American Exceptionalism

**SUPPORTERS ARGUE**
The founding principles of the United States make it the greatest country in the world. The United States has a responsibility to spread freedom to other countries. President Obama (D) and other liberals do not understand what makes the United States special and have pursued policies that have made the country look weak.

**OPPONENTS ARGUE**
Americans, like everybody else, think their country is the most special on earth, but that does not make it so. The belief in American exceptionalism has led the United States into a series of costly and seemingly endless wars, often with disastrous results. Meanwhile, rising economic inequality at home has weakened social mobility, one of the few aspects of life in the United States that previously made it exceptional.
innocent civilians in response to protests against his rule. On March 28, President Obama (D) gave a speech explaining his rationale for U.S. involvement in the bombings, saying, "Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different."

Many observers thought Obama's speech represented the president's acceptance of the notion of "American exceptionalism"—the idea that the U.S. has a special role to play in world events. Proponents of American exceptionalism tend to argue that the U.S. has a moral responsibility to spread freedom and democracy around the globe. Conservatives have long championed that idea and had previously criticized Obama for what they considered his rejection of it.

The policies of Obama's predecessor, President George W. Bush (R, 2001–09), exemplified for many the belief in American exceptionalism. In 2001 and 2003, the Bush administration launched wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, respectively, that overthrew those countries' governments. Though Bush had initially promoted those wars to the public as a response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, he later came to frame them as part of a deeper struggle for global freedom. In his second inaugural address, in 2005, Bush argued that "it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world."

Many observers viewed Bush's speech as an argument for continued U.S. military intervention worldwide; some journalists at the time suggested that the administration had been considering launching other invasions, even as U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq struggled to maintain order in the absence of stable governments in those countries. While Bush's supporters vehemently defended his goal of spreading freedom, critics insisted that the president's policies would lead the U.S. down a path to perpetual war.

Obama, who, as a state senator in Illinois had opposed the Iraq war and, as a presidential candidate, had promised to end the war, was considered by many observers to be a departure from Bush. The U.S. intervention in Libya, however, has changed many people's perceptions of Obama. Indeed, even as he came under fire from many liberals for launching a third U.S. military operation, Obama was applauded by conservatives for finally embracing, in their opinion, the idea of American exceptionalism.

Many observers also note that U.S. citizens are more likely than those of other countries to have strongly patriotic views. James Wilson, a scholar with the conservative think tank the American Enterprise Institute, notes that more than 70% of Americans consider themselves "very proud" to be living in their country, compared to, according to Wilson, only 38% of the French and 21% of Germans and Japanese. Indeed, Wilson notes, "America differs from other democratic nations in many ways, some material and some mental."

Broadly generalizing the ways that people of differing political ideologies view American exceptionalism, political analyst Michael Medved writes for USA Today,

> The right views America as exceptionally blessed and righteous—chosen by God...to inspire humanity with distinctive ideals of liberty, self rule and free markets. The left, on the other hand, expresses an intensifying tendency to see the U.S. as exceptionally guilty (for slavery, "genocide" against Native Americans and arrogant imperialism) and exceptionally backward when it comes to "social justice."

Is the U.S. inherently a better, more special country than all others? Does it have a moral obligation to spread freedom and democracy throughout the world?

Supporters of American exceptionalism contend that the U.S. is unlike any other country. Because of its standing as the world's most socially and economically successful democracy, the U.S. is the greatest country in the world, supporters say. The U.S. has a God-given duty to promote its values, many adherents insist. Working with other countries weakens U.S. individuality, supporters contend. They believe that the U.S. should use its military might whenever necessary to spread freedom and democracy throughout the world.

Critics of American exceptionalism argue that every country wants to believe it is special; citizens in the U.S. are no different from people in other countries in feeling that their country is the best in the world. A belief in American exceptionalism, opponents argue, has led the U.S. into a state of continuous war. Additionally, critics say, with economic equality in the U.S. diminishing, some of the core values that made the country exceptional in the past have faded away.

The Notion of American Exceptionalism

The concept of American exceptionalism has its roots in the founding of the U.S. in the 18th century as a democracy unlike any other in the world at the time. As the country's population grew and, by necessity, began to move westward during the early part of the 19th century, many U.S. policy makers promulgated a belief in Manifest Destiny—the view that the U.S. was meant or fated to expand across the North American continent to the Pacific Ocean. The belief in Manifest Destiny led to the removal of American Indians from desirable lands and the annexation of Texas in 1845, which precipitated the Mexican–American War (1846-48). [See Issues & Controversies in American History: Manifest Destiny; Issues & Controversies in American History: Mexican–American War]

One of the earliest writers to articulate the concept of American exceptionalism was the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville, who in 1835 and 1840 released the two volumes that constitute Democracy in America. In the book, Tocqueville analyzes the young nation and examines what makes the U.S. different from other countries. According to Harvey Mansfield, a professor of government at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Tocqueville's "book on America told the rest of the civilized world what to expect in its future, as America was unique in displaying a complete democracy."
Toqueville writes, "The position of the Americans is...quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one." However, Toqueville contended that the uniqueness of Americans was not attributable to their acceptance of democracy so much as to other circumstances, such as the country's geographic location—far from Europe—and its origins in the culture of the Puritans, who believed they were chosen by God to settle a new Promised Land. Indeed, many observers have noted that religion plays a major role in the belief in American exceptionalism, with some proponents contending that the U.S. was tasked by God to spread freedom throughout the world.

Some observers have found that a number of factors that Toqueville says contribute to Americans' sense of specialness actually reflect negatively on the U.S. For instance, Mansfield notes that Toqueville wrote that Americans were exceptional because they were almost unintellectual—that "their exclusively commercial habits" seem to "divert their minds from the pursuit of science, literature and the arts."

While the U.S. reveled in its reliance on personal freedoms, such as the ability to speak, gather and worship freely, Toqueville noted that the country at the time still relied extensively on slave labor, even after most of the rest of the world had abolished it. Mansfield writes, "That is why [Toqueville] could say that America revealed what a complete democracy is. Democratic justice is always accompanied by democratic injustice. The reason why slavery continued for so long in America is that the majority was behind it."

Observers have noted a variety of ways in which the U.S. differs from other democracies. They point out it has a unique system of government with three separate branches that are accountable to one another. Because of that, the U.S. has a chief executive—the president—who is not directly involved in the process of making laws (although the president does have influence over the legislative process and can veto laws he disagrees with). Wilson notes that, by contrast, most European democracies have parliamentary systems, which do not separate executive and legislative branches of government. The American style of government, Wilson explains, makes the country less vulnerable than others to major changes. According to Wilson:

> America was slow to adopt welfare programs, social security, unemployment insurance, and government-supported health care, while Europe adopted these policies rapidly. We have kept our tax rate lower than it is in most of Europe. The central difference is that...a parliamentary system permits temporary popular majorities to make bold changes rather quickly, while a presidential system with a powerful, independent, and internally divided Congress requires that big changes undergo lengthy debates and substantive accommodations.

The concept of American exceptionalism has often been tied to U.S. military interventions overseas. Many early U.S. military conflicts were over the acquisition of territory and involved no rhetoric about spreading democracy or freedom to other countries. That changed over time, however. In 1917, President Woodrow Wilson (D, 1913–21) declared that the U.S. had to enter World War I (1914–18) because "The world must be made safe for democracy." Wilson told a joint session of Congress:

> Peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no domination. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them.

U.S. military actions in the latter half of the 20th century were shaped primarily by the Cold War—an ideological conflict between the U.S. and the communist Soviet Union. A number of so-called proxy wars erupted during the Cold War, in which the U.S. would provide military, financial and tactical support to one combatant, while the Soviet Union supported the other. Although many of those conflicts were covert operations (planned and undertaken in secret), others were major military operations—specifically the Korean War (1950–53) and the Vietnam War (1959–75). Both of those conflicts involved the U.S. fighting to defend a democratically inclined South from an aggressive, Soviet-supported North. In the Vietnam War, the U.S. paid a particularly high price in casualties, with a little more than 58,000 soldiers killed before the South's capital city of Saigon fell to the North in 1975. It was also the first time the U.S. had lost a major military conflict, which instilled doubts in many as to the U.S.'s ability to determine the outcome of global events. [See Issues & Controversies in American History: Korean War; Issues & Controversies in American History: Vietnam War]

Despite the U.S. loss in Vietnam, some political leaders continued to advance the idea of the U.S. as a global example of freedom and defender of democracy. President Ronald Reagan (R, 1981–89), for example, referred to the U.S. as a "shining city upon a hill." The phrase was a reference to a 1630 sermon in which Massachusetts Puritan John Winthrop warned pilgrims who had recently arrived from England that their colony would be an example for other civilizations. He said, "We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us." The phrase is often used as a metaphor for American exceptionalism.

In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, bringing an end to the Cold War. Many foreign policy analysts debated the role the U.S. would play in the post–Cold War global environment. During that period, the U.S. embarked on several military actions in war-torn countries such as Yugoslavia and Somalia to provide humanitarian aid and reduce civilian casualties. Those interventions were termed multilateral—they employed a diplomatic or military strategy that includes working with international partners—and were carried out with U.N. backing and assistance from many countries. [See Multilateralism and the Conflict in Libya (sidebar)]
Views of American Exceptionalism by Presidents Bush and Obama

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, some observers speculated that the "war on terror" begun by President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the attacks, which included the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, would replace the Cold War as the new era's chief geopolitical conflict.

Many people found Bush's foreign policy to be the ultimate expression of American exceptionalism. During Bush's tenure, journalists frequently referred to the influence on the Bush administration of neoconservatives—conservatives who held the view that the U.S. should exercise a strong foreign policy and have a powerful presence in the world. Neoconservatives strongly favored invading Iraq, and, according to many reports, were in large part responsible for promoting the idea to Bush.

Bush's second inaugural address was almost entirely focused on promoting the idea that the U.S. should export its brand of democracy to the world. In the speech, Bush framed the American struggle against dictatorships worldwide as a battle between good and evil prompted by the September 11 attacks, and he evoked religious imagery in discussing the U.S. mission:

*America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth.... Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation. It is the honorable achievement of our fathers. Now it is the urgent requirement of our nation's security, and the calling of our time.*

Bush also said, "America's influence is not unlimited, but fortunately for the oppressed, America's influence is considerable, and we will use it confidently in freedom's cause." Bush's speech received a substantial amount of praise, even from critics of his policies. Liberal MSNBC commentator Rachel Maddow has described the speech as "beautiful," and paraphrased it, saying, "we believe in this idea of a human value of democracy and self-determination that transcends all of our international differences."

Obama was considered by many observers to have a far more nuanced view of the U.S. role in the world. In the speech, Bush framed the American struggle against dictatorships worldwide as a battle between good and evil prompted by the September 11 attacks, and he evoked religious imagery in discussing the U.S. mission:

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Obama was considered by many observers to have a far more nuanced view of the U.S. role in the world. Obama angered many proponents of American exceptionalism in 2009 by replying, when asked whether he believed in the notion, "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism."

Still, Obama, on a handful of occasions, had given voice to the sentiment that the U.S. was a unique nation. In his 2011 State of the Union address, Obama described the U.S. as "a light to the world" as well as "the greatest nation on Earth."

Meanwhile, even when calling for the U.S. to engage in humanitarian efforts in Libya, Obama stressed that U.S. intervention in foreign affairs must always be carefully considered. In his March 28 speech discussing the conflict, he said, "It's true that America cannot use our military wherever repression occurs. And given the costs and risks of intervention, we must always measure our interests against the need for action. But that cannot be an argument for never acting on behalf of what's right." [See President Obama's Remarks on Libya Conflict (sidebar)]

Shortly after Obama's speech, many political pundits declared that his comments proved that the president subscribed to the notion of American exceptionalism. Political analyst Adam Server wrote for the *Washington Post*, "Whatever the substantive differences between Obama and his conservative critics on the topic of American Exceptionalism, the notion that Obama has refused to acknowledge or denied outright America's unique role in the world has been permanently laid to rest."

Indeed, many conservatives praised the speech. William Kristol, one of the foremost neoconservative proponents of the Iraq war, wrote in the *Weekly Standard* that he found the speech "reassuring.... The president was unapologetic, freedom-agenda-embracing, and didn't shrink from defending the use...
of force or from appealing to American values and interests."

**U.S. Is Exceptional Among the World's Nations, Supporters Say**

Those who believe in American exceptionalism contend that the U.S. is greater than any other country in the world. Herman Cain, former chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City and former chief executive of the National Restaurant Association trade group, asserts that people in the U.S. "are blessed with unparalleled freedoms and boundless prosperity that for generations have inspired an innovative and industrious people. America is exceptional."

Proponents of American exceptionalism often proclaim that the U.S. has a religious calling to defend and protect its freedoms, especially those named in the Declaration of Independence. Cain argues, "We know that God, not government, bestows upon us these inalienable rights, and because of that, they must not be compromised by the whims of man."

Supporters insist that it is because of the U.S.'s founding principles that it is a greater nation than any other. Conservative pundit Monica Crowley opines for the *Washington Times*, "American exceptionalism is grounded in the founding of the United States upon an idea...built on the concept of individual liberty and equal justice before the law, with freedoms ranging from speech to worship, and rights from gun ownership to assembly."

Many conservatives have bemoaned what they believed was Obama's acceptance of multilateralism over a desire to embark on military actions alone. That attitude of cooperation, American exceptionalists say, is antithetical to the idea of the U.S. as a nation of rugged individualists. Mallory Factor, a member of the nonpartisan think tank the Council on Foreign Relations, writes for *Forbes*:

> President Obama favors global summits in which we participate humbly among large groups of the world's nations. He has embraced meetings of the G-20 group of countries...as a more "global" replacement for the G-7 meetings of the seven largest industrial democracies.... President Obama may be the first American president to lack faith in our special history, our special spirit and our special mission in the world.

Supporters insist that the uniquely American sense of individualism cultivates an enormous amount of character, which, they contend, Americans have more than other people. Cain argues that "conservatives see America as exceptional because of our shared belief in the dignity and creativity of the individual. We know that it is innately human to work, to risk, to dream. We understand that these virtues, coupled with the conditions American Exceptionalism provides, allow us to enjoy the economic and social mobility that other countries envy."

Conservatives have argued that Obama's lack of faith in American exceptionalism is the reason for his liberal, egalitarian policies. Indeed, they say, because he believes no individual—or country—is better than any other, he has supported an agenda that endorses what they see as the erroneous belief that all people are the same. Crowley writes, "In Mr. Obama's kaleidoscopic left-wing view, no nation is better than any other, no country can tell another country not to have nuclear weapons, and we're all socialists now."

Proponents of American exceptionalism insist that the U.S. should intervene more frequently to spread freedom in other countries. Kristol argues that the U.S. has not done enough to help foster the pro-democracy movements currently sweeping through countries that have endured authoritative regimes for decades. He argues, "The United States really should have the backs of those fighting for freedom." He has also written, "Here, early in the twenty-first century, the Arabs seem to be rising to the occasion. The question is, will we?"
U.S. Must Be Careful Not to Overexert Its Influence, Critics Maintain

Critics of American exceptionalism argue that, while it is natural for any individual or group of people to want to believe that they are special or exceptional, it is still unattractive and does not necessarily reflect reality. Salon blogger Glenn Greenwald argues, "As tribal beings, we naturally believe that our customs and beliefs with which we were inculcated from childhood are superior to Theirs.... Still, it is not a particularly appealing trait for an individual to run around hailing themselves 'the greatest in the world.'"

Opponents of American exceptionalism contend that the U.S. founders did not create a country in order to export freedom and democracy around the world. Andrew Bacevich, a professor of history and international relations at Boston University in Massachusetts, argues, "The hardheaded lawyers, merchants, farmers, and slaveholding plantation owners gathered in Philadelphia [on July 4, 1776] did not set out to create a church. They founded a republic. Their purpose was not to save mankind. It was to ensure that people like themselves enjoyed unencumbered access to the Jeffersonian trinity [of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness]."

Opponents also point out that, in its formative years, the U.S. did not act on behalf of other nations, opting instead to use its resources to expand its own power and influence. Bacevich contends, "[N]ever during the course of America's transformation from a small power to a great one did the United States exert itself to liberate others—absent an overriding perception that the nation had large security or economic interests at stake."

Critics argue that belief in American exceptionalism promotes a double standard that allows the country to rationalize unjust behavior. Greenwald maintains:

The fact remains that declaring yourself special, superior and/or exceptional... has serious consequences. It can (and usually does) mean that the same standards of judgment aren't applied to your acts as are applied to everyone else's.... It means that you're entitled (or obligated) to do things that nobody else is entitled or obligated to do.... It means that no matter how many bad things you do in the world, it doesn't ever reflect on who you are, because you're inherently exceptional and thus driven by good motives.

Critics such as Greenwald claim that, if proponents of American exceptionalism have their way, the U.S. will never be a peaceful nation. Greenwald worries that the notion of national exceptionalism will cause a country like the U.S. to find itself "in a posture of endless war, because your 'unique power, responsibilities, and moral obligations' will always find causes and justifications for new conflicts."

Other opponents argue that, while there are aspects of U.S. society that may have once made it exceptional, rising economic inequality has prevented the country from maintaining its status as an exceptional nation. Such critics contend that social mobility—one of the founding principles of the U.S.—has diminished in recent decades, making it increasingly difficult for people to rise above the social status into which they were born. With that aspect of the American dream disappearing, opponents say, it is impossible to declare that the U.S. is still the exceptional nation it once was. Richard Wolff, economics
professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, writes, "Over the last 30 years, the vast majority of US workers have, in fact, gotten poorer, when you sum up flat real wages, reduced benefits (pensions, medical insurance, etc), reduced public services and raised tax burdens. In economic terms, American 'exceptionalism' began to die in the 1970s."

Critics have also accused Republicans of pandering to voters by appealing to the basest emotions of fear and anger, in the process eroding the American tradition of discussing and debating important issues, which U.S. founders such as James Madison attempted to instill in the nation. Greg Grandin, a professor of history at New York University in New York City, argues:

[E]ven as the right defines individual supremacy as the essence of American Exceptionalism, it forsakes a Madisonian restraint in pursuit of electoral gain. It is hard to think of another moment in U.S. history where one half of the political establishment is, as the Republican party is today, so dependent on fanning the extremes and playing to the paranoia in order to win at the polls. American exceptionalism does seem to be dead or dying but at the hands of those who embrace it most tightly.

End of U.S. Intervention in Libya Uncertain

Much of the current debate over American exceptionalism has taken place in the context of the U.S. military intervention in Libya. Although conservatives initially applauded Obama’s decision to intervene in the conflict, they have since criticized his lack of aggressiveness and repeated pledges that the conflict will not be a prolonged one. Such promises lead them to worry that the U.S. will cease its military engagement before the job is done. Critics of the notion of American exceptionalism, however, insist that the idea is responsible for a string of what they see as futile military actions that may never end.

It remains to be seen how long the U.S. will be militarily involved in Libya, and whether that mission will be successful. In any event, it is likely that the debate over the U.S. role in the world will continue.

Discussion Questions

1) Do you think the U.S. is the greatest country in the world? Why or why not?

2) Do those who believe in American exceptionalism differ from people in other countries who think their nation is the greatest in the world? Explain your position.

3) Why do you think President Obama declared that the U.S., more than any other country, has a moral obligation to take action in Libya?

4) How does the U.S. differ from other democracies? Does that make it a better country? Why or why not?

5) Imagine you are U.S. president. Write a brief statement explaining the U.S. position in relation to other countries. Would you favor intervening in foreign wars? Do you feel the U.S. has a responsibility to do so? How would your opinion on American exceptionalism factor into your creation of a foreign policy?

Bibliography


**Additional Sources**

Additional information about American exceptionalism can be found in the following sources:


**Contact Information**

Information on how to contact organizations that either are mentioned in the discussion of American exceptionalism or can provide additional information on the subject is listed below:

**American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research**

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**Keywords and Points**

For further information about the ongoing debate over American exceptionalism, search for the following words and terms in electronic databases and other publications:

Alexis de Tocqueville
American democracy
Endless war
Exporting freedom
Libya

**Citation Information**