



The Myth of American Exceptionalism



The idea that the United States is uniquely virtuous may be comforting to Americans. Too bad it's not true.

By: Stephen M. Walt (November 2011)

Over the last two centuries, prominent Americans have described the United States as an "**empire of liberty**," a "**shining city on a hill**," the "**last best hope of Earth**," the "**leader of the free world**," and the "**indispensable nation**." These enduring tropes explain why all presidential candidates feel

compelled to offer ritualistic paeans to America's greatness and why President Barack Obama landed in hot water -- most recently, from **Mitt Romney** -- for saying that while he believed in "American exceptionalism," it was no different from "British exceptionalism," "Greek exceptionalism," or any other country's brand of patriotic chest-thumping.

Most statements of "American exceptionalism" presume that America's values, political system, and history are unique and worthy of universal admiration. They also imply that the United States is both destined and entitled to play a distinct and positive role on the world stage.

The only thing wrong with this self-congratulatory portrait of America's global role is that it is mostly a myth. Although the United States possesses certain unique qualities -- from high levels of religiosity to a political culture that privileges individual freedom -- the conduct of U.S. foreign policy has been determined primarily by its relative power and by the inherently competitive nature of international politics. By focusing on their supposedly exceptional qualities, Americans blind themselves to the ways that they are a lot like everyone else.

This unchallenged faith in American exceptionalism makes it harder for Americans to understand why others are less enthusiastic about U.S. dominance, often alarmed by U.S. policies, and frequently irritated by what they see as U.S. hypocrisy, whether the subject is possession of nuclear weapons, conformity with international law, or America's tendency to condemn the conduct of others while ignoring its own failings. Ironically, U.S. foreign policy would probably be more effective if Americans were less convinced of their own unique virtues and less eager to proclaim them.

What we need, in short, is a more realistic and critical assessment of America's true character and contributions. In that spirit, I offer here the Top 5 Myths about American Exceptionalism.

Myth 1

There Is Something Exceptional About American Exceptionalism.

Whenever American leaders refer to the "unique" responsibilities of the United States, they are saying that it is different from other powers and that these differences require them to take on special burdens.

Yet there is nothing unusual about such lofty declarations; indeed, those who make them are treading a well-worn path. Most great powers have considered themselves superior to their rivals and have believed that they were advancing some greater good when they imposed their preferences on others. The British thought they were bearing the "white man's burden," while French colonialists invoked *la mission civilisatrice* to justify their empire. Portugal, whose imperial activities were hardly distinguished, believed it was promoting a certain *missão civilizadora*. Even many of the officials of the former Soviet Union genuinely believed they were leading the world toward a socialist utopia despite the many cruelties that communist rule inflicted. Of course, the United States has by far the better claim to virtue than Stalin or his successors, but Obama was right to remind us that all countries prize their own particular qualities.

So when Americans proclaim they are exceptional and indispensable, they are simply the latest nation to sing a familiar old song. Among great powers, thinking you're special is the norm, not the exception.

Myth 2

The United States Behaves Better Than Other Nations Do.

Declarations of American exceptionalism rest on the belief that the United States is a uniquely virtuous nation, one that loves peace, nurtures liberty, respects human rights, and embraces the rule of law. Americans like to think their country behaves much better than other states do, and certainly better than other great powers.

If only it were true. The United States may not have been as brutal as the worst states in world history, but a dispassionate look at the historical record belies most claims about America's moral superiority.

For starters, the United States has been one of the most expansionist powers in modern history. It began as 13 small colonies clinging to the Eastern Seaboard, but eventually expanded across North America, seizing Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California from Mexico in 1846. Along the way, it eliminated most of the native population and confined the survivors to impoverished reservations. By the mid-19th century, it had pushed Britain out of the Pacific Northwest and consolidated its hegemony over the Western Hemisphere.

The United States has fought numerous wars since then -- starting several of them -- and its wartime conduct has hardly been a model of restraint. The 1899-1902 conquest of the Philippines killed some

200,000 to 400,000 Filipinos, most of them civilians, and the United States and its allies did not hesitate to dispatch some 305,000 German and 330,000 Japanese civilians through aerial bombing during World War II, mostly through deliberate campaigns against enemy cities. No wonder Gen. Curtis LeMay, who directed the bombing campaign against Japan, told an aide, "If the U.S. lost the war, we would be prosecuted as war criminals." The United States dropped more than 6 million tons of bombs during the Indochina war, including tons of napalm and lethal defoliants like Agent Orange, and it is directly responsible for the deaths of many of the roughly 1 million civilians who died in that war.

More recently, the U.S.-backed Contra war in Nicaragua killed some 30,000 Nicaraguans, a percentage of their population equivalent to 2 million dead Americans. U.S. military action has led directly or indirectly to the deaths of 250,000 Muslims over the past three decades (and that's a low-end estimate, not counting the deaths resulting from the sanctions against Iraq in the 1990s), including the more than 100,000 people who died following the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. U.S. drones and Special Forces are going after suspected terrorists in at least five countries at present and have killed an unknown number of innocent civilians in the process. Some of these actions may have been necessary to make Americans more prosperous and secure. But while Americans would undoubtedly regard such acts as indefensible if some foreign country were doing them to us, hardly any U.S. politicians have questioned these policies. Instead, Americans still wonder, "Why do they hate us?"

The United States talks a good game on human rights and international law, but it has refused to sign most human rights treaties, is not a party to the International Criminal Court, and has been all too willing to cozy up to dictators -- remember our friend Hosni Mubarak? -- with abysmal human rights records. If that were not enough, the abuses at Abu Ghraib and the George W. Bush administration's reliance on waterboarding, extraordinary rendition, and preventive detention should shake America's belief that it consistently acts in a morally superior fashion. Obama's decision to retain many of these policies suggests they were not a temporary aberration.

The United States never conquered a vast overseas empire or caused millions to die through tyrannical blunders like China's Great Leap Forward or Stalin's forced collectivization. And given the vast power at its disposal for much of the past century, Washington could certainly have done much worse. But the record is clear: U.S. leaders have done what they thought they had to do when confronted by external

dangers, and they paid scant attention to moral principles along the way. The idea that the United States is uniquely virtuous may be comforting to Americans; too bad it's not true.

Myth 3

America's Success Is Due to Its Special Genius.

The United States has enjoyed remarkable success, and Americans tend to portray their rise to world power as a direct result of the political foresight of the Founding Fathers, the virtues of the U.S. Constitution, the priority placed on individual liberty, and the creativity and hard work of the American people. In this narrative, the United States enjoys an exceptional global position today because it is, well, *exceptional*.

There is more than a grain of truth to this version of American history. It's not an accident that immigrants came to America in droves in search of economic opportunity, and the "melting pot" myth facilitated the assimilation of each wave of new Americans. America's scientific and technological achievements are fully deserving of praise and owe something to the openness and vitality of the American political order.

But America's past success is due as much to good luck as to any uniquely American virtues. 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. This account of America's rise does not deny that the United States did many things right, but it also acknowledges that America's present position owes as much to good fortune as to any special genius or "manifest destiny."

Myth 4

The United States Is Responsible for Most of the Good in the World.

Americans are fond of giving themselves credit for positive international developments. President Bill Clinton **believed** the United States was "indispensable to the forging of stable political relations," and the late Harvard University political scientist Samuel P. Huntington thought U.S. primacy was central "to the future of freedom, democracy, open economies, and international order in the world." Journalist Michael Hirsh has gone even further, writing in his book *At War With Ourselves* that America's global role is "the **greatest gift** the world has received in many, many centuries, possibly all of recorded history." Scholarly works such as Tony Smith's *America's Mission* and G. John Ikenberry's *Liberal Leviathan* emphasize America's contribution to the spread of democracy and its promotion of a supposedly liberal world order. Given all the high-fives American leaders have given themselves, it is hardly surprising that most Americans see their country as an overwhelmingly positive force in world affairs.

Once again, there is something to this line of argument, just not enough to make it entirely accurate. The United States has made undeniable contributions to peace and stability in the world over the past century, including the Marshall Plan, the creation and management of the Bretton Woods system, its rhetorical support for the core principles of democracy and human rights, and its mostly stabilizing military presence in Europe and the Far East. But the belief that all good things flow from Washington's wisdom overstates the U.S. contribution by a wide margin.

For starters, though Americans watching *Saving Private Ryan* or *Patton* may conclude that the United States played the central role in vanquishing Nazi Germany, most of the fighting was in Eastern Europe and the main burden of defeating Hitler's war machine was borne by the Soviet Union. Similarly, though the Marshall Plan and NATO played important roles in Europe's post-World War II success, Europeans deserve at least as much credit for rebuilding their economies, constructing a novel economic and political union, and moving beyond four centuries of sometimes bitter rivalry. Americans also tend to think they won the Cold War all by themselves, a view that ignores the contributions of other anti-Soviet adversaries and the courageous dissidents whose resistance to communist rule produced the "velvet revolutions" of 1989.

Moreover, as Godfrey Hodgson recently noted in his sympathetic but clear-eyed book, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*, the spread of liberal ideals is a global phenomenon with roots in the Enlightenment, and European philosophers and political leaders did much to advance the democratic

ideal. Similarly, the abolition of slavery and the long effort to improve the status of women owe more to Britain and other democracies than to the United States, where progress in both areas trailed many other countries. Nor can the United States claim a global leadership role today on gay rights, criminal justice, or economic equality -- Europe's got those areas covered.

Finally, any honest accounting of the past half-century must acknowledge the downside of American primacy. The United States has been the major producer of greenhouse gases for most of the last hundred years and thus a principal cause of the adverse changes that are altering the global environment. The United States stood on the wrong side of the long struggle against apartheid in South Africa and backed plenty of unsavory dictatorships -- including Saddam Hussein's -- when short-term strategic interests dictated. Americans may be justly proud of their role in creating and defending Israel and in combating global anti-Semitism, but its one-sided policies have also prolonged Palestinian statelessness and sustained Israel's brutal occupation.

Bottom line: Americans take too much credit for global progress and accept too little blame for areas where U.S. policy has in fact been counterproductive. Americans are blind to their weak spots, and in ways that have real-world consequences. Remember when Pentagon planners thought U.S. troops would be greeted in Baghdad with flowers and parades? They mostly got RPGs and IEDs instead.

Myth 5

God Is on Our Side.

A crucial component of American exceptionalism is the belief that the United States has a divinely ordained mission to lead the rest of the world. Ronald Reagan told audiences that there was "**some divine plan**" that had placed America here, and once **quoted Pope Pius XII** saying, "Into the hands of America God has placed the destinies of an afflicted mankind." Bush offered a similar view in 2004, saying, "We have a **calling from beyond the stars** to stand for freedom." The same idea was expressed, albeit less nobly, in Otto von Bismarck's alleged quip that "God has a special providence for fools, drunks, and the United States."

Confidence is a valuable commodity for any country. But when a nation starts to think it enjoys the mandate of heaven and becomes convinced that it cannot fail or be led astray by scoundrels or

incompetents, then reality is likely to deliver a swift rebuke. Ancient Athens, Napoleonic France, imperial Japan, and countless other countries have succumbed to this sort of hubris, and nearly always with catastrophic results.

Despite America's many successes, the country is hardly immune from setbacks, follies, and boneheaded blunders. If you have any doubts about that, just reflect on how a decade of ill-advised tax cuts, two costly and unsuccessful wars, and a financial meltdown driven mostly by greed and corruption have managed to squander the privileged position the United States enjoyed at the end of the 20th century. Instead of assuming that God is on *their* side, perhaps Americans should heed Abraham Lincoln's admonition that our greatest concern should be "whether *we* are on God's side."

Given the many challenges Americans now face, from persistent unemployment to the burden of winding down two deadly wars, it's unsurprising that they find the idea of their own exceptionalism comforting -- and that their aspiring political leaders have been proclaiming it with increasing fervor. Such patriotism has its benefits, but not when it leads to a basic misunderstanding of America's role in the world. This is exactly how bad decisions get made.

America has its own special qualities, as all countries do, but it is still a state embedded in a competitive global system. It is far stronger and richer than most, and its geopolitical position is remarkably favorable. These advantages give the United States a wider range of choice in its conduct of foreign affairs, but they don't ensure that its choices will be good ones. Far from being a unique state whose behavior is radically different from that of other great powers, the United States has behaved like all the rest, pursuing its own self-interest first and foremost, seeking to improve its relative position over time, and devoting relatively little blood or treasure to purely idealistic pursuits. Yet, just like past great powers, it has convinced itself that it is different, and better, than everyone else.

International politics is a contact sport, and even powerful states must compromise their political principles for the sake of security and prosperity. Nationalism is also a powerful force, and it inevitably highlights the country's virtues and sugarcoats its less savory aspects. But if Americans want to be truly exceptional, they might start by viewing the whole idea of "American exceptionalism" with a much more skeptical eye.
