

American Exceptionalism: Some Current Case Studies

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IN A RECENT *Wall Street Journal* article, two influential figures inform us that the United States is “the exceptional nation. America has guaranteed freedom, security, and peace for a larger share of humanity than any other nation in all of history. There is no other like us. There never has been.”

True, the statement might be discounted. The senior author is Dick Cheney, who has prime responsibility for the greatest crime of the current century: the invasion of Iraq, which left hundreds of thousands of corpses and millions of refugees, virtually destroyed the country, and ignited a sectarian conflict that is tearing the region to shreds.

But it would be wrong to discount the statement, because it is in fact conventional, pretty much across the political spectrum. To take an example almost at random, the distinguished liberal intellectual Samuel Huntington, Professor of the Science of Government at Harvard, writes in Harvard’s prestigious journal *International Security* that the “national identity” of the United States, unlike other powers, is “defined by a set of universal political and economic values,” namely “liberty, democracy, equality, private property, and markets.” Hence the United States has a solemn duty to maintain its “international primacy” for the benefit of the world. And since this is a matter of definition, we may dispense with the tedious work of empirical verification—which, in fact, would be absurd, like seeking empirical confirmation for the thesis that $2+2=4$.

Or let us turn to the leading left-liberal intellectual journal, the *New York Review of Books*, where Jessica Mathews, the former chair

of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, uncritically summarizes the exceptionalist creed: “American contributions to international security, global economic growth, freedom, and human well-being have been so self-evidently unique and have been so clearly directed to others’ benefit that Americans have long believed that the United States amounts to a different kind of country. Where others push their national interests, the United States tries to advance universal principles.” While she implicitly criticizes two neo-conservative authors for taking such views to “the extreme,” she never questions the fundamental assumptions behind them.

For further edification, consider the September/October 2015 issue of one of the most sober and respected journals of international affairs, *National Interest*, which espouses a realist, unsentimental approach to these matters. The focus of the issue, announced on the cover of the print edition, is a symposium on the question: “What Is America’s Purpose?”

Other countries don’t have purposes, but the United States is exceptional, and most of the contributors make that clear, including those who are critical of US practices. The most critical of them, former Senator Gary Hart, writes that in addition to the common possessions of economic, political, and military power, “there is a fourth power possessed uniquely, though not uniformly demonstrated, by the United States. That fourth power is the power of principle.” It would be enlightening to run through the contributions and to compare these sorts of pronouncements with historical evidence. But space and time constraints prohibit such a detailed exercise.

In general, it’s fair to say, the contributors to the *National Interest* symposium adhere pretty much to the analysis of America’s purpose by one of the founders and icons of realist doctrine, Hans Morgenthau, in his book *The Purpose of American Politics* (1960). Morgenthau explains that the United States is unlike other great powers, past and present, because it has a “transcendent purpose”: “the establishment of equality in freedom in America,” and indeed throughout the world, since “the arena within which the United States must defend and promote its purpose has become worldwide.”

Morgenthau was an honest and competent scholar, and recognized that the historical record is radically inconsistent with America's transcendent purpose. But he explains that we should not be misled by that apparent contradiction. In his words, we should not "confound the abuse of reality with reality itself." Reality itself is the unachieved "national purpose" revealed by "the evidence of history as our minds reflect it." The actual historical record is merely the "abuse of reality," which is of interest only to small minds. Morgenthau goes on to say that those who confuse "reality" with "the abuse of reality" are committing "the error of atheism, which denies the validity of religion on similar grounds." His analogy is apt, if not in the manner he intended. And indeed one of the contributors to the *National Interest* symposium, former World Bank president and high-ranking US-government official Robert Zoellick, assures us that, as the Virgilian phrase "Annuit Coeptis" in the great seal on the back of the one dollar bill reminds us, "a higher force has favored our undertaking" from the epoch of the Founders down to the present.

Indeed the idea that our national purpose is divinely ordained has been a staple of American thought since the first Puritan colonists arrived in Massachusetts Bay to establish "a city upon a hill." It may be recalled that the settlement of a city upon a hill was the first example of what is now called "humanitarian intervention." We learn this from the great seal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which depicts an American Indian holding a bow and arrow pointing down in a sign of peace, with a scroll coming out of his mouth saying, "come over and help us." We need not tarry on the outcome, which was typical of subsequent humanitarian interventions.

Times have of course changed, and the events of the early colonial period are now depicted a little differently in the mainstream culture. For example, the current guidelines of the College Board, which controls all high school advanced-placement tests, read as follows: "Mutual misunderstandings between Europeans and Native Americans often defined the early years of interaction and trade as each group sought to make sense of the other. Over time, Europeans and Native Americans adopted some useful aspects of each other's

culture.” This is not exactly the way the remnants of Native Americans view the matter, from the days when George Washington was called “the town destroyer” by the Iroquois through the rest of the gory record.

All of this is rather reminiscent of President Carter’s response to the question of whether we had some responsibility for the fate of Vietnam. We owe “no debt,” he explained, because “the destruction was mutual”—as is evident when one compares a stroll through Plains, Georgia, with a stroll through Quang Ngai province. I should make clear that Carter’s reaction is at the liberal extreme. George Bush I, the statesman Bush, recognized that there was one moral problem remaining after the war: the failure of the North Vietnamese to devote their resources to finding the remains of American pilots whom they mercilessly shot down while the pilots were bombing their country. But we are a generous nation, Bush explained, so that we will forgive the crimes they committed against us and will permit them to enter international society if they recognize their guilt and devote themselves to overcoming it. This is the exceptionalist creed at its most morally obtuse.

For some reason, the world doesn’t quite see things in the American way. A recent international poll by WIN/Gallup found that the United States is ranked the leading threat to peace in world opinion, by a very large margin. Pakistan is far behind in second place, an outcome presumably inflated by the Indian vote. The results were not reported in the United States, but their challenge cannot be dismissed. They conflict radically with our standard picture of ourselves. To quote again from the *National Interest* symposium, our role in the world has been to foster “democratic governance at home and peaceful resolution of disputes abroad,” a role we have fulfilled with great success, though some contributors note that there has been some “questionable conduct,” which we can chalk up to “expediency, haste, perceived necessity, ideological motivation, mistaken intelligence, or simple ignorance of history,” while we provide the essential “security umbrella” for those who seek peace and democracy. Promoting “respect for universal human rights” and other high values is not

only the exercise of American power, but also “a *source* of that power.” And so on. Presumably something is wrong with the world if it doesn’t perceive this after such long experience with American goodwill.

It’s only fair to say that there is nothing exceptional about American exceptionalism. It’s mirrored in the pronouncements of the most respected intellectuals of England before us, such outstanding and estimable figures as John Stuart Mill, for example. And of France and others in their day in the sun.

Thanks to their own experience with imperial exceptionalism, British diplomats could read the handwriting on the wall when they reluctantly handed the mantle of global dominance over to the American upstarts after World War II. As we learn from Christopher Thorne’s *The Issue of War* (1985), Foreign Office analysts recognized that Washington, guided by “the economic imperialism of American business interests, [is] attempting to elbow us out...under the cloak of a benevolent and avuncular internationalism.” One senior minister commented to his colleagues that Americans believe “that the United States stands for something in the world—something of which the world has need, something which the world is going to like, something, in the final analysis, which the world is going to take, whether it likes it or not”—a realistic gloss on the exceptionalism of the powerful.

Like the exceptionalism of its predecessors in global hegemony, the US variety is revealed not only in doctrine, but also in practice. One illustration is the US record with regard to international conventions on law and human rights. In the former category, the United States is alone in having vetoed Security Council resolutions calling on all states to observe international law. The resolutions mentioned no one, though it was understood that they were directed against the United States after it rejected the demand of the World Court that it terminate its terrorist attack against Nicaragua—its “unlawful use of force,” in the wording of the Court. At the time (June 1986), the United States was joined by Libya and Albania in rejecting the World Court judgments, but now it is truly exceptional, standing alone.

The same is true of the crucial matter of aggression. A primary reason why the United States did not accept the jurisdiction of the new International Criminal Court was concern that it might extend its domain to the crime of aggression—the “supreme international crime,” in the wording of the Nuremberg Tribunal, differing from other war crimes in that it encompasses all the evil that follows.

The United States has offered various pretexts for its refusal to allow the Court to consider the supreme international crime (you can read a review of the pretexts in the April 2015 issue of the journal of the *American Society of International Law*). But the real reason, while unstated, is not hard to discern. As an exceptional state, the United States claims the right of aggression in violation of international law. And it often exercises this right with impunity, given its power and the willingness of the political class and the intellectual community to provide apologetics when needed. The invasion of Iraq, for example, was a textbook case of aggression, but the sharpest criticism that can be voiced within the dominant consensus is that it was a “strategic blunder,” as President Obama observed, eliciting much praise for his courage—which might be compared to that of Russian generals admitting mistakes in Afghanistan, or German generals condemning Hitler’s tactics after Stalingrad. (And to fend off the familiar absurdities produced by the apologists for state violence, this accurate comparison does not imply that it is impossible to distinguish Obama from Hitler and Russian generals.)

There are many other examples, and much the same is true of conventions on human rights. The United States rarely ratifies any of these, and when it does, it adds reservations rendering them inapplicable to the United States. For example, the United States ratified the Genocide Convention (after forty years), but with a reservation—which the World Court upheld—excluding the United States from a case charging NATO with genocide. The Court’s decision was technically correct, since its statutes restrict prosecution to those who accept its jurisdiction.

One interesting illustration of this exceptionalist double standard is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A central

component, with the same force as others, is the section on socio-economic rights: the right to health, food, housing, and so on. The United States flatly rejects these. They are a mere “letter to Santa Claus,” according to President Reagan’s Secretary of State Jeane Kirkpatrick. They “seem preposterous,” and are “little more than an empty vessel into which vague hopes and inchoate expectations can be poured.” They are also a “dangerous incitement,” to quote Ambassador Morris Abram, explaining Washington’s unilateral veto of the UN resolution on the Right to Development, which virtually repeats the socioeconomic provisions of the UD. The United States does not accept these provisions. There are no American laws or practices guaranteeing these rights. In fact the United States is truly “exceptional” in this regard. Virtually every other major country has some form of guaranteed national health care. The majority of the American population has supported it for a long time—even believing it ought to be, or maybe already is, a constitutional right. When Obama introduced the Affordable Care Act, the public option—national health care—was supported by about a five to three margin in the population at large. But it was dropped without discussion by the President.

Returning to current threats to world peace, while the world gives the prize to the United States, the United States is again an exception. Here, among high officials, the media, and the political class, the gravest threat to world peace is regularly declared to be Iran. That is the background for the domestic reaction to the recent nuclear deal with Iran. The deal was welcomed with relief and optimism almost everywhere. The glaring exceptions were the United States and its regional allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia, though the latter reluctantly tempered its criticism. The Republican majority in Congress opposed the deal with the kind of unanimity that is impossible in a genuine political party, though it is familiar in such organizations as the old Communist Party. The reasons offered verge on hysteria. More interesting were the reactions among supporters, for example, the Clinton-Obama Middle East negotiator Dennis Ross, who regards Iran as so terrifying that he has called on Washington

to send its most advanced bombers and deep-penetration bombs to Israel, not for defense—these are not defensive weapons—but for attack. And across the political spectrum it is agreed that the United States has the right to resort to military force, unilaterally, if it claims to detect some Iranian deviation from the terms of the agreement.

In brief, there is near-universal agreement that the United States is in effect a rogue state, free to resort to force at will in radical violation of international law. There is, to be sure, nothing new about that, either in practice or in doctrine. As is often the case, the most revealing versions come from American liberals. Take, for example, the Clinton Doctrine, which says that the United States is free to resort to “unilateral use of military power” even for such purposes as to ensure “uninhibited access to key markets, energy supplies, and strategic resources,” let alone alleged “security” or “humanitarian” concerns.

The same exceptional standard applies to the United States’ regional allies. Israel’s actions in the occupied territories are in explicit violation of orders from the Security Council, the judgment of the World Court, and the Geneva Convention. It has repeatedly resorted to unprovoked aggression, particularly against Lebanon. Saudi Arabia is a newer member of the club. It sent forces to Bahrain to crush a reformist movement there, and now is using its American weapons to exacerbate a humanitarian crisis by bombing Yemen indiscriminately.

The exceptionalism of the three rogue states bears directly on the alleged Iranian threat. What exactly is the threat? The clamorous debate about the matter largely evades this question. We know that the threat is not military. Iran’s military expenditures are a small fraction even of the Gulf dictatorships, let alone Israel or its superpower backer. Other charges against Iran—aggression, support for terrorism, and human rights violations—also collapse quickly on examination. Even where they are correct, they cannot justify refusal to negotiate with Iran, given US support for far more extreme crimes elsewhere.

What then is the Iranian threat, and why is it regarded as so great, even existential, by the three rogue states that rampage in the region? The answer is given by US intelligence, which informed Congress that “Iran’s nuclear program and its willingness to keep open the possibility of developing nuclear weapons is a central part of its deterrent strategy.” That Iran has a serious interest in a deterrent strategy is hardly in doubt, and is recognized by US intelligence. The influential analyst and CIA veteran Bruce Riedel—no dove—observes that “If I was an Iranian national security planner, I would want nuclear weapons” as a deterrent. He also points out that Israel’s “strategic room for maneuver in the region would be constrained by an Iranian nuclear deterrent.” That is also true for the United States. The unwillingness to accept any deterrent to the free use of force is the heart of the opposition to the Iran nuclear deal.

The Iran nuclear deal is one of the two foreign policy legacies of the Obama administration. The other is the beginning of normalization of relations with Cuba. Here Obama’s initiative is portrayed as a courageous and humane effort to help Cuba escape from its isolation. The reality is quite the opposite, and again sheds light on American exceptionalism.

Internationally, the United States has almost always been isolated in its harsh assaults on Cuba. That was of course true of the attack against Cuba launched by the Kennedy administration after the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion, an attack intended to bring “the terrors of the earth” to Cuba, in the words of the Kennedy confidant and historian Arthur Schlesinger. It was no small affair, and the policy it embodied—the determination to unseat Castro—persisted long after the invasion and almost brought the world to terminal nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis. The same destructive intent animated Washington’s savage economic warfare against Cuba. In annual votes in the UN General Assembly, the United States has been alone in support for the embargo, apart from Israel, which ritually has to obey the master, and occasionally a Pacific island dependency.

More strikingly, the United States is by now isolated in the western hemisphere. The hemispheric conference in Colombia in

2012 reached no agreements because the United States and Canada rejected the otherwise universal stand that Cuba must be admitted to hemispheric organizations, and that steps should be taken to cut back Washington's drug war, which is devastating the hemisphere.

Another hemispheric meeting, the Summit of the Americas, was coming up in Panama in April 2015, and Obama's advisers surely realized that if they didn't make some move to join the world the United States might literally be excluded from hemispheric organizations (as it already partially is). So they made the courageous and humane gesture that receives such praise from the educated classes. As Enrique Krause explained in the *New York Review of Books*, "President Obama, bravely and intelligently, though with considerable political risk, decided to reestablish diplomatic relations in December 2014...what [he] described as a means to 'more effectively empower the Cuban people.'" The president "has taken a truly historic step." More accurately, the South American continent has taken "a truly historic step" in recent years, liberating itself from imperial domination for the first time in five hundred years, moving toward integration, and beginning to address its shocking internal problems. That has left the United States largely by the wayside, a dramatic change from not many years ago when Latin America was dismissed by the US government and political commentators as "the backyard," which does what we tell it to—or else.

Even Obama's allegedly liberal foreign policy legacy reveals the continued presence of exceptionalist assumptions. The task for the future is plain: to take the values that are professed by those who assert America's exceptional status—democracy, freedom, human rights, peaceful settlement of disputes—and improve them further. And then to adopt them as guidelines for policy formation by supporting their implementation instead of often undermining them or simply ignoring them as irrelevant to actual decision making. Pursuit of this task would create a form of exceptionalism that has few if any models in history.