



John Gast, *American Progress* (1872)

American exceptionalism [New World Encyclopedia](#)

American exceptionalism has been historically referred to as the belief that the [United States](#) differs qualitatively from other developed nations because of its national credo, historical evolution, or distinctive political and religious institutions. The difference is often expressed in American circles as some categorical superiority, to which is usually attached some alleged proof, rationalization or explanation that may vary greatly depending on the [historical](#) period and the political context. However, the term can also be used in a negative sense by critics of American policies to refer to a willful nationalistic ignorance of faults committed by the American government.

On the one hand, American intervention on the world stage has claimed a [moral](#) purpose of acting altruistically in defense of [freedom](#) and [democracy](#). On the other hand, America has been accused of behaving as a "nation above nations" imposing its hegemony on the rest of the world, acting in its own interest, with no concern for others. The U.S. is far from unique in claiming to be special. Many nations, ancient and modern, have regarded themselves as having a special role to play, sometimes blessed by [God](#). Pinnacle nations can be forces for good or for [evil](#) in the world. History suggests that pinnacle nations that temper power with morality, with the aim of maintaining peace, of spreading [justice](#) or of defending human rights may have a crucial role to play in securing a sustainable future for the planet

and human race. Former [imperial](#) powers are among the world's strongest champions of human rights and human equality.

Overview

The term was first used with respect to the United States by [Alexis de Tocqueville](#) "during his first visit to America in 1831." He noticed that the American idea of "nationality" was "different, based less on common history or ethnicity than on common beliefs."^[1] American exceptionalism is close to the idea of [Manifest Destiny](#), a term used by Jacksonian Democrats in the 1840s to promote the annexation of much of what is now the Western United States (the [Oregon](#) Territory, the [Texas](#) Annexation, and the [Mexican](#) Cession). Manifest Destiny saw itself as extending liberty and democracy from sea to shining sea across the American continent, from the original 13 colonies in the East, to the Pacific coast in the West. Some then suggested that this process should not stop at the coastline but continue beyond, establishing liberty wherever people lived under governments that denied democratic rights. The notion that the founding of the United States represented a break with history itself, that its citizens were making a new beginning and a new society, stands behind American exceptionalism. Founded on the principles of [freedom](#), human rights, and rights of the people to govern themselves, America would also avoid the mistakes of other nations. These mistakes would include "the mass [poverty](#) and class conflict that modernity appeared to be creating in [Britain](#)."^[2] Thus, America would enjoy a special status among the nations of the world; America would be a "'city on a hill' or a 'beacon to the world,'" defending and promoting [democracy](#) and liberty, exercising only "benevolent power in the world."^[3] Many linked this with belief in a divine mission or destiny; the U.S. would be "tied to [God's](#) steady path".^[4] America would not "follow Europe into a historical future" in which qualitative change would take place. Rather, "American progress would be a quantitative multiplication and elaboration of its founding principles."^[4] The term was later used in the 1890s, by Republicans as a theoretical justification for U.S. expansion outside of North America.

The term has also come to describe the belief that the United States has an exceptional position among countries, and should not be bound by international law except where it serves American interests. This position is driven by a (usually implicit) premise that the United States cannot violate international law (and in particular international human rights norms) because of the view that America itself was largely responsible for instigating those norms in the first place. This view has come under stress due to international condemnation of U.S. human rights practices in the context of the War on [Terror](#) since 2001.

The basis most commonly cited for American exceptionalism is the idea that the United States and its people hold a special place in the world, by offering opportunity and hope for humanity, derived from a unique balance of public and private interests governed by constitutional ideals that are focused on personal and economic freedom. Some United States citizens have used the term to claim [moral](#) superiority for America or Americans. Others use it to refer to the American concept, or "dream" as itself an exceptional ideal.

Americans can model this for other people and nations to replicate and can assist them with constructing their own democratic, free societies.

Opponents of the concept of American exceptionalism believe it to be little more than [ethnocentrism](#) and [propaganda](#).^{[5][6]} In their arguments, they often compare the U.S. to other countries that have claimed an exceptional nature or destiny. Examples in more recent times include Great Britain at the height of the [British Empire](#), [Israel](#), the [USSR](#), and [Nazi Germany](#), while many historic empires such as Ancient Rome, China, and a wide range of minor kingdoms and tribes have also embraced exceptionalism. In the case of France, the concept of French exceptionalism has generated a considerable amount of literature.^[7] In each case, a basis was presented as to why the country was exceptional compared to all other countries, drawing upon circumstance, cultural background and mythos, and self-perceived national aims. Many nations have regarded their birth as "sui generis" and have understood themselves as "a unique and chosen nation."^[8] In some cases, [civilizing](#) the world or establishing the rule of law across the globe was also regarded as a national responsibility. Others have simply aimed to dominate the world and to exploit and oppress what they regard as "inferior" peoples. Arguably, however, when the claim to be special has had a moral aspect, such as the mandate to make the world a more peaceful and equitable place, exceptionalism cannot be seen as having totally negative consequences. Imperial powers, though, often act imperiously, laying down their own laws and riding rough-shod over people's [cultures](#) and beliefs. As they spread their own civilization, they may see themselves as [racially](#) superior. In the end, however, this process also binds people together. Common laws, common values and a Lingua franca—usually the language of the [colonial](#) power—lead people to see themselves as members of the same world. Some of the world's former imperial powers are now among the strongest voices around the globe in defense of human rights and human equality.

Puritan roots

The earliest ideologies of English colonists in the country were embodied by the [Protestantism](#) of Puritan settlers of New England. Many Puritans with Arminian leanings embraced a middle ground between strict Calvinist predestination and a less restricting theology of Divine Providence. They believed God had made a covenant with their people and had chosen them to lead the other nations of the earth. One Puritan leader, [John Winthrop](#), metaphorically expressed this idea as a "City upon a Hill" — that the Puritan community of New England should serve as a model community for the rest of the world.^[9] This metaphor is often used by proponents of exceptionalism.

Although the worldview of New England Puritans changed dramatically, and the strong influence of other Protestant traditions in the Middle Colonies and the South, the Puritans' deep moralistic values remained part of the national identity of the United States for centuries, remaining influential to the present day. Parts of American exceptionalism can be traced to American Puritan roots. The Puritans also had Utopian ideals; their new society in the U.S. would be a paradise on earth, perhaps a taste of the ideal community that [Jesus Christ](#) will establish when he returns.^[10] The [Pilgrims](#), having endured "a

transatlantic exodus" saw "themselves as participants with God in creating a millenarism kingdom of God on earth." In 1832, the revivalist preacher Charles Grandison thought that [education](#), fair wages, healthy souls and bodies might all result in the millennium coming in the USA "in three years."[\[11\]](#)

Aspects of arguments for American exceptionalism

Republican ethos and ideas about nationhood

Proponents of American exceptionalism argue that the United States is exceptional in that it was founded on a set of republican ideals, rather than on a common heritage, ethnicity, or ruling elite. In the formulation of President [Abraham Lincoln](#) in his [Gettysburg Address](#), America is a nation "conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." In this view, America is inextricably connected with liberty and equality. It is claimed that America has often acted to promote these ideals abroad, most notably in the [First](#) and [Second](#), in the [Cold War](#) and today in the Iraq War. Critics argue that American policy in these conflicts was more motivated by economic or military self-interest than an actual desire to spread these ideals, and point to an extensive history of using South American nations as slave economies, suppressing democratic revolutions against U.S.-backed dictators when necessary.

The United States' policies have been characterized since their inception by a system of federalism and [checks and balances](#), which were designed to prevent any person, faction, region, or government organ from becoming too powerful. Some American exceptionalists argue that this system and the accompanying distrust of concentrated power prevent the United States from suffering a "tyranny of the majority," and also that it allows citizens to live in a locality whose laws reflect that citizen's values. A consequence of this political system is that laws can vary greatly across the country. Critics of American exceptionalism maintain that this system merely replaces the power of the national majority over states with power by the states over local entities. On balance, the American political system arguably allows more local dominance but prevents more national dominance than does a more unitary system.

Frontier spirit

Proponents of American exceptionalism often claim that the "American spirit" or the "American identity" was created at the frontier (following Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis), where rugged and untamed conditions gave birth to American national vitality. In this view, "American history and society" is best "understood when viewed in terms of a response to the unique conditions present in the New World" not as "a continuation of certain European ideas not the implementation of such ideas but an entirely new set of phenomenon deriving from the unique interaction between the white man and the 'Virgin Lands.'"[\[13\]](#) However, this "frontier spirit" was not unique to the United States—other nations such as Canada, [South Africa](#), [Argentina](#) and Australia had long frontiers that were similarly settled by pioneers, shaping their national psyches. In fact, all of the British Imperial domains involved pioneering work. Although each nation

had slightly different frontier experiences (for example, in Australia "mateship" and working together was valued more than individualism was in the United States), the characteristics arising from British attempting to "tame" a wild and often hostile landscape against the will of the original population remained common to many such nations. Of course, at the limit, all of humankind has been involved, at one time or another, in extending the boundaries of their territory.

Mobility

For most of its history, especially from the mid-19th to early 20th centuries, the United States was exceptional in its occupational and physical mobility. America is known as the "land of opportunity" and in this sense, it prided and promoted itself on providing individuals with the opportunity to escape from the contexts of their class and family background. Examples of this [social mobility](#) include:

Occupational—children could easily choose careers which were not based upon their parents' choices.

Physical—that geographical location was not seen as static, and citizens often relocated freely over long distances without barrier.

Status—As in most countries, family standing and riches were often a means to remain in a higher social circle. America was notably unusual due to an accepted wisdom that anyone—from impoverished immigrants upwards—who worked hard, could aspire to similar standing, regardless of circumstances of birth. This aspiration is commonly called living the American dream. Birth circumstances were not taken as a social barrier to the upper echelons or to high political status in American culture. This stood in contrast to other countries where many higher offices were socially determined, and usually hard to enter without being born into the suitable social group.

The United States still has remarkable class mobility, however, a 2005 study showed that children born into poverty in Europe and Canada were more likely to find prosperity than children born into poverty in the United States.[\[14\]](#)

Critique

The idea that the United States represented a new beginning, a new experiment in republicanism, of government by, for and of the people, has had an inspirational value in reminding Americans to live up to their highest principles and ideals, those on which the nation was founded. The U.S. is often accused of acting arrogantly in world affairs, of intervening in other nations for its own self-interest rather than to promote freedom and democracy. However, until the [Spanish-American War](#) a policy of non-intervention overseas had dominated, itself based on the desire not to repeat the errors of the Europeans, where nations had spent centuries fighting each other. When the U.S. did begin to intervene overseas, which some describe as the launch of its [imperial](#) phase, the motive was to help Spanish colonies achieve their freedom. There is no doubt that American intervention in other nations has often served American interests. In prosecuting the Cold

War, too, when anti-communist dictators were propped up, many mistakes were made. Fighting proxy battles on other people's territory was also destructive and far from the action of a benevolent power in the world. On the other hand, the idealism inherent in the concept of American exceptionalism has also, at least at times, led to U.S. intervention when self-interest has not represented a significant factor, as Boot says:

in the early years of the twentieth century, the United States was least likely to intervene in those nations (such as [Argentina](#) and [Costa Rica](#)) where American investors held the biggest stakes. The longest occupations were undertaken in precisely those countries—[Nicaragua](#), [Haiti](#), the [Dominican Republic](#)—where the United States had the smallest economic stakes. Moreover, two of the most interventionist presidents in American history [Theodore Roosevelt](#) and [Woodrow Wilson](#), were united in their contempt for what TR called "malefactors of great wealth." Wilson was probably the most imperialist president of all, and his interventions had a decidedly idealistic tinge. His goal, as he proclaimed at the start of his administration, was "to teach the South American republics to elect good men."[\[15\]](#)

The claim that the U.S. was immaculately conceived, that it was sui generis, is debatable. The founding fathers did not invent the concepts of liberty, of rights or of the "pursuit of happiness" but were influenced by [John Locke](#), [John Stuart Mill](#) and by other European thinkers. They also drew on institutional precedents and on ideas from [Rome](#) and from [Ancient Greece](#). They were, though, suspicious of some European ideas.[\[16\]](#) It has been suggested, too, that if Europe "dreamt" the Enlightenment then it was the U.S. that "realized it." However, according to Gutfeld, not all the ideals on which the U.S. was founded can be found in Enlightenment thought. The Enlightenment thinkers did not have much to say about either democracy or pluralism or advocate church-state separation, thus "in America, the Enlightenment had to fuse itself to democracy" and "Americans discovered that the two were not always synonymous." "Almost none of the eighteenth century philosophers" says Gutfeld "directed his thoughts to such a pluralist society."[\[17\]](#) Gutfeld argues that many of the ideas on which the U.S. was founded did originate from Europe but that Americans transformed these into "something that the European philosophers and dreamers did not plan or foresee," including church-state separation. The "most meaningful outcome" remains "the [Constitution of the United States](#)," which is "America's most important contribution to the history of modern thought." This document was an attempt to "translate the ideas of the Enlightenment to a daily reality." This "has remained a continuous, ongoing struggle throughout the entire history of the United States."[\[18\]](#) It could be argued that unique circumstances surround the birth of many nations. The claim to be "special" can result in negative consequences, especially if the nation is also a world power. It can pursue self-interest across the globe. On the other hand, the notion of being "special," if tempered by moral considerations and a genuine desire to do good in the world, can have positive consequences.

Imperial powers, ranging from the Romans to the [Mongols](#) to the British, have self-consciously tried to establish the rule of law, and to preserve the peace; hence references in literature to the Pax Romana, the Pax Mongolica, and the Pax Britannica. Findlay and

O'Rourke point out that "Periods of sustained expansion in world trade have tended to coincide with the infrastructure of law and order necessary to keep trade routes open being provided by a dominant "hegemon" or imperial power, as in the cases of the Pax Mongolica and Pax Britannica."^[19] Ferguson argues that Empires (he includes the "American Empire" here) are "necessary" arguing that as a "liberal empire," America promotes freedom, "economic openness" and the "institutional foundations for successful development."^[20] The way in which the concept of American exceptionalism has impacted on the wider world has also involved a struggle. On the one hand, America has tried to act as a nation among nations promoting liberty and the pursuit of happiness. On the other hand, America has acted as a nation above nations pursuing its special self-interest at the expense of other people's liberty and happiness. The convictions that poverty and class-conflict were alien to the principles on which the republic was founded can also motivate political leaders to eliminate these from the American experience. Phillips warns that the notion of being special can also become a form of "imperial hubris." He points out how many empires that once claimed to be special, even "God's chosen nation" over-extended themselves and collapsed, and suggests that Americans take a look at history. While generalizing about how and why empires fall is problematic, an "economic as well as political and religious smugness," he says "threads through each historical sequence."^[21]

Notes

↑ Martin (2007), 112-113.

↑ Ross (1991), xiv.

↑ Stam and Shohat (2007), 22-23.

↑ [4.0 4.1](#) Ross (1991), 26.

↑ Ron Jacobs, [American Exceptionalism: A Disease of Conceit](#), Counterpunch. Retrieved October 19, 2008.

↑ Howard Zinn, [The Myth of American Exceptionalism](#), MIT. Retrieved October 19, 2008.

↑ Emmanuel Godin and Tony Chafer, [The French Exception](#) (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005, [ISBN 9781571816849](#)).

↑ Phillips (2006), xv.

↑ John Winthrop, [A Model of Christian Charity](#), Hanover Historical Texts Project. Retrieved October 19, 2008.

↑ Emory Elliott, "The dream of a Christian utopia," [The Cambridge Introduction to Early American Literature](#) (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002, [ISBN 9780521817172](#)), 29-50.

↑ Kenneth L. Woodward, [The Way the World Ends](#), Newsweek (2005):67-74.

↑ Thomas Paine, [Common Sense](#), Early America. Retrieved October 19, 2008.

↑ Gutfield (2002), 12.

↑ David Wessel, [As rich-poor gap widens in US, class mobility stalls](#), The Wall Street Journal. Retrieved October 19, 2008.

↑ Max Boot, [Neither New nor Nefarious: The Liberal Empire Strikes Back](#), Current History 102 (667). Retrieved October 19, 2008.

↑ Gutfield (2002), 11.

↑ Gutfield (2002), 31.

↑ Gutfield (2002), 205.

↑ Ronald Findlay and Kevin H. O'Rourke, Power and Plenty: Trade, War, and the World Economy in the Second Millennium. The Princeton Economic History of the Western World (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007, [ISBN 9780691118543](#)), 540.

↑ Ferguson (2004), 27-28.

↑ Phillips (2006), 298.

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