

American Exceptionalism: Reaffirming the rogue republic

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“I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being. But what makes us exceptional is not our ability to flout international norms and the rule of law; it’s our willingness to affirm them through our actions.”

—U.S. President Barack Hussein Obama¹

The United States of America: the shining city on the hill; the last best hope of earth; the land of opportunity where anyone can get rich by hard work and resourcefulness; an exception to the world order because its government affirms international norms and the rule of law—the U.S. president himself said so in front of a graduating class of fledgling warfighters at the country’s imperial war college, West Point. However, and contrary to the words of POTUS, the U.S. not only has the ability to flout international norms but has done so repeatedly by unilateral interventions in countries around the world from Albania to Zaire.²

This is not the first time that Obama has declared his faith in American exceptionalism. When asked in 2009 by Financial Times reporter Ed Luce about whether or not he saw the United States as uniquely qualified to lead the world, he replied, “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.” Perhaps realizing that he had uttered a self-contradictory statement by asserting the un-exceptionality of American exceptionalism, Obama declared, “... I see no contradiction between believing that America has a continued extraordinary role in leading the world towards peace and prosperity and recognizing that that leadership ... depends on our ability to create partnerships ...”³

What is this notion of American exceptionalism and where did it come from? Is it just political propaganda from government heads or do the American people themselves actually believe in the utopian uniqueness of their country and way of life? While the United States is undeniably the unitary economic and military power in the world, what distinguishes it from previous empires? For example, the Spanish, Dutch and British: all of whom at one point or another viewed themselves as exceptional and matchless in history, just as Americans do today. As political commentator Kevin Phillips observed, “Cocksure Americans were hardly the first to think themselves immune from prior history.”⁴

The term “American exceptionalism” seems to have received its impetus from Alexis de Tocqueville, who in his classic nineteenth-century work, *Democracy in America*, wrote, “The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one.”⁵ For Tocqueville, “American exceptionalism” meant a unique combination of political, economic and social factors such as liberty, egalitarianism, individualism and laissez-faire mercantilism, which created greater social equality “than in any other country of the world, or in any age of which history has preserved the remembrance.”⁶

While George Washington, in his farewell address in 1796, spoke elatedly of the coming age of U.S. unilateralism “when we may choose peace or war, as our interest, guided by our justice, shall counsel,” others, such as the Spanish Governor of Louisiana, were less than enthusiastic about American exceptionalism. In 1794, alarmed over the onslaught of land-hungry Anglo-American colonizers pouring into his territory, he predicted the demise of anyone who opposed them and warned, “Their method of spreading themselves and their policy are as much to be feared as Spanish arms.”⁷ By the end of the War of 1812, years before Tocqueville’s glowing assessment was published in 1840, America had established a pattern of preemption, unilateralism and hegemony⁸ that worried the European rulers. “The universal feeling of Europe in witnessing the gigantic growth of our population is that we shall, if united, become a very dangerous member of the society of nations,” wrote John Quincy Adams in 1817.⁹

Taking Tocqueville to task over his benign characterization of American exceptionalism, Harvard professor of international relations Stephen Walt wrote, “The idea that the United States is uniquely virtuous may be comforting to Americans. Too bad it's not true.”¹⁰ Walt points out that over the course of history, U.S. political leaders have not felt constrained by moral principles when it comes to acting in what they perceived to be the country’s (or their own) best interests. A brief look at America’s murderous past should suffice to illustrate the point.

Since the time of the establishment of the original 13 colonies, the U.S. has routinely targeted civilian populations in its imperial campaigns. Beginning with the colonial genocide perpetrated against the American Native People, which reduced a civilization of millions to less than 250,000 by 1892,¹¹ the U.S. liquidated upwards of 400,000 civilians in its Philippine conquest, 305,000 German and 330,000 Japanese by firebombing cities during World War II, and over a million Vietnamese by bombs, napalm and Agent Orange, and some 30,000 Nicaraguans by the U.S.-backed Contra death squads,¹² not to mention the empire’s most recent imperial rampage, the Iraq Reconquista, which claimed the lives of from 500,000¹³ to upwards of 1.2 million¹⁴ innocent lives between March 2003 to 2011. This should be sufficient to shake anyone’s cherished faith in the beneficence of American exceptionalism, however, as University of Toronto historian Margaret MacMillan pointed out, “Faith in their own exceptionalism has sometimes led to a certain obtuseness on the part of Americans.”¹⁵

Occasionally, even U.S. officials have acknowledged the less-than-altruistic nature of their government’s motives, as was the case in 2007 when retiring Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan conceded that the Iraq invasion was “largely about oil.”¹⁶ During a congressional debate in 1998, U.S. Representative Tom Coburn (R-OK) asked, “Do we believe in capitalism and money or do we believe in human rights?”¹⁷ But by and large, American leaders have reiterated their beliefs that their country has an inimitable, beneficent role to lead the world in spreading democracy and safeguarding human rights, an example of which is former U.S. president Bill Clinton’s conviction that America was “indispensable to the forging of stable political relations.”¹⁸ Other instances include former presidential contender Mitt Romney’s assertion that “America must lead the world,” and Senator Marco Rubio’s (R-FL) description in 2010 of the United States as “a place without equal in the history of all mankind.”¹⁹

As for the American people, a full 60 percent of them believe that, although they themselves are not perfect, their culture is superior to all others, with some 70 percent very proud of their

nationality and agreeing that American ideas and culture should be spreading around the world. While majorities in Europe and Canada feel it is more important for governments to ensure that no citizen is in dire need than it is for individuals to be able to pursue their goals free from government interference, a majority of Americans disagree: a mere three in ten Americans “completely agree” that the government should help the poor. Americans of all social strata staunchly believe that success or failure depends solely on the individual and not outside social factors; even the poorest Americans are less likely than wealthy Europeans to blame society for lack of success in life.²⁰

“Foreigners should be wary of confusing the ambitions of America’s elites with the attitudes of the American public,” admonished Andrew Kohut of Pew Research and former Council of Foreign Relations senior fellow Bruce Stokes.²¹ Up to 2004, worldwide polls on anti-American sentiment generally yielded results showing negative attitudes towards the country’s government and policies, but more generally positive feelings towards the American people. After reelecting George Bush for another term, however, Americans demonstrated their concurrence with the exceptionalism of its elitist leaders, and thereafter, world opinion surveys reflected a narrowing gap between the previously diverging foreigners’ opinions of Americans as opposed to their views of the U.S. government.²²

Comparing the U.S. and the earlier empires of Spain, Holland and Britain, scholars note certain parallels: broad-based prosperity built on manufacturing and trade gave rise to financial speculation, which slowly undercut the manufacturing economy, causing increasing income disparity, impoverishment of the middle class and eventual imperial collapse. Taking the average duration of collapse for the three predecessor empires to be from 50 to 80 years, and the American economic peak to be around 1970, then, at most, America has 35 years left.²³ Undaunted by these historical parallels, Obama reaffirmed American exceptionalism, assuring the graduating West Point cadets that “the United States is and remains the one indispensable nation. That has been true for the century past, and it will be true for the century to come.”²⁴

American exceptionalism: from the president on down to the poorest citizen, Americans still cling tenaciously to this malevolent myth, refusing to see the truth about their rogue republic. As the late American Indian Movement leader Russell Means, whose people continue to be oppressed, regarding American exceptionalism said, “It’s a lie. The whole thing’s a lie and it always has been.”²⁵

Endnotes

¹ “Obama: Military to remain backbone of America’s leadership,” *Russia Today*, May 28, 2014, ed. May 30, 2014, accessed June 6, 2014, <http://rt.com/usa/162032-obama-policy-west-point/>.

² William Blum, *Rogue State: A Guide to the World’s Only Superpower* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2000), 129, 137.

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⁴ Kevin Phillips, *Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002), 171.

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- ⁸ Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes, *America Against the World* (New York: Times Books, 2006), 80, 81.
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- ¹⁸ Stephen Walt, *ibid.*
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- ²¹ Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes, *ibid.*, 74.
- ²² Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes, *ibid.*, 29, 30.
- ²³ Kevin Phillips, *ibid.*, 175-179.
- ²⁴ Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony," *The White House*, Office of the Press Secretary, May 28, 2014, accessed June 8, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-west-point-academy-commencement-ceremony>.
- ²⁵ Ward Churchill, *ibid.*, page before table of contents quoting Russell Means.