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American Exceptionalism and the Quest to “Make America Great Again”

Just a few years ago, the thought of Donald Trump being president of the United States of America was nothing more than the butt of some absurd joke. Yet from the moment the billionaire business mogul launched his presidential campaign on June 16, 2015, Trump defied all expectations and nay-sayers, and eventually won the Republican Party’s nomination first and the presidency soon after. Trump built his campaign and propelled himself to victory on two main cornerstones: those of populism and the promise to “Make America Great Again”. Yet the temporal qualifier “again” implies that the United States was at one point great and is no longer so. That, in turn, spurs the questions of exactly when *was* America great, the manner in which one would go about quantifying this so-called greatness, and why it is no longer great. I believe that an effective and critical lens to examine and measure our country’s greatness is through the concept of “American Exceptionalism”, a term with a murky etymology that is often attributed to American arch-nemesis Josef Stalin. Though the term has since been co-opted by American politicians as a positive term that describes American freedom and ingenuity, Stalin originally used the term derisively to ridicule “America for its abnormalities” (McCoy). This duality of the term American Exceptionalism is crucial to gaining a clear and concise understanding that fully encompasses the caveats and nuances of such an awe-inspiring concept.

As an immigrant to this country, my perspective on what American Exceptionalism means is also based upon this duality. Growing up as a child in Mexico, I would often hear about hear stories about

this mystical place referred to as “el norte” by adults. The way they talked about it stoked my curiosity. My imagination—fueled by television images—painted pictures of sprawling cities with glittering lights, brand-new cars speeding down interstate highways like the blood pumping through veins, and cul-de-sac after cul-de-sac filled with cookie-cutter three bedroom homes with manicured lawns, perfect for the nuclear family. Upon actually moving to the United States at the age of five, my experience was a bit different because I lived in a small, 7,000 person community surrounded by vegetable fields on all sides, which didn’t quite meet my pre-conceived notions of this country.

Yet my parents always made sure to let me know that we had moved to the United States to improve our lives and to give my two-year-old sister and me a better future, thus impairing me with a sense that this country was indeed exceptional. My siblings and I would have luxuries and toys that were simply unthinkable to obtain if we lived back in Mexico. So as I grew up here in the United States, I had an innocent admiration of this country and assumed we were always the “good guys” and could never do no wrong. However, throughout the latter half of high school and my brief time at UCI, I became increasingly aware as my identity as not just an immigrant, but an undocumented one, and began to examine the way in which people sharing my identity and other minority identities were subjugated to and damaged by the foreign and domestic policies of essentially every presidential administration in the modern era. I began to see the behind-the-scenes actions that enabled the American Exceptionalism that my family and millions of others have been lured by. Learning about American intervention in other countries during the Cold War—especially in Latin and Central America—really opened my eyes to the reality of our foreign policy. It became startling clear that our foreign policy no longer (or arguably ever) pursues democracy and liberty abroad, but rather imperialism and capitalism.

Based on my personal experiences, the examples laid out in LaFeber’s and Nye’s books, and also the statements of our current president, the usage of American Exceptionalism as justification for our foreign policy is fairly deceptive in both contemporary and historical terms. American Exceptionalism

has disguised American intervention abroad as being altruistic and noble rather than self-serving and strategic. American Exceptionalism manifests itself in many ways, primarily in the belief that the United States is the brightest, most intelligent nation—the ultimate arbiter of democracy, justice, and freedom. Accordingly, as the United States carved and eventually maintained its position into the global hierarchy in the 19th and 20th century, it developed an extensive track record of meddling in the political, social, and economic affairs of other countries. These brutal, retrospectively dubious interferences were all justified in the eyes of the American public and politicians of the time under the guise of American Exceptionalism. We were just acting according to God’s plan and bringing “the blessings of American democracy to many other places” (LaFeber 98).

When the “other places” refuse to accept our generous offer of democracy (and religion), we have no choice but to force them to comply or face eradication. Such was the case during the American campaign to systemically and brutally remove Native Americans from their ancestral lands, which occurred because the Natives “prefer[ed] a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic (. . .) filled with all the blessings, of liberty, and religion” (LaFeber 99). Or when our westward expansion placed the Mexicans right in our crosshairs their displacement became necessary because “Providence has so ordained it. (. . .) The Mexicans are aboriginal Indians, and they must share the destiny of their race” (100-101). Or when Americans sprung themselves on the Chinese in the late 18th century, with protestant missionaries using the argument that “war is the sledgehammer of Providence” to expose the Chinese to “the family of nations and the benign influence of Christianity” (103). Or various other examples throughout our history of mass displacement and systematic violence of foreign folks that we knew better than they did. I will not go into detail for the sake of brevity, but some of the more devastating examples include Vietnam, several South and Central American countries, the Congo, and Iran—all locations where American Exceptionalism ran amuck.

In modern times, American Exceptionalism and our quest to bring democracy and freedom—at least our flavor of it—into every corner of the world has gotten us tangled into a daunting, seemingly-unsolvable quagmire in the Middle East. In the wake of the horrific terrorist attacks of 9/11, President George Bush seized the opportunity and used American Exceptionalism as an excuse to exact extrajudicial revenge against “enemies” of the state. Within a month, we were on the hunt for Osama bin Laden in the mountains of Tora Bora, Afghanistan and indiscriminately rounding up any folks with any perceived ties to Al-Qaeda or the Taliban (Grim).

Two years later, Bush made his case against Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein to the American people. His speech warned Americans that “we are not dealing with peaceful men” and that the US “has the sovereign authority to use force in assuring its own national security”. Bush framed the Iraq war as the United States liberating Iraqis from Saddam’s reign of terror, saying the war was “directed against the lawless men who rule your country and not against you [the Iraqi people]”. Bush’s mission to oust Saddam Hussein was successful, but our hopes to “liberate” the Iraqi people fell flat. The removal and subsequent handling of a post-Saddam Iraq brought more instability and destruction to the region and eventually culminated into the rise of the Islamic State, all while American defense industry companies such as Raytheon and Boeing reaped billions of dollars in government contracts. The winners and losers of this still-ongoing conflict in Afghanistan further makes it clear that American Exceptionalism no longer spreads “the blessings of American democracy”—it now expands corporate profits.

Nonetheless, American Exceptionalism is an accurate term, but what *exactly* it is that we’re exceptional in is the question. We have an exceptional military presence abroad that has sowed chaos and rained death on every continent sans Antarctica (as of now). We have an exceptionally inept and unscrupulous president as well as an exceptionally out-of-touch and shady legislature that are running our country into the ground. Our economy has an exceptional, often predatory, impact on the global economy. Our country faces exceptional problems such as climate change, global terrorism, financial

collapses, and social uprisings—issues that often start foreign but manifest themselves in domestic ways. However, our country also has exceptional potential with its relatively young population (a figure largely thanks to 1st & 2nd generation immigrants, I might add) and budding availability of careers in various modern industries, including technology and information services (Csorny).

So our country is undoubtedly exceptional. But what was once as a positive term used to accurately describe the relentless can-do, trailblazing attitude that is peculiarly American has been transformed by the passage of time into a negative term summarizing the barbaric intervention and exploitative nature of American foreign policy from the mid-19th century to today. This is the very same pillar that the slogan “Make America Great Again” sits upon. The slogan fails to recognize the bloodshed, manipulation, and oppression that enabled our American Exceptionalism, our so-called greatness. MAGA takes the form of selective American Exceptionalism and it is detrimental to the future and structure of our nation because it blinds us to the reality of our past success and current situation.

Our previous greatness was not due solely because we are an innately superior country, but because we were able to push others down to propel ourselves upwards. Furthermore, many of the conditions that were necessary for our country’s eventual success were created through pure dumb luck rather than through any conscious human action. As Stephen Walt writes for *Foreign Policy*,

The new nation was lucky that the continent was lavishly endowed with natural resources and traversed by navigable rivers. It was lucky to have been founded far from the other great powers and even luckier that the native population was less advanced and highly susceptible to European diseases. Americans were fortunate that the European great powers were at war for much of the republic’s early history, which greatly facilitated its expansion across the continent, and its global primacy was ensured after the other great powers fought two devastating world wars.

Another way to look at this would be by imagining the world as a raging ocean and the United States as an island constantly pummeled by large waves, waves representing challenges and opportunities.

Joseph Nye writes in *Presidential Leadership*, "like surfers, leaders with contextual intelligence have the ability to judge and adjust to new waves and then ride them to success". This does not deny the ambitious actions and innovations of Americans and how they shaped the course of this country, but rather acknowledges that our success was largely a matter of uncontrollable circumstances and how our leaders and citizens capitalized on them.

This notion of American Exceptionalism is also dangerous because it leads us to believe that we are insulated from global problems and that we alone possess the power to fix any and all issues facing us when in fact we live in a world where some of the most pressing issues have no regards for national . Just as American Exceptionalism fueled our country's rise and expansion in the past two centuries, our unwavering, unquestionable attachment to it may very well lead to our demise.

However, it is not too late. Though the term American Exceptionalism has been deceptive and has been used as justification for unthinkable action, we as Americans have the ability to reclaim it. Rather than signifying our rampant foreign aggressions and blind nationalism, American Exceptionalism can be a term for equal opportunity, innovation, and problem-solving. But much more than just being an empty slogan, our society needs to actually carry out the actions that would be worthy of the title American Exceptionalism. A few ideas that come to mind are affordable higher education, accessible healthcare, and better wages. We need to embody the spirit of the term rather than mindlessly rattling off phrases. Until that day, American Exceptionalism will remain a concept that elicits shame and despair rather than pride and hope.

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