

Politics and “American Exceptionalism”

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May 2012

With Help from E. L. Doctorow, New York Times, Sunday, April 29, 2012

Definition: “**American Exceptionalism**” from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia...

American exceptionalism is the theory that the United States is different from other countries in that it has a specific world mission to spread liberty and democracy. In this view, America's [exceptionalism](#) stems from its emergence from a revolution, becoming "the first new nation,"^[1] and developing a uniquely American ideology, based on liberty, [egalitarianism](#), [individualism](#), [populism](#) and [laissez-faire](#). This observation can be traced to [Alexis de Tocqueville](#), the first writer to describe the United States as "exceptional" in 1831 and 1840.^[2] Historian [Gordon Wood](#) has argued, "Our beliefs in liberty, equality, constitutionalism, and the well-being of ordinary people came out of the Revolutionary era. So too did our idea that **we Americans are a special people with a special destiny to lead the world toward liberty and democracy.**"^[3]

The Sisters of St. Joseph at Blessed Sacrament Elementary School in Holyoke where I attended for pre-primary (their term for kindergarten) through grade eight used phrases like “Shining City on a Hill” to describe how they viewed America. I looked up the phrase “City on a Hill” and found that it was used by the pilgrim John Winthrop in a sermon called “City on a Hill” given in 1630 CE.

“Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us; soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a byword through the world, wee shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the wayes of god and all professours for Gods sake; wee shall shame the faces of many of gods worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into Cursses upon us till wee be consumed out of the good land whether wee are going: And to shutt upp this discourse with that exhortacion of Moses that faithfull servant of the Lord in his last farewell to Israell Deut. 30. Beloved there is now sett before us life, and good, deathe and evill in that wee are Commaunded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another to walke in his wayes and to keepe his Commaundements and his Ordinance, and his lawes, and the Articles of our Covenant with him that wee may live and be multiplyed, and that the Lord our God may blesse us in the land whether wee goe to possesse it: But if our heartes shall turne away soe that wee will not obey, but shall be seduced and worshipp other Gods our pleasures, and proffitts, and serve them, it is propounded unto us this day, wee shall surely perishe out of the good Land whether wee passe over this vast Sea to possesse it.”

I grew up believing this view of America, the view that: “Beloved there is now sett before us life, and good, deathe and evill in that wee are Commaunded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another to walke in his wayes and to keepe his Commaundements and his Ordinance, and his lawes, and the Articles of our Covenant with him that wee may live and be multiplyed, and that the Lord our God may blesse us in the land whether wee goe to possesse it.”

However, I have a grave concern that the politics of the American right, certainly since the days of Ronald Reagan, and particularly since the very advent of the George W. Bush administration, have veered sharply from this view of America as a City on a Hill. I have a grave concern that neoconservatism is shoving the country in the opposite direction, towards unexceptionalism. This concern is fundamental to my rejection of current republicanism.

In order to achieve unexceptionalism, the new republican political ideal that would render the United States indistinguishable from the impoverished, traditionally undemocratic, brutal or catatonic countries of the world, the right, perhaps unintentionally, has recommended or continues to recommend that we do the following:

1. Beginning with the Presidential election of 2000, if you're a justice of the Supreme Court, suspend the counting of ballots in that presidential election. Appoint the candidate of your choice as president.
2. If you're the newly anointed president, react to a terrorist attack by invading a nonterrorist country. Despite the loss or disablement of untold numbers of lives, manage your war so that its results will be indeterminate.
Using the state of war as justification, order secret surveillance of American citizens, data mine their phone calls and e-mails, make business, medical and public library records available to government agencies, perform illegal and warrantless searches of homes and offices.
3. Take to torturing terrorism suspects, here or abroad, in violation of the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, which prohibits the infliction of cruel and unusual punishment. Unilaterally abrogate the Convention Against Torture as well as the Geneva Conventions regarding the treatment of prisoners of war. Commit to indeterminate detention without trial those you decide are enemies.
4. Suspend progressive taxation so that the wealthiest pay less proportionately than the middle class. See to it that the wealth of the country accumulates to a small fraction of the population so that the gap between rich and poor widens exponentially.
5. By cutting taxes and raising wartime expenditures, deplete the national treasury so that Congress and state and municipal legislatures cut back on domestic services, ensuring that there will be less money for the education of the young, for government health programs, for the care of veterans, for the maintenance of roads and bridges, for free public libraries, and on and on...
6. Deregulate the banking industry so as to create a severe recession in which enormous numbers of people lose their homes, jobs and retirements.
7. Before you leave office, add to the Supreme Court justices like the ones who awarded you the presidency.
8. If you're one of the conservative majority of the refurbished Supreme Court, rule that corporations, no less than human beings, have the right under the First Amendment to express their political point of view. To come to this judgment, do not acknowledge that corporations lack the range of feelings or values that define what it is to be human. Do not acknowledge that humans can act against their own interest, whereas corporations cannot act otherwise than in their own interest. Do not acknowledge that the corporation's only purpose is to produce wealth, regardless of social consequences. This decision of the court will ensure tremendous infusions of corporate money into the political process and lead to the election in national and state legislatures of majorities of de facto corporate lobbyists.
9. Given corporate control of legislative bodies, enact laws to the benefit of corporate interests. For example, those laws sponsored by weapons manufacturers wherein people may carry concealed weapons and shoot and kill anyone by whom they feel threatened.
10. Give the running of state prisons over to private corporations whose profits increase with the increase in inmate populations. See to it that a majority of prisoners are African-American.

11. When possible, treat immigrants as criminals.
12. Deplete and under finance a viable system of free public schools and give the education of children over to private for-profit corporations.
13. Make college education unaffordable.
14. Inject religious precepts into public policy so as to control women's bodies.
15. Enact laws prohibiting collective bargaining. Portray trade unions as un-American.
16. Enact laws restricting the voting rights of possibly unruly constituencies.
17. Propagandize against scientific facts that would affect corporate profits. Indeed, propagandize against science in particular and against any intellectual elitism in general as being a conspiracy by the left and "liberal mainstream media" to undermine the "wisdom of the people." In particular, energetically and confrontationally portray global warming as a conspiracy of scientists.
18. Having subverted the Constitution and enervated the nation with these measures, portray the federal government as unwieldy, bumbling and shot through with elitist liberals. Create mental states of maladaptive populism among the citizenry to support this view.

As a last and yet untaken step, if you're a justice of the Supreme Court, decide that the police of any and all cities and towns and villages have the absolute authority to torture or strip-search or do anything else deemed to be appropriate any person whom they, for whatever reason, put under arrest.

With this last ruling, if it ever happens to be enacted, the reduction of America to unexceptionalism would be complete.

I hope that I am wrong. I hope that we return to being that "City on a Hill." I hope that we return to being **"a special people with a special destiny to lead the world toward liberty and democracy."**^[3]