

The Greatest of All Time

Americans love to talk about “greatness.” In this book, Zev Eleff explores the phenomenon of “greatness” culture and what Americans really mean when they talk about greatness. Greatness discourse provides a uniquely American language for participants to discuss their “ideal” aspirational values and make meaning of their personal lives. The many incarnations and insinuations of “greatness” suggest more about those carrying on the conversation than they do about those being discussed. An argument for Abraham Lincoln or Franklin D. Roosevelt over George Washington as America’s greatest statesman says as much about the speaker as it does about the legacies of former US presidents. Making a case for the Beatles, Michael Jordan, or Mickey Mouse involves the prioritization of politics and perspectives. The persistence of Henry Ford as a great American despite his toxic antisemitism offers another layer to this historical phenomenon. Using a variety of compelling examples, Eleff sheds new light on “greatness” and its place in American culture.

Zev Eleff is President and Professor of American Jewish History at Gratz College. He is the author, most recently, of *Dyed in Crimson: Football, Faith, and Remaking Harvard’s America*.

The Greatest of All Time
A History of an American Obsession

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*For Melissa, Meital, Jack, Adir, and, most especially,
the little one on the way
– by any measure, the greatest*

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Acknowledgments

In July 1816, Naphtali Phillips eulogized Gershom Mendes Seixas. The Phillipses were among the most prominent families that established Congregation Shearith Israel, the very first synagogue in North America. Seixas was the synagogue's longtime minister, the first native-born religious leader in American Jewish history. Phillips's tribute to Seixas was one of the earliest sources I found that grapple with the contours of American greatness, and how it might be applied to make meaning for Jews and other groups who wished to endow their own ranks – and by extension, themselves – with greatness. The source also explains, to some extent, how I, an American Jewish historian, got involved with a research subject far afield. In his eulogy, Phillips rattled off the recently deceased and still living “great and patriotic characters” – Franklin, Washington, and Jefferson – and then considered the addition of some others. “And while the history of our eminent political men are transmitted to posterity, there are also niches reserved for those who have been eminently good or great in another sphere of action.”¹ Researching this book constantly led me to consider individuals in the other “spheres of action.”

I had a lot of help in my journeys in and out of the spheres of literature, history of science, rock and roll, and all varieties of American sport. Accounting for the breadth and depth of myriad subjects requires more than a modicum of support. Foremost, I am grateful to the staff of the Gratz College Tuttleman Library: Director of Libraries Donna

¹ Naphtali Phillips, *An Eulogium to the Memory of the Rev. Gershom Mendes Seixas* (New York: H. H. Sherman, 1816), 10.

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The stories and histories included in these pages are new, even though many of the historical figures are well known. I was therefore aided by the books and essays produced by the biographers of Francis Galton, Edgar Allan Poe, Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Albert Einstein, Charlie Chaplin, Charles Lindbergh, Walt Disney, Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, the Roosevelts, Muhammad Ali, the Beatles, and Michael Jordan. My dutiful appreciation is evident throughout the notes and citations in this book.

"What are you working on?" is a fraught question when directed at me. For the past three years, my stock answer has been "Gratz College." Leading this historic institution together with its students, faculty, staff, board members, and growing number of stakeholders has been the honor of a lifetime. Many of these colleagues and friends have also experienced the second part of my typical response: "When I find some free time, I'm working on a history of the greatest of all time." Most friends in the Philadelphia area and elsewhere have indulged my excitement to overshare the contents of this book. In many instances, their comments

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have provoked further thought and refined my writing. To this incalculable roster of people, I am most grateful for your wisdom.

As always, I am indebted to my family more than I can ever repay. My parents, Susan and Scott Eleff, might trace the genesis of this research to my unflagging appreciation for Billy Joel and youthful downright refusal to acknowledge the achievements of other songwriters. Perhaps they might recall the mid 1990s when I never shied away from a chance to debate Emmitt Smith's greatness against the forces of Barry Sanders fandom. My grandparents, Annette and Morton Eleff, will remember my frequent requests for my grandmother's oatmeal chocolate chip cookies on the grounds that it was – and always will be – the greatest dessert. My apologies if I did not always wait fifteen minutes between snacking and swimming in their backyard pool. My brothers – David, Ben, and Joey – will likely claim that this book was seeded during trenchant arguments comparing the merits of superheroes situated in the DC and Marvel universes.

No doubt, my wife, Melissa, would tell them that they're all correct; that my research into the discourse around the greatest of all time is somehow autobiographical, a historical inquiry into a slice of American culture that has intrigued me since, well, baking cookies as a young boy with my grandma. Meital, Jack, and Adir will agree with their mother – always a wise position. Privately, they will wonder if this isn't just part of an elaborate attempt to obtain the scholarly credentials to once and for all dethrone Tom Brady or reject anyone with an allegiance to the Pittsburgh Steelers. Melissa and our children – our family – is the greatest thing I have ever been a part of. By the time anyone reads these lines, we will have welcomed Baby #4 to our Hall of Fame family; and, hopefully, we will have settled on her name. While I haven't met her yet, I have no doubt our daughter is bound for greatness. It is to her – as well as to her mother and siblings – that I dedicate this book.