



## America was Great When Nationally Relevant Events Occurred and When Americans Were Young



Robbie J. Taylor and Cassandra G. Burton-Wood  
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Maryanne Garry\*  
University of Waikato, New Zealand

During his campaign, President Donald Trump promised to “Make America Great Again.” When do Americans think America was at its greatest, and how do they decide on that year? We asked Americans to nominate America’s greatest year, their personal greatest year, and to explain why they nominated those years. Americans could not agree on America’s greatest year. Instead, some Americans nominated years when nationally relevant events occurred, such as 1776 and 1945. Others nominated years when they were between 0 and 20 years old; people nominated a similar pattern of years when asked the year they were at their personal greatest. Our findings establish, for the first time, a set of memories for the events that shape America’s identity. Our findings also add to the literature on the reminiscence bump, showing that decisions about America’s greatest time and one’s personal greatest time are most likely to occur during one’s youth.

### *General Audience Summary*

During his campaign, President Donald Trump promised to “Make America Great Again.” When do Americans think America was at its greatest and how do they decide on that year? We asked Americans to nominate America’s greatest year, their personal greatest year, and to explain why they nominated those years. Americans could not agree on America’s greatest year. Instead, some Americans nominated years when events important to American identity occurred, such as 1776 and 1945. But others nominated years when they were between 0 and 20 years old, a pattern similar to when these people thought they were at their personal greatest. Our findings suggest that Donald Trump may find it difficult to make America great again, because Americans do not agree on when America was great.

*Keywords:* Nationally relevant memories, Reminiscence bump, Politics

President Donald Trump promised to “Make America Great Again.” But to make America great again, he must first know when America was great. Trump told the New York Times, “. . .the turn of the [20th] century, that’s when we were great, when we were really starting to go robust.” Then later in the same interview, he nominated “the late ‘40s and ‘50s. . .” (Haberma n & Sanger, 2016, “When America was ‘Great,’” para. 6). Of

course, if Trump is going to lead America back to greatness, it would help if both he and the American public agreed on their destination. Do they? The New York Times wondered the same thing. Instead of asking Americans “When was America great?” and obtaining a broad range of time periods that would be hard to interpret, the Times asked Americans “What year was America’s greatest?” But Americans could not agree. In fact, although

### Author Note

Thanks to Dawn-Leah McDonald for coding responses for Study 2 and Study 3.

\* Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Maryanne Garry, School of Psychology, University of Waikato, Box 3105, Hamilton 3240, New Zealand. Contact: [maryanne.garry@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:maryanne.garry@waikato.ac.nz)

the most popular “greatest” year was 2000, fewer than 9% of people surveyed nominated that year (Morning Consult, 2016; Sanger-Katz, 2016).

We were intrigued by the question the New York Times asked, and the lack of agreement they discovered. Our intrigue arose not as a matter of politics, but as a matter of memory: Do Americans share a set of memories about when America was great? Or are Americans’ memories of when America was great shaped by personal factors, such as their age, or their assessment about when they were at their own personal greatest? We addressed these two possibilities in three studies.

### Nationally Relevant Memories

It seems reasonable to expect that when Americans nominate America’s greatest year, they would think of widely remembered events that make up part of America’s identity—these memories are called *collective memories* (Hirst & Manier, 2008). Collective memories differ from historical facts because they function to create a group identity, possibly at the expense of accuracy (Hirst & Manier, 2008; Wertsch & Roediger, 2008). By contrast, historical facts represent an attempt to provide an accurate account of the past, even if that account is negative, or does not fit with the identity of a nation (Wertsch & Roediger, 2008). We further expect the years people nominate as America’s greatest will be tied to *nationally relevant memories*, which are collective memories that are represented in a nation’s culture—for example, in monuments, texts, and traditions (Assmann, 2011; Stone, van der Haegen, Luminet, & Hirst, 2014). Although there is no published, empirically-developed, list of nationally relevant memories for Americans, we might expect such a list would include a mix of memories for positive and negative events—events such as the Moon landing, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, or the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. People can have nationally relevant memories for events that happened in their lifetime, such as the World Trade Center attacks, or events that happened before they were born, such as the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Therefore, we expect that when Americans nominate America’s greatest year, they will draw on collective and nationally relevant memories.

But how can we know if Americans nominate these events when asked for America’s greatest year? One idea is to return to the New York Times research, and examine how frequently people nominated years that match important events in American history. But those data suggest only a small percentage of people nominated years with any obvious connection to American identity. For example, although it seems reasonable to assume that Americans who nominated 1776 as America’s greatest year were referring to the signing of the Declaration of Independence—surely a contender for one of America’s greatest years—fewer than 1% of Americans actually nominated 1776. Likewise, fewer than 2% nominated 1945, which marked the end of World War II, or 1969, the year of the Moon landing (Sanger-Katz, 2016).

How can we understand this seeming lack of agreement about when America was great? One possibility is that national events accrue their importance not because people assess memories

of these events against some benchmark of American nationalism, but because people relate those events to their own lives, making them personal memories (see, for example, Symons & Johnson, 1997). Although nationally relevant memories and personal memories can be about the same event, nationally relevant memories are widely remembered, and the subject of these memories is the nation (Stone et al., 2014). Consider, for example, the 50-something woman who remembers the first Moon landing. As she remembers, she reexperiences childhood thoughts, images, and feelings from her 7th birthday: She “sees” the Apollo 11 touch down on the lunar surface, and “hears” Neil Armstrong’s voice, “The Eagle has landed.” Does she remember the Moon landing as an event that defined America’s identity, or is she instead remembering her own autobiographical memory? To the extent that Americans rely on their personal memories to determine America’s greatest year, we might expect people to nominate a personally important year.

### The Reminiscence Bump

The autobiographical memory literature provides support for this idea, and shows that the importance people attribute to personal events is related to how old they were when the event occurred. More specifically, when people report their most important personal events, or the events most central to their life story, they disproportionately nominate events from when they were between 10 and 30 years old—a period described as the *reminiscence bump* (Berntsen & Rubin, 2002; Bohn, 2010; Rubin, Rahhal, & Poon, 1998; Rubin, Wetzler, & Nebes, 1986). The reminiscence bump also appears when people are probed with cue words (for example, “street”) or asked to freely recall autobiographical memories (Demiray, Gülgöz, & Bluck, 2009; Janssen, Rubin, & Jacques, 2011; for a review, see Koppel & Rubin, 2016). Moreover, when people think about a hypothetical person’s lifetime and predict when his or her most important personal event will occur, they disproportionately nominate years from that hypothetical person’s reminiscence bump (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004). This literature supports the possibility that people’s memories of personal greatness would be disproportionately from the reminiscence bump period.

These findings, of course, do not tell us about the extent to which the reminiscence bump would appear when people nominate America’s greatest year. But to the extent that America’s greatest year is an important public event, then we would expect to see a bump. For example, we know that when people report important public events, they disproportionately nominate events from their reminiscence bump, although one study detected an earlier bump for public events compared to personal events (Holmes & Conway, 1999; Schuman & Corning, 2013; Schuman & Scott, 1989). As with personal events, when people predict when the most important public event will occur in a hypothetical person’s lifetime they disproportionately nominate events or years that would occur in that hypothetical person’s reminiscence bump—despite the fact that the probability of important public events occurring should be independent of one’s age (Koppel & Berntsen, 2014).

There are at least three explanations for the public bump. First, people develop their generational identity in early adulthood, which causes them to identify with public events that occur in that period (Holmes & Conway, 1999; Janssen, 2015; Mannheim, 1952). Second, people experience many public events for the first time during their reminiscence bump, which makes these events more salient and, therefore, remembered better (Belli, Schuman, & Jackson, 1997; Fitzgerald, 1988; Janssen, 2015). Third, people have culturally-shared expectations that important public events should occur during a person's early adulthood (youth bias), which may make people remember events that happen in this period better, or more likely to search this period when prompted for an important public event (Koppel & Berntsen, 2014). Although there is some empirical support for each of these explanations, they have not been tested against each other (as Koppel & Berntsen, 2016, note). Regardless of why the public bump might occur, to the extent that America's greatest year is an important public event, we might expect that year to be disproportionately sampled from when people were aged 10–30.

## Overview

Across three studies we set out to determine how Americans decide when America was at its greatest. To answer this question, we began, in Study 1, by gathering data to establish the events that constitute America's nationally relevant memories. Then, in Studies 2 and 3, we asked people to identify America's greatest year, as well as their own personal greatest year. We interpreted the responses of America's greatest year with respect to the nationally relevant events we obtained in Study 1, and looked for evidence of overlap between America's greatest year and Americans' personal greatest years. To the extent that Americans use a set of nationally relevant events to decide when America was greatest, then we should find that Americans nominate a “short list” of years that overlap with the list of events from Study 1. But to the extent that American's memories of national greatness are tied to personal factors, we should find the events people nominate in Studies 2 and 3 should come disproportionately from when they were young, producing a reminiscence bump similar to their memories of personal greatness.

## Study 1

### Method

**Subjects.** A total of 100 Americans recruited from Mechanical Turk ([www.mturk.com](http://www.mturk.com)) took part in the study, and were compensated 0.50 USD.

**Procedure.** We used Qualtrics survey software (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) to present instructions and questions in subjects' web browsers. Before starting the study, we asked subjects to maximize their web browser, to not engage in other tasks during the study, and to complete the study in an environment free of distractions. Subjects then answered two questions (counterbalanced for order): “Please list the 10 most important events that have occurred at any point in history that, in your opinion, have shaped America's identity,” and “Please

list the 10 most important events that have occurred within your lifetime that, in your opinion, have shaped America's identity.” For both questions, we instructed subjects to list the events in the order the events came to mind. We then asked four demographic questions: their age, where they were born, what country they had lived in the longest, and their gender. We also asked subjects their political affiliation (Democrat, Republican, or Independent), and which presidential candidate they most favored (at the time of this study, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were the only remaining presidential candidates.<sup>1</sup>) Finally, we asked subjects questions to identify those who failed to comply with our instructions.

## Results and Discussion

We eliminated nine people from the dataset because they either did not complete the study or they described at least one personally relevant event, leaving a total of 91 people aged 20–66,  $M = 36.33$ ,  $SD = 11.00$ ,  $Median = 34$ . A total of 30.8% of subjects identified as Republicans, 37.4% identified as Democrats, and 31.9% identified as Independent.

Our primary aim was to determine which events constitute America's nationally relevant memories. Before addressing this question, we evaluated the dataset for subject compliance. We found that 28.6% of subjects failed at least one of our compliance check questions. These failure rates are typical of those in research investigating “attention check” failures among Mechanical Turk subjects, which range from 10 to 39% (Downs, Holbrook, Sheng, & Cranor, 2010; Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2013; Kapelner & Chandler, 2010). Including subjects who failed our compliance checks did not change the overall patterns of results, so we retained them in our analyses (see Table S1 in the Supplemental Materials for the percentage of subjects who failed each compliance question).

Then, to address our primary question, two judges reviewed each of the 1820 (91 subjects  $\times$  20 events) responses and classified those responses according to the event described. The second author (CBW) classified all responses; as a check on reliability, the first author (RT) independently classified 400 of those events. Judges agreed on 90.3% of these 400 responses, and resolved disagreements by discussion. We then further classified those events according to whether subjects nominated them in response to the “any point in history” version of the question, or the “in your lifetime” version, tallied the number of times those events appeared, and reported those data in Tables 1 and S2.

Table 1 shows a set of nationally relevant events. The two leftmost columns display the rank ordering of the top 10 events, which were shared by 27.5–69.2% of Americans. As the two adjacent columns show we further classified subjects' nationally relevant events by whether they were currently “in” (Age  $\leq$  30) or “out” (Age  $>$  30) of the reminiscence bump period. We classified the data according to whether subjects were in or out of the

<sup>1</sup> During the course of preparing this manuscript, we realized we needed data on nationally relevant memories, so we collected these data. Therefore, the experiments do not appear in chronological order. This order also explains why more presidential candidates appear in Study 2 and Study 3 than Study 1.

**Table 1**  
Top 10 Most Frequently Reported Nationally Relevant Events of All Time

Rank order	Event	Percent		
		All subjects	Age ≤ 30	Age > 30
1	American Civil War	69.2	60.6	74.1
2	Attacks on the WTC	69.2	78.8	63.8
3	WWII	52.8	42.4	58.6
4	Declaration of Independence	48.4	39.4	53.5
5	American Revolutionary War	34.1	39.4	31.0
6	JFK assassination	34.1	21.2	41.4
7	Vietnam War	30.8	27.3	32.8
8	WWI	30.8	24.2	34.5
9	Great Depression	29.7	27.3	31.0
10	Women's voting rights	27.5	18.2	32.8

Note. Events are ordered from the most common to the least common based on responses from all subjects. See Table S3 for the 25 most reported nationally relevant events.

reminiscence bump period so we could determine the extent to which the events in our “Top 10” list were widely remembered by subjects in both classifications. If the events on Table 1 represent nationally relevant memories, then subjects in both classifications should mention them frequently. Indeed, that is what we found: widespread agreement between subjects under and over 30 on the most important events that shaped America’s identity. As we expected, and in line with the literature, people reported a mix of seemingly positive and negative events. Although people reported more negative events—only two events in Table 1 might be considered primarily positive: The Declaration of Independence and women’s voting rights. But regardless of the valence, Table 1 shows that both age groups agree on the events that shaped America’s identity.<sup>2</sup>

## Study 2

Study 1 equipped us with a list of events people consider nationally relevant. Therefore, we can now return to our primary question: How do Americans decide when America was at its greatest? Recall we considered two possibilities. One possibility is that people produce a “short list” of years tied to national relevant memories. We might expect this “short list” to resemble the list of nationally relevant events in Table 1. Although, we might also expect that the nationally relevant events people nominate in response to America’s greatest year might be more positive than the events on Table 1 because the “greatest” question implies a positive event. A second possibility is that Americans’ memories about when America was great are shaped by their age, and their own assessments about when they themselves reached their peak “greatness.” This finding leads us to expect that America’s greatest year should come disproportionately from people’s reminiscence bump. In Study 2 we addressed both of these possibilities.

<sup>2</sup> Table S2 also shows that when we constrained people to choose events that happened within their lifetime, both age groups nominated remarkably similar events, despite the fact that older people had more events to choose from.

## Method

**Subjects.** A total of 496 Americans recruited from Mechanical Turk completed the study, and were compensated 0.25 USD.

**Procedure.** We asked subjects the same demographic and political questions as in Study 1. Then we asked, “Which year would you describe as America’s greatest?” Qualtrics restricted subjects to nominate a year between 1400 and the current year (2016). To evaluate evidence that people indeed drew on nationally relevant memories to answer this question, we also asked “Explain why [year] is/was America’s greatest year.” To evaluate examples of memories of personal greatness, we then asked, “Now think of your own life. Which year would you describe as your greatest?” followed by a prompt to explain why that year is/was their greatest year. We finished by measuring compliance as in Study 1, and then asked subjects if they had read or heard about the New York Times article (Sanger-Katz, 2016).

## Results and Discussion

We identified 25.5% subjects who failed at least one of our compliance check questions and 20.8% who had read or heard about the New York Times article (Sanger-Katz, 2016). Because of an error, the first 150 subjects did not see the compliance instructions, but all subjects saw the compliance questions at debriefing. As in Study 1, including subjects who failed at least one compliance check question did not change the overall patterns of results, so we retained all 496 subjects in our analyses. Table S1 shows the percentage of subjects who failed each compliance question.

Before turning to our primary question, we first addressed our assumption that subjects would draw on national events to decide when America was at its greatest. First, for each subject, judges reviewed the explanations tied to the nominated year, and classified those explanations according to whether (a) they mentioned specific events or eras, and (b) those events or eras were about America, about themselves, both, or neither. Second, judges classified all explanations that mentioned a specific event about America (60.1% of all responses) according to the event described (for example, “WWII”). Note, then, that classifications were based on subjects’ explanations of why America was at its greatest, not the years nominated; however, most explanations reported the correct year—only 2.4% of subjects reported the wrong year when describing a specific verifiable event (such as incorrectly nominating 1968 as the year of the Moon landing). The primary judge (a research assistant) and a secondary judge (RT) classified 400 of these responses in tandem. Across all judgments, judges agreed on 94.3% of responses, resolving disagreements by discussion. The primary judge classified the remaining responses alone. We then excluded 30 subjects (6.1% of the sample) who reported a personal event when asked for America’s greatest year (for example, “It was the year I was born”), leaving 466 remaining subjects for the following analyses. These subjects were aged 19–84,  $M = 38.83$ ,  $SD = 13.47$ ,  $Median = 35.5$ .

**Table 2**  
The Percentage of People Who Nominated an Event from Table 1 as America's Greatest Year

Rank from Table 1	Event	Percent		
		All subjects	Age ≤ 30	Age > 30
1	American Civil War	1.1	0.0	1.6
2	Attacks on the WTC	0.9	1.2	0.7
3	WWII	12.9	13.0	12.8
4	Declaration of Independence	20.8	17.3	22.6
5	American Revolutionary War	1.7	1.2	2.0
6	JFK assassination	0.0	0.0	0.0
7	Vietnam War	0.0	0.0	0.0
8	WWI	0.6	0.0	1.0
9	Great Depression	0.2	0.0	0.3
10	Women's voting rights	0.4	0.0	0.7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>38.5</b>	<b>32.7</b>	<b>41.7</b>

*Note.* Percentages are calculated based on the number of people who mentioned each specific event as the reason why the year they picked was America's greatest. The values in the "Total" row are calculated by summing unrounded data, and therefore are slightly different from totals that would be obtained by summing the rounded entries in the table.

A total of 21.5% of subjects identified as Republicans, 47.2% identified as Democrats, and 31.3% identified as Independent.<sup>3</sup>

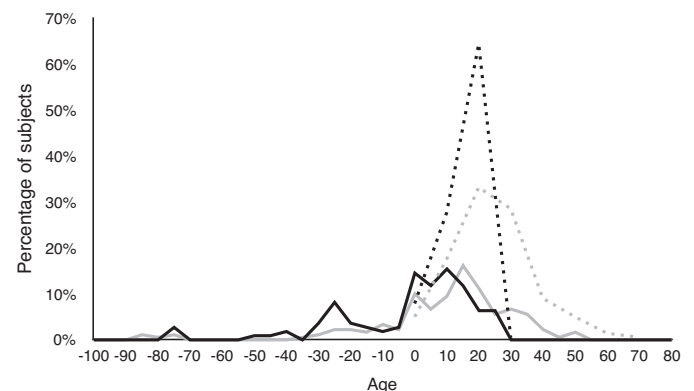
We now turn to our primary question: How did Americans decide when America was great? Recall, we defined nationally relevant memories as the high frequency events from Study 1 (see the second column in Table 1), and we now consider the evidence that people use these memories to describe America's greatest year. Table 2 shows that 38.5% of subjects drew from nationally relevant memories to describe America's greatest year.<sup>4</sup>

If we compare Table 1 with Table 2, we see some of the events that constitute nationally relevant memories were the same events that made America great, but not all. For example, the attacks on the World Trade Center were mentioned by 69.2% of subjects in Study 1, but mentioned by 0.9% in Study 2. How are we to understand this seeming disparity? One explanation is that Americans reported a mix of positive and negative events when asked to describe the events that shaped America's identity, but that they might have been more likely to think of positive events when asked to describe America's greatest year. In support of this possibility, when subjects described World War II, they emphasized the victory at the end of the war. For example, one subject who nominated 1945 as America's greatest year told us "This was the year the U.S. won World War 2. After a lot of bloodshed the U.S. ended one of the most destructive wars in history."

So far, according to our definition, 38.5% of people reported nationally relevant memories as America's greatest year. How did the rest decide when America was at its greatest? We

suspected those responses might have been shaped by their age, and their beliefs about when they themselves reached their peak "greatness." We considered the evidence for this possibility by examining the responses from those 61.5% of people who did not mention one of the "top 10" nationally relevant memories from Study 1 (Table 1). We plotted responses by how old these people were when they thought America was greatest in Figure 1.

Figure 1 reveals three important findings. First, in line with the literature on the reminiscence bump, subjects disproportionately nominated years when they were between 10 and 30 as their personal greatest (Berntsen & Rubin, 2002; Bohn, 2010; Koppel & Rubin, 2016; Rubin et al., 1998). Second, consistent with one study showing that public events can produce an earlier reminiscence bump than personal events, 60.0% of these subjects also disproportionately nominated years when they were between 0 and 20 as America's greatest (Holmes & Conway, 1999). There were also two smaller bumps for America's greatest year, centered around -25 and -75, corresponding to the postwar period (1950s) and the early 1920s. It is possible



**Figure 1.** How old Americans were when they thought America was at its greatest (solid lines) and when they, personally, thought they were at their greatest (dotted lines). Black lines represent people 30 years and under. Gray lines represent people over 30. America's greatest distribution excludes people who nominated a top 10 nationally relevant memory from Study 1 and only shows responses as far back as 100 years before subjects were born. See Figures S2 and S3 for these graphs broken down by 10-year bins of current age.

<sup>3</sup> We also analyzed responses by political affiliation and found no obvious relationship between affiliation and the years or events subjects nominated to describe America's greatest year. Those analyses appear in the Supplemental Materials.

<sup>4</sup> We could also define nationally relevant memories as the 10 most frequently mentioned events from subjects' descriptions of why they nominated the years they did in the current study. If we define nationally relevant memories this way, Table S5 shows that 52.2% of subjects drew on nationally relevant memories to describe America's greatest year.

that the bump centered around  $-25$  could have been the time when subjects' parents were in their reminiscence bump. Parents' preferences might have been transmitted from generation to generation, a phenomenon called a *cascading reminiscence bump* (Krumhansl & Zupnick, 2013). Third, we observed a "sawtooth" pattern in America's greatest year between 0 and 20. This pattern was caused by subjects in this group who nominated the first, fifth, or last year of a decade, and referenced the whole decade in their explanation—these people could not nominate a decade because Qualtrics forced them to choose a specific year. We might imagine that if these subjects had instead nominated a random year to represent their decade, we would see the classic reminiscence bump shape, rather than the "sawtooth" shape.

Of course, it is relatively unsurprising that when nominating America's greatest year, younger subjects chose a year from when they were 0–20 more often than 21–30—not because of the reminiscence bump, but because they had fewer years outside of the reminiscence bump they could nominate. Therefore, we should not draw conclusions about the presence of a reminiscence bump from the black lines in Figure 1. Instead, we should focus on the solid gray line, which shows that many older subjects—those over 30—still tended to nominate a year from their youth. That is, they too nominated years from when they were 0–10 and 11–20 more than from when they were 21–30 or 31–40. The consistency of these findings suggests the bump pattern we observed is not entirely explained by a restricted set of years among younger subjects.

Considered as a whole, then, when was America great? Our findings support both of our possibilities. We found that 38.5% of subjects thought that America was greatest at the time a nationally relevant event occurred. After excluding the 38.5% of people who nominated a nationally relevant event, 60.0% of the remaining subjects thought that America was at its greatest in their youth (between 0 and 20).

The finding that people tended to report that America was greatest in their youth is consistent with the literature demonstrating a reminiscence bump for recall of positive events (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004). But we saw this bump in only 60.0% of the people who did not nominate a nationally relevant event. Such a finding is weak evidence that people have a general tendency to think the America of their youth was its greatest time. We could, however, determine the extent to which people have a general tendency to think that America was greatest in their youth compared to any other time in their own lives. In Study 3, we aimed to replicate and then extend the findings from Study 2. We asked people who initially said America's greatest year happened before they were born to nominate a year from their lifetime. We expected that, when asked for a year in their lifetime, these people would also disproportionately nominate America's greatest year as occurring when they were 0–20 years old.

### Study 3

#### Method

**Subjects.** A total of 498 Americans recruited from Mechanical Turk completed the online study for 0.25 USD.

**Procedure.** The procedure was the same as Study 2 with two exceptions. First, we counterbalanced the order our dependent variables were presented to subjects: Some subjects were asked for their personal greatest year first, others were asked for America's greatest year first. Second, if subjects nominated a year before they were born as America's greatest year, we then asked them "Now we'd like you to think only about the years during your lifetime. Which year would you describe as America's greatest year?" followed by an instruction to explain their response.<sup>5</sup>

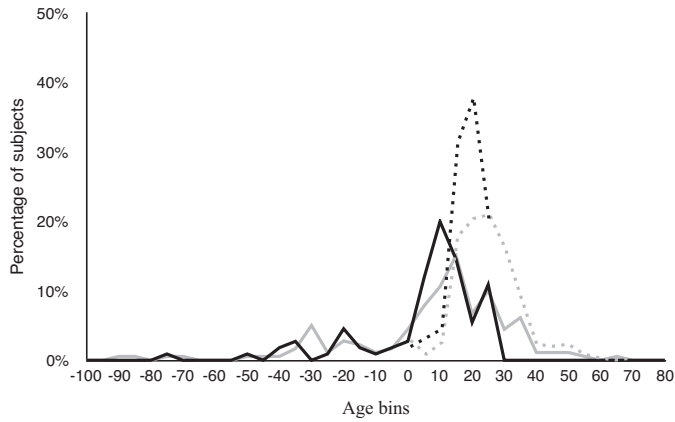
#### Results and Discussion

We identified 34.9% subjects who failed at least one of our compliance check questions and 18.1% who had read or heard about the New York Times article (Sanger-Katz, 2016). Including these subjects did not change the overall patterns of results, so we retained all 498 subjects in our analyses. Table S1 shows the percentage of subjects who failed each compliance question. The pattern of results did not differ based on whether subjects answered the "personal greatest" question first, or whether they answered the "America's greatest" question first. Therefore, we present the combined data from both counterbalance groups. Using the same coding method as in Study 2, we then excluded 45 people (9.0% of the sample) who reported only personally relevant memories in response to at least one of questions about America's greatest year. These exclusions left 457 subjects in the dataset, who were aged 19–72,  $M_{age} = 37.27$ ,  $SD_{age} = 12.22$ ,  $Median_{age} = 34.00$ . A total of 23.2% of subjects identified as Republicans, 45.5% identified as Democrats, and 31.4% identified as Independent. We found 60.4% of subjects mentioned a specific, nationally relevant, event in their explanation of why they considered America's greatest year "great."

We now turn to our primary question: How did Americans decide when America was great? To address this question, we examined each subject's initial response to the question "Which year would you describe as America's greatest?" To calculate the percentage of people who drew from nationally relevant memories to decide when America was greatest, the primary judge classified each response according to the event it described. In short, we replicated the basic pattern from Study 2: 37.5% of subjects nominated nationally relevant memories to describe America's greatest year. These events were consistent with those events nominated in Study 2. See Tables S6a and b for these top 10 events.

We now address our second possibility, that responses might be shaped by subjects' age, and their beliefs about when they themselves reached their peak "greatness." For this analysis, we analyzed only subject's initial responses. Just as in Study 2, subjects who nominated nationally relevant memories defined by Study 1 are excluded from Figure 2. We plotted subjects' responses by how old they were when they thought America

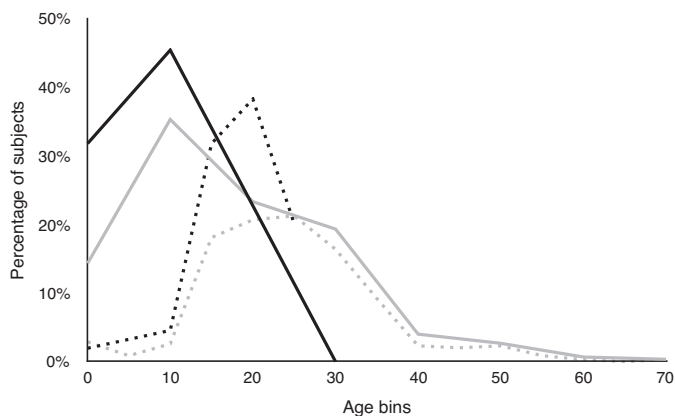
<sup>5</sup> We also asked people who initially nominated America's greatest year from in their lifetime "Now we'd like you to think only about the years before [subject's birth year] Which year would you describe as America's greatest?" These responses don't answer our research questions, so are not included in the results.



**Figure 2.** How old Americans were when they thought America was its greatest (solid lines) and when they, personally, thought they were at their greatest (dotted lines). Black lines represent people 30 years and under. Gray lines represent people over 30. America's greatest distribution excludes people who nominated a “top 10” nationally relevant memory from Study 1 and only shows responses as far back as 100 years before subjects were born. See Figures S5 and S6 in the Supplemental Materials section for these graphs broken down by 10-year current-age bins.

was great; these data appear in Figure 2. Consistent with Study 2, of those people who nominated something other than a “Top 10” nationally relevant memory as America’s greatest year, the majority (56.0%) nominated years from when they were age 0–20.

We know that subjects who nominated a year from their lifetime tended to nominate a year between 0 and 20. But consider the subjects who initially nominated a year from before they were born and subsequently were forced to nominate a year from their lifetime: Did they, too, then nominate a year from 0 to 20? To address this question, we combined the “in lifetime” responses from both subsets of subjects, to produce a set of greatest years occurring in subjects’ lifetimes. We then took this set, grouped it according to the age of subjects when they thought America was greatest, and displayed the results in Figure 3. We used the same exclusion criteria as Figures 1 and 2, removing



**Figure 3.** How old Americans were when they thought America was at its greatest within their lifetime (solid lines) and when they, personally, thought they were at their greatest (dotted lines). Black lines represent people 30 and under. Gray lines represent people over 30. See Figure S7 for this graph broken down 10-year current-age bins.

people who nominated a “top 10” nationally relevant memory from Study 1. As Figure 3 shows, subjects disproportionately nominated years from their reminiscence bump. Figure 3 also shows a “bump shift” where the peak for America’s greatest year is earlier compared to personal greatest years.

Taken together, our findings are consistent with Study 2. More specifically, many subjects nominated a nationally relevant memory as America’s greatest year, and many others nominated a year from when they were age 0–20. Furthermore, those people who initially nominated a nationally relevant memory as America’s greatest year tended to nominate a year from when they were age 0–20 when asked for a year from their lifetime.

## General Discussion

Across three studies, we set out to answer this question: How do Americans decide when America was great? We found that although Americans share a set of memories for the events that shape their national identity, only 37.5–38.5% reported one of these events when asked about America’s greatest year. Of course, we cannot be certain that people were indeed thinking about America’s identity when they nominated events in any of studies reported here. The rest of the subjects reported a time apparently shaped by their age, nominating a year from when they were 0–20, rather than any other year in their life. It would be fruitful for future research to address factors that influence the nomination of nationally relevant events compared to years between 0 and 20. Perhaps the more people know about American history, or the more they identify as an American, the more likely they would be to nominate nationally relevant events rather than a year between 0 and 20. But we do not have data related to either of these ideas, so we can only speculate.

Our findings make important contributions to two literatures. First, although a number of studies have identified the public events important to Americans, our study is the first to identify a set of nationally relevant memories of public events that shape America’s identity (Griffin, 2004; Schuman & Rodgers, 2004; Schuman & Scott, 1989). These nationally relevant events were not just events that occurred during peoples’ lifetimes; they stretched back to 1776. These findings fit with the literature suggesting that memories for national events do not accrue importance solely because of personal experience, but instead because these memories are passed down from generation to generation (Stone et al., 2014; Svob, Brown, Takšić, Katulić, & Zauhar, 2016). Second, when people did not nominate a nationally relevant event as America’s greatest year, the distribution of responses produced a reminiscence bump—although one shifted to earlier in one’s life (Howes & Katz, 1992; Janssen, 2015; Koppel & Berntsen, 2014). Therefore, our study is also the first to demonstrate that when people think about when their country was great, their age matters.

## The Bump “Shift”

Why did we see an earlier bump for America’s greatest year—public events—compared to personal events? It might be that in childhood, public events are encoded better than personal events (see for example the “generational identity” explanation

in Holmes & Conway, 1999). Of course, we still would expect few events from age 0 to 3, public or personal, to be remembered in adulthood, unless they were often rehearsed with the help of others (Hayne, 2004; Jack, MacDonald, Reese, & Hayne, 2009). For example, research suggests that some people “remember” personal events from before they were three because their families discussed these events with them later in childhood (MacDonald, Uesiliana, & Hayne, 2000). Public events would afford more opportunity for rehearsal, because the media often helps to make these public events salient at an early age (Hirst et al., 2009). Public events might be discussed not only within a family, but also within a community, or nationwide. As a result, for example, people born in 2000 might remember the attacks on the World Trade Center because their parents discussed the event with them, or because the event is frequently invoked as an explanation for some aspects of foreign and military policy. We cannot address these explanations using our data, of course, but understanding what might cause an earlier bump for public events compared to personal events is important.

Of course, it is also possible that the reminiscence bump for public events is simply an artifact: Perhaps more nationally relevant events happened when subjects were between 0 and 20 than any other time in their lives. We addressed this counterexplanation by excluding those people who nominated a nationally relevant memory as America’s greatest year from the age distribution graphs in Study 2 and 3. Even after applying this exclusion we still observed a reminiscence bump for public events. To further address this counterexplanation, we coded the reasons subjects gave for nominating a year, and found that many people who said America was greatest between 0 and 20 were referring to an era, rather than a specific event. Considered as a whole, therefore, our data do not fit with the idea that more nationally relevant events occurred when subjects were between 0 and 20.

### Why Did People Nominate Years from the Past?

Our data revealed an interesting pattern: Most people nominated America’s greatest year and their personal greatest year as a year from the past. This finding is curious in light of work showing that people tend to rate their current self as better than their past self. That is, people criticize their past selves to portray their current self in a positive way, and to boost their self-regard (Wilson & Ross, 2001). We found little evidence of this self-enhancing memory effect. In Study 2 and 3, only 7.5% and 8.0% of people, respectively, nominated 2016—the year they were their “current selves”—as their personal greatest year. Perhaps the reason why we did not see more people nominating 2016 as their personal greatest year is because people responded to our questions with the greatest events that happened to them, rather than when they were their greatest self. If, instead, we had asked people “What year would you describe as being your greatest version of yourself?” we might expect more people to nominate the current year. We might also expect this self-enhancing memory effect for judgments of America’s greatness too. After all, if most Americans think they are currently the greatest version of themselves, then America must also currently be the greatest version of itself. This puzzle is an interesting one for future research.

The idea that the past was better than the present is not new—it is especially common in conservative politics (Eibach & Libby, 2009). In fact, Trump’s slogan itself is not new. For example, one of Ronald Reagan’s 1980 presidential campaign slogans was “Let’s make America great again.” But of course, to make America great again, we first need to agree on when America was great. Our data suggest that no one time stands out as America’s greatest. It is clear from our findings that Americans may never agree on a single time when America was at its greatest, because this decision is shaped by their personal and national memories. But this lack of agreement does not matter too much. President Donald Trump did not specify a point of arrival, Americans are free to imagine where each of them is headed.

### Author Contributions

R.T and C.B.W collected and analyzed the data. All authors contributed to writing and editing the manuscript.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

### Appendix A. Supplementary Data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.05.003>.

### References

- Assmann, J. (2011). Communicative and cultural memory. In P. Meusbürger, M. Heffernan, & E. Wunder (Eds.), *Cultural memories: The geographical point of view* (pp. 15–27). Dordrecht, NL: Springer.
- Belli, R. F., Schuman, H., & Jackson, B. (1997). Autobiographical misremembering: John Dean is not alone. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *11*, 187–209. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-0720\(199706\)11:3<187::AID-ACP446>3.0.CO;2-K](http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-0720(199706)11:3<187::AID-ACP446>3.0.CO;2-K)
- Berntsen, D., & Rubin, D. C. (2002). Emotionally charged autobiographical memories across the life span: The recall of happy, sad, traumatic and involuntary memories. *Psychology and Aging*, *17*, 636–652. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037//0882-7974.17.4.636>
- Berntsen, D., & Rubin, D. C. (2004). Cultural life scripts structure recall from autobiographical memory. *Memory & Cognition*, *32*, 427–442. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3758/BF03195836>
- Bohn, A. (2010). Generational differences in cultural life scripts and life story memories of younger and older adults. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *24*, 1324–1345. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/acp.1641>
- Demiray, B., Gülgöz, S., & Bluck, S. (2009). Examining the life story account of the reminiscence bump: Why we remember more from young adulthood. *Memory*, *17*, 708–723. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09658210902939322>
- Downs, J. S., Holbrook, M. B., Sheng, S., & Cranor, L. F. (2010). Are your participants gaming the system? Screening Mechanical Turk workers. In *Proceedings of the 28th international conference on human factors in computing systems* (pp. 2399–2402). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/1753326.1753688>
- Eibach, R. P., & Libby, L. K. (2009). Ideology of the good old days: Exaggerated perceptions of moral decline and conservative politics. In J. T. Jost, A. C. Kay, & H. Thorisdottir (Eds.), *Social and*



- psychological bases of ideology and system justification* (pp. 402–423). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Fitzgerald, J. M. (1988). Vivid memories and the reminiscence phenomenon: The role of a self narrative. *Human Development, 31*, 261–273. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1159/000275814>
- Goodman, J. K., Cryder, C. E., & Cheema, A. (2013). Data collection in a flat world: The strengths and weaknesses of Mechanical Turk samples. *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making, 26*, 213–224. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/bdm.1753>
- Griffin, L. J. (2004). “Generations and collective memory” revisited: Race, region, and memory of civil rights. *American Sociological Review, 69*, 544–557. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/000312240406900404>
- Haberman, M., & Sanger, D. E. (2016, March). Transcript: Donald Trump expounds on his foreign policy views. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>
- Hayne, H. (2004). Infant memory development: Implications for childhood amnesia. *Developmental Review, 24*, 33–73. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2003.09.007>
- Hirst, W., & Manier, D. (2008). Towards a psychology of collective memory. *Memory, 16*, 183–200. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09658210701811912>
- Hirst, W., Phelps, E. A., Buckner, R. L., Budson, A. E., Cuc, A., Gabrieli, J. D., . . . , & Meksins, R. (2009). Long-term memory for the terrorist attack of September 11: Flashbulb memories, event memories, and the factors that influence their retention. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 138*, 161–176. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0015527>
- Holmes, A., & Conway, M. A. (1999). Generation identity and the reminiscence bump: Memory for public and private events. *Journal of Adult Development, 6*, 21–34. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1021620224085>
- Howes, J. L., & Katz, A. N. (1992). Remote memory: Recalling autobiographical and public events from across the lifespan. *Canadian Journal of Psychology/Revue Canadienne de Psychologie, 46*, 92–116. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0084311>
- Jack, F., MacDonald, S., Reese, E., & Hayne, H. (2009). Maternal reminiscing style during early childhood predicts the age of adolescents’ earliest memories. *Child Development, 80*, 496–505. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29738629>
- Janssen, S. M. (2015). Is there a cultural life script for public events? *Applied Cognitive Psychology, 29*, 61–68. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/acp.3022>
- Janssen, S. M., Rubin, D. C., & Jacques, P. L. S. (2011). The temporal distribution of autobiographical memory: Changes in reliving and vividness over the life span do not explain the reminiscence bump. *Memory & Cognition, 39*, 1–11. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3758/s13421-010-0003-x>
- Kapelner, A., Chandler, D. (2010, October). Preventing satisficing in online surveys: A “kapcha” to ensure higher quality data. Paper presented at CrowdConf, San Francisco, CA. Retrieved from <http://www.danachandler.com/files/kapcha.pdf>.
- Koppel, J., & Berntsen, D. (2014). Does everything happen when you are young? Introducing the youth bias. *The Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology, 67*, 417–423. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17470218.2013.869613>
- Koppel, J., & Berntsen, D. (2016). The reminiscence bump in autobiographical memory and for public events: A comparison across different cueing methods. *Memory, 24*, 44–62. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09658211.2014.985233>
- Koppel, J., & Rubin, D. C. (2016). Recent advances in understanding the reminiscence bump: The importance of cues in guiding recall from autobiographical memory. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 25*, 135–140. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/09637214166631955>
- Krumhansl, C. L., & Zupnick, J. A. (2013). Cascading reminiscence bumps in popular music. *Psychological Science, 24*, 2057–2068. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0956797613486486>
- MacDonald, S., Uesiliana, K., & Hayne, H. (2000). Cross-cultural and gender differences in childhood amnesia. *Memory, 8*, 365–376. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09658210050156822>
- Mannheim, K. (1952). *Essays on the sociology of knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Morning Consult. (2016, April). *National Tracking Poll #160407*. Retrieved from [https://morningconsultintelligence.com/media/mc/160407\\_crosstabs\\_NYT\\_v4\\_KD.pdf](https://morningconsultintelligence.com/media/mc/160407_crosstabs_NYT_v4_KD.pdf)
- Qualtrics Labs Inc. (2016). *Qualtrics survey software [Internet-based software]*. Provo, UT: Qualtrics.
- Rubin, D. C., Rahhal, T. A., & Poon, L. W. (1998). Things learned in early adulthood are remembered best. *Memory & Cognition, 26*, 3–19. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3758/BF03211366>
- Rubin, D. C., Wetzler, S. E., & Nebes, R. D. (1986). *Autobiographical memory across the adult lifespan*. In D. C. Rubin (Ed.), *Autobiographical memory* (pp. 202–221). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Sanger-Katz, M. (2016, April). *When was America greatest?* Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/26/upshot/when-was-america-greatest.html>
- Schuman, H., & Corning, A. (2013). Collective memory and autobiographical memory: Similar but not the same. *Memory Studies, 7*, 146–160. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1750698013508196>
- Schuman, H., & Rodgers, W. L. (2004). Cohorts, chronology, and collective memories. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 68*, 217–254. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfh012>
- Schuman, H., & Scott, J. (1989). Generations and collective memories. *American Sociological Review, 54*, 359–381. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2095611>
- Stone, C. B., van der Haegen, A., Luminet, O., & Hirst, W. (2014). Personally relevant vs. nationally relevant memories: An intergenerational examination of World War II memories across and within Belgian French-speaking families. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition, 3*, 280–286. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2014.08.002>
- Svob, C., Brown, N. R., Takšić, V., Katulić, K., & Žauhar, V. (2016). Intergenerational transmission of historical memories and social-distance attitudes in post-war second-generation Croatians. *Memory & Cognition, 44*, 846–855. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3758/s13421-016-0607-x>
- Symons, C. S., & Johnson, B. T. (1997). The self-reference effect in memory: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 121*, 371–394. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.121.3.371>
- Wertsch, J. V., & Roediger, H. L. III. (2008). Collective memory: Conceptual foundations and theoretical approaches. *Memory, 16*, 318–326. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09658210701801434>
- Wilson, A. E., & Ross, M. (2001). From chump to champ: People’s appraisals of their earlier and present selves. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 80*, 572–584. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.80.4.572>

Received 16 November 2016;  
 received in revised form 8 May 2017;  
 accepted 9 May 2017  
 Available online 29 July 2017