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Is America Exceptional?

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The following is adapted from a speech delivered on September 20, 2012, in Washington, D.C., at Hillsdale College's third annual Constitution Day Dinner.

Once upon a time, hardly anyone dissented from the idea that, for better or worse, the United States of America was different from all other nations. This is not surprising, since the attributes that made it different were vividly evident from the day of its birth. Let me say a few words about three of them in particular.

First of all, unlike all other nations past or present, this one accepted as a self-evident truth that all men are created equal. What this meant was that its Founders aimed to create a society in which, for the first time in the history of the world, the individual's fate would be determined not by who his father was, but by his own freely chosen pursuit of his own ambitions. In other words, America was to be something new under the sun: a society in which hereditary status and class distinctions would be erased, leaving individuals free to act and to be judged on their merits alone. There remained, of course, the two atavistic contradictions of slavery and the position of women; but so intolerable did these contradictions ultimately prove that they had to be resolved—even if, as in the case of the former, it took the bloodiest war the nation has ever fought.

Secondly, in all other countries membership or citizenship was a matter of birth, of blood, of lineage, of rootedness in the soil. Thus, foreigners who were admitted for one reason or another could never become full-fledged members of the society. But America was the incarnation of an idea, and therefore no such factors came into play. To become a full-fledged American, it was only necessary to pledge allegiance to the new Republic and to the principles for which it stood.

Thirdly, in all other nations, the rights, if any, enjoyed by their citizens were conferred by human agencies: kings and princes and occasionally parliaments. As such, these rights amounted to privileges that could be revoked at will by the same human agencies. In America, by contrast, the citizen's rights were declared from the beginning to have come from God and to be "inalienable"—that is, immune to legitimate revocation.

As time went on, other characteristics that were unique to America gradually manifested themselves. For instance, in the 20th century, social scientists began speculating as to why America was the only country in the developed world where socialism had failed to take root. As it happens, I myself first came upon the term "American exceptionalism" not in Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, where it has mistakenly been thought to have originated, but in a book by the sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset, who used it in connection with the absence in America of a strong socialist

party. More recently I have discovered that the term may actually have originated with Joseph Stalin, of all people, who coined the term in the same connection but only in order to dismiss it. Thus, when an American Communist leader informed him that American workers had no intention of playing the role Marx had assigned to the worldwide proletariat as the vanguard of the coming socialist revolution, Stalin reputedly shouted something like, "Away with this heresy of American exceptionalism!" And yet Stalin and his followers were themselves exceptional in denying that America was exceptional in the plainly observable ways I have mentioned.

If, however, almost everyone agreed that America was different, there was a great deal of disagreement over whether its exceptionalism made it into a force for good or a force for evil. This too went back to the beginning, when the denigrators outnumbered the enthusiasts.

At first, anti-American passions were understandably fuelled by the dangerous political challenge posed to the monarchies of Europe by the republican ideas of the American Revolution. But the political side of anti-Americanism was soon joined to a cultural indictment that proved to have more staying power. Here is how the brilliant but volatile historian Henry Adams—the descendent of two American presidents—described the cultural indictment as it was framed in the earliest days of the Republic:

In the foreigner's range of observa-

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[Latin]: in the first place

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tion, love of money was the most conspicuous and most common trait of the American character No foreigner of that day—neither poet, painter, or philosopher—could detect in American life anything higher than vulgarity Englishmen especially indulged in unbounded invective against the sordid character of American society Contemporary critics could see neither generosity, economy, honor, nor ideas of any kind in the American breast.

In his younger days, Adams defended America against these foreign critics; but in later life, snobbishly recoiling from the changes wrought by rapid industrialization following the Civil War, he would hurl the same charge at the America of the so-called Gilded Age.

We see a similar conflict in Tocqueville. *Democracy in America* was mainly a defense of the country's

political system and many of its egalitarian habits and mores. But where its cultural and spiritual life was concerned, Tocqueville expressed much the same contempt as the critics cited by Henry Adams. The Americans, he wrote, with "their exclusively commercial habits," were so fixated "upon purely practical objects" that they neglected "the pursuit of science, literature, and the arts," and it was only their proximity to Europe that allowed them "to neglect these pursuits without lapsing into barbarism." Many years later, another Frenchman, Georges Clemenceau, went Tocqueville one better: "America," he quipped, "is the only nation in history which miraculously has gone from barbarism to decadence without the usual interval of civilization."

The main reason for the enduring power of the cultural critique was its fervent embrace, beginning in the late 19th century, by the vast majority of the writers, artists, and intellectuals who followed

Tocqueville. And so it still goes in 2012, when the putative materialism and crassness of American life are harped upon in movies, television shows, novels, volumes of social criticism, and op-ed pieces too numerous to count.

Like Tocqueville and the foreigners cited by Henry Adams, moreover, these more recent works attribute this crassly philistine attitude to the love of money and “the exclusively commercial habits” that went with it—in other words, to the species of freedom that has done more than anything else ever invented to lift masses of people out of poverty and that would later be known as capitalism. America, these critics were declaring, was exceptional all right—exceptionally bad, or even downright evil.

On the other hand, there have always been defenders of American exceptionalism as a vital force for good. Thus, several decades before switching sides, Henry Adams charged America’s foreign critics with blindness to the country’s amazing virtues. Whereas, Adams wrote, European philosophers and poets could see only rapacity and vulgarity here, the poorest European peasants could discern that “the hard, practical money-getting American democrat was in truth living in a world of dream” and was “already guiding Nature with a kinder and wiser hand than had ever yet been felt in human history.” It was this dream, Adams went on to say, that beckoned to the poor of the old world, calling upon them to come and share in the limitless opportunities it offered—opportunities unimaginable anywhere else.

For a long time now, to speak personally, I have taken my stand with the *young* Adams, to whom America was exceptionally good, against his embittered older self, to whom it had become exceptionally bad. In my own younger days, I was on the Left, and from the utopian vantage point to which leftism invariably transports its adherents, it was the flaws in American society—the radical 1960s trinity of war, racism, and poverty—that stood out most vividly. It rarely occurred to me or my fellow leftists to ask a simple question: Compared to what is America so bad?

From our modern perspective, much more was wrong with Periclean Athens, or the Italy of the Medicis, or England under the first Queen Elizabeth, or 19th-century Russia under the Romanovs. But this has not disqualified them from being universally ranked among the highest points of human civilization and achievement. After more than 40 years of pondering the question “Compared to what?” I have come to believe with all my heart that the United States belongs on that exalted list. It is true that we have not earned a place on it, as the others mainly did, by our contribution to the arts. Yet it is worth pointing out that even in the sphere of the arts, we have not done too badly. To speak only of literature, names like Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Edith Wharton, Robert Frost, and many others attest that we have, in fact, done far better than might generally have been expected of a nation conceived primarily to achieve other ends. These ends were social, political, and economic, and it is in them that we have indeed excelled the most.

We have excelled by following our Founding Fathers in directing our energies, as our Constitution exhorts us to do, to the preservation of the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, as well as to the pursuit of happiness tacitly understood by the Declaration of Independence to require prosperity as a precondition. (In his original draft of the Declaration, of course, Jefferson used the word “property” instead of “pursuit of happiness.”) By remaining faithful in principle—and to a considerable extent

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in practice—to the ideas by which the Founders hoped to accomplish these ends, we and our forebears have fashioned a country in which more liberty and more prosperity are more widely shared than among any other people in human history. Yes, even today that holds true, despite policies unfaithful both to the letter and to the spirit of the traditional American system that have resulted in a series of political and economic setbacks.

So far as liberty is concerned, until recently no one but libertarians have been arguing that we were insufficiently free in the United States. If anything, some conservatives, dismayed by such phenomena as the spread of pornography and sexual license, thought that we had too much freedom for our own good. But thanks to modern liberalism’s barely concealed hostility to the free market, not to mention the threat posed by Obamacare to religious and economic freedom, many conservatives are now echoing these libertarian arguments, if in a milder form.

Judging by what they say and the policies they pursue, modern liberals are not all that concerned about liberty. What they really care about, and what they assign a higher value to, is economic equality (as reflected in the now famous phrase, “spread the wealth around”). Yet here is what the late Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote in 1976 about this very issue in connection with the redistributionist ideology then regnant at the United Nations:

And equality . . . what is the record? The record was stated most succinctly by an Israeli socialist who told William F. Buckley, Jr. that those nations which have put liberty ahead of equality have ended up doing better by equality than those with the reverse priority . . . *This is our case. We are of the liberty party, and it might surprise us what energies might be released were we to unfurl those banners.*

Four years later, Ronald Reagan came along to unfurl those banners. And just as Moynihan predicted, the result was

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the release of new political and economic energies that reversed the political and economic decline of the Carter years and that led to our victory in the Cold War.

Of course, the party of liberty Moynihan was talking about was the United States of America and the party of economic equality was the socialist countries of what was then called the Third World. But within America today, an analogous split has opened up, with the Republicans constituting the party of liberty and the Democrats more and more becoming the party of redistribution. Hence the Democrats never stop claiming that the rich are failing to pay their fair share of taxes. Yet after surveying the numbers, the economist Walter Williams of George Mason University asks an excellent question: “What standard of fairness dictates that the top ten percent of income earners pay 71 percent of the federal income tax burden while 47 percent of Americans pay absolutely nothing?” To which an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* replies: “There is nothing fair about confiscatory tax policy that reduces growth, denies opportunity, and keeps more people in poverty.”

Then too there is the assumption, blithely accepted by the party of economic equality, that the gap between rich and poor—or even between the rich and the middle class—self-evidently amounts to a violation of social justice. Yet far from being self-evident, this assumption stems from a highly questionable concept of social justice—one that rules out or minimizes the role played by talent, character, ambition, initiative, daring, work, and spirit in producing unequal outcomes in “the pursuit of happiness.”

Furthermore, both the assumption and its correlative concept of social justice run counter to the American grain. As study after study has shown, and as the petering out of the Occupy Wall Street movement has recently confirmed, what Tocqueville observed on this point in the 1830s remains

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true today: Americans, unlike Europeans, he wrote, “do not hate the higher classes of society” even if “they are not favorably inclined toward them . . .” Which is to say that most Americans are not prone to the envy of the rich that eats away at their self-appointed spokesmen on the Left.

Nor are most Americans subject to the accompanying passion for economic egalitarianism that made for the spread of socialism in other countries. What explains the absence of that levelling passion is that it has been starved by the opportunities America has afforded millions upon millions to better their lot and the advantage they have been free to take of those opportunities—which in turn explains how unprecedented and unmatched levels of prosperity have been created here and how they have come to be shared more widely here than anywhere else.

Tocqueville also put his finger on a second and related reason for the persistence of this particular feature of American exceptionalism: “The word poor is used here in a relative, not an absolute sense. Poor men in America would often appear rich in comparison with the poor of Europe.” A story I was once told by a Soviet dissident provides an amusing illustration. It seems that the Soviet authorities used to encourage the repeated screening of *The Grapes of Wrath*, a movie about the Great Depression-era migration of starving farmers from the Dust Bowl to California in their broken-down pickups. But contrary to expectation, what Soviet audiences got from this film was not an impression of how wretched was

the plight of the poor in America. Instead they came away marvelling that in America, “even the peasants own trucks.”

Tocqueville further observed that in America, “the poor, instead of forming the immense majority of the nation, as is always the case in aristocratic communities, are comparatively few in number, and the laws do not bind them together by the ties of irremediable and hereditary penury.”

As the great economist and social critic Thomas Sowell has demonstrated time and again, it is still the case that the poor in America “are comparatively few in number.” And except for the black underclass—whose size is generally estimated at somewhere between two and ten percent of the black community and whose plight has thus far resisted every attempt at alleviation over the past 50 years—it is also true that penury in the United States is neither irremediable nor hereditary. As Sowell shows, of those who live on the next rung of the economic ladder, more of whom are white than black, only three percent get stuck in the bottom fifth of the income distribution for more than eight years.

Elaborating on Sowell’s analyses, the economist Mark Perry writes:

In the discussions on income inequality and wage stagnation, we frequently hear about the “top 1%” or the “top 10%” or the “bottom 99%” and the public has started to believe that those groups operate like closed private clubs that contain the exact same people or households every year. But the empirical evidence . . . tells

a much different story of dynamic change in the labor market—people and households move up and down the earnings quintiles throughout their careers and lives. Many of today’s low-income households will rise to become tomorrow’s high-income households, and some will even eventually be in the “top 10%” or “top 1%.” And many of today’s “top 1%” or top income quintile members are tomorrow’s middle or lower class households, reflecting the significant upward and downward mobility in the dynamic U.S. labor market.

No such mobility can be found in any of the member countries of the European Union, or anywhere else for that matter. Even in the dismal economic state our nation has fallen into today, it is still exceptional where the degree and the distribution of prosperity are concerned. But to this, modern liberals are willfully blind.

With all exceptions duly noted, I think it is fair to say that what liberals mainly see when they look at America today is injustice and oppression crying out for redress. By sharp contrast, conservatives see a complex of traditions and institutions built upon the principles that animated the American Revolution and that have made it possible—to say yet again what cannot be said too often—for more freedom and more prosperity to be enjoyed by more of its citizens than in any other society in human history. It follows that what liberals—who concentrate their attention on the relatively little that is wrong with America instead of the enormous good embodied within it—seek to change or discard is precisely what conservatives are dedicated to preserving, reinvigorating, and defending.

A similar divide separates liberals and conservatives as to the role America has played in world affairs. Consider the many apologies President Obama has

issued for the misdeeds of which he imagines Americans have been guilty in our relations with other countries in general and the Muslim world in particular. Never mind that the United States has spilled blood and treasure to liberate and protect many millions of people from the totalitarian horrors first of Nazism and then of Communism, and that since 9/11 we have spilled yet more blood and treasure fighting against Islamofascism, the totalitarian successor to Nazism. And as to the Muslim world in particular, never mind that, as the columnist Mona Charen puts it, “of the last six wars in which the United States was involved (Kuwait, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya), four were undertaken to rescue Muslims and the other two (Afghanistan and Iraq) had the side benefit of liberating Muslims—to what end remains an open question.”

In spite of all this, the liberal community seems to think that the rest of the world would be better off without the United States, or at least with it following the policy of “leading from behind.” Admittedly there are paleoconservatives like Pat Buchanan and libertarians like Ron Paul who agree on this point, but most conservatives do not believe that a radical diminution of American power and influence would be good for us or for the world.

Shortly before the election of 2008, then-candidate Obama declared that his election would usher in “a fundamental transformation of America.” The desirability of such a transformation—which would entail the wiping away of as many more traces of American exceptionalism as it will take to turn this country into a facsimile of the social-democratic regimes of western Europe—is the issue at the heart of our politics today. And in the long run, I hope and trust, Americans

will reject such a transformation, and elect instead to return to the principles that have made this nation so exceptional—yes, exceptional—a force for good both at home and abroad. ■



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