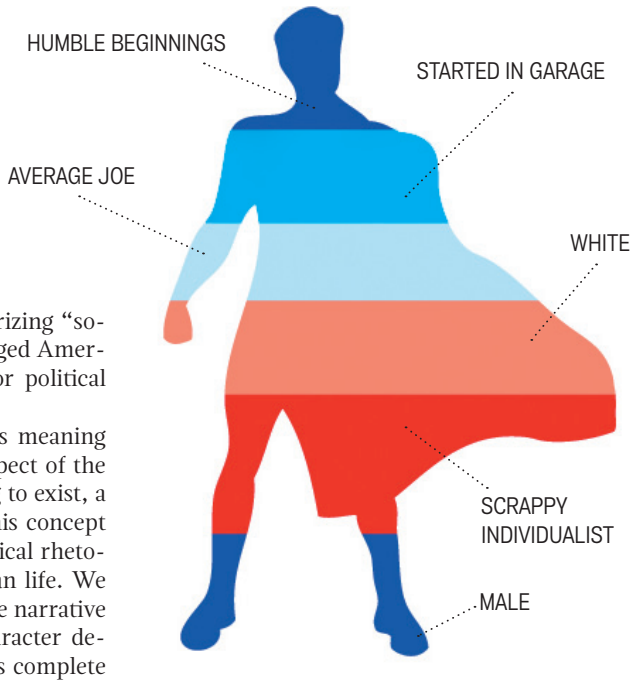

Americans love an underdog. The narrative is embedded in all forms of our culture: sports, business, politics, film, literature—all capitalizing on the "little guy" who "overcomes the odds" and gains success. Though the word "success" is ambiguous in meaning, for the purpose of this context we can come to a collective American idea of success as the achievement of monetary wealth, respect, power, and prestige. We like to believe that America is a country of underdogs, but does American society embrace all shades of its population, or do we only praise a specific kind of underdog?

The instinctive response to this query is to start from a historical perspective. Look at the Revolutionary War—a war that should not have realistically been won by Americans. The British military establishment was more than competent in its execution of military theory and knew how to effectively apply its naval dominance. What did the American militia have? Perseverance. Despite facing defeat countless times, the American militia defeated British troops, and the country then began its legacy of independence and liberty. Mind you, they had quite a bit of help from France, but David didn't defeat Goliath using French artillery, so 'perseverance' will do.

Since then, every major political election in the United States has had a pool of candidates racing to claim the proud title of underdog, no matter how privileged their backgrounds may be. This is evidenced by Mitt Romney's struggle to adopt such a title during his bid for the presidency, especially since his infamous "47 percent" comment revealed his disdain for those who "believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it."

Romney's remark shows us how politicized definitions of terms change rapidly. History shows us how politicians use them to weave a web—a web that is equal parts voter sympathy, equal parts ideology. But how did this Americanism become such a coveted branding device?

As Jill Lepore, staff writer for *The New Yorker*, cited, the term "underdog" comes from a popular 1859 poem titled "The Under Dog in the Fight." She states: "The underdog is the cur who's been bitten and trampled and who, at the end of the fight, lies bloodied and beaten. Sympathy for the underdog meant sympathy for the downtrodden." Lepore goes on to note that the term's meaning went from characterizing "socially and economically underprivileged Americans" to a branding mechanism for political consultants to sell their candidates.

The modern take on the term's meaning centers solely on the competitive aspect of the definition. In order for the underdog to exist, a contest must already be in place. This concept exceeds the realm of American political rhetoric; it is at the very core of American life. We love an underdog story, so long as the narrative fulfills the acceptable phases of character development, leading up to the figure's complete metamorphosis into a winner.

American companies play up the "humble beginnings" shtick to attract consumers. The "brand biography" is sometimes the most important aspect of selling the product. Consumers' sympathy for a brand that has emerged from a disadvantaged market position can be the driving force of its success. What better way of celebrating the millennial take on American self-reliance than to flaunt brands like Apple and its founders? Silicon Valley has been the home of the innovative underdog story since 1955, and the image of a gangly kid starting a major corporation from his garage captivates us today. Humble upbringings? Check. Contribution to American industry? Double check. Winner.

Set aside the marketing ploys and entrepreneurial strategies and you'll find the dramatized, Hollywood version of the underdog myth. It's sold to us as a fragment of the larger picture that is the American Dream. The most prominent trope that stems from this idea is the "rags to riches" story. Following a predictable three-point story arc, the (orphaned) protagonist who "comes from nothing" is beaten down by the establishment (which, for reasons unknown, is fundamentally against him), and, through broken practice, emerges as a self-made manifestation of success.

Notice the use of male pronouns in reference to underdogs. Entrepreneurs, athletes, politicians, and movie characters (think Rocky Balboa) bring to mind male underdog figures because there is no such thing as the self-made woman or the female underdog. Women don't get a chance at the underdog story, but rather the Cinderella story.

But what if Cinderella is the daughter of migrant workers? What if her fairy godmother worked three jobs and Prince Charming came to her in the form of a college acceptance letter? Shouldn't this description characterize the American underdog the best? And what happened to the immigrant's underdog story? Or is the moniker reserved for those with the right cultural makeup?

We can only stomach a cynical flavor of underdogma if it applies to white, male characters like Jay Gatsby. Their origins may be vague and they may resort to criminal acts to maintain the self-made lifestyle that ends in tragedy, but they uphold the persistence and rugged individualism that Americans are comfortable with. Nobody wants to see an "illegal" immigrant's struggle to make it in America—they didn't break the right kind of rules to earn proper underdog status.

The true irony behind this is that the American value system that the country's "average Joes" try to uphold enforces conformity and, realistically, rejects the underdog figures that they mythologize. The majority of Americans would not side with the unconventional pioneer or rogue, yet we watch documentaries on civil rights icons while wagging our fingers at the ignorance and inhumanity of the past.

We can blame American exceptionalism and the founding fathers' vision of a "new nation" of scrappy individualists. We can turn our backs on the Puritanical European underdogs who secured their freedom by way of native oppression. And we can pretend that we, too, would have had the moral high ground to fight for civil and political rights. But recent events would have us believe that Americans don't love an underdog; Americans love a winner. So long as you are on the winning side of history, so long as your story can be mythologized, rewritten, rebranded as sentimentalist folklore—then and only then will it be validated by the very people who work to suppress it. ■