

Is America Still An Exceptional Nation?

Remarks by David J. Bobb at the 2010 spring meeting of the Philadelphia Society
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America is still an exceptional nation, and so long as it exists it always will be.

This may seem to be a claim of exceptional arrogance, but I make this claim not because of America's current political, economic, or military standing. America is exceptional because of the exceptional ideas upon which this nation is founded. Alexis de Tocqueville is often cited as the originator of the idea of American exceptionalism, but in fact America's founding fathers deemed their *own* efforts exceptional.

Take, for example, James Madison's statement as Publius in *Federalist* 14: "Happily for America, happily we trust for the whole human race, [the American Revolutionaries] pursued a new and more noble course. They accomplished a revolution that has no parallel in the annals of human society. They reared the fabrics of governments which have no model on the face of the globe."

Many other similar statements from other leading lights of the founding reveal to us what was obvious to them: The American experiment of self-government under law was new, unparalleled, and exceptional.

As John Adams described what happened in the American Revolution, "The radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments and affections of the People, was the real American Revolution."

This is not Saul Alinsky or Howard Zinn radicalism. It is not even a distant cousin of the radicalism of the French Revolution, which was borne of anti-religious ire and leveling zeal.

Rather, the radicalism of which Adams wrote impelled everyday Americans to go the root of the matter—as the Latin root "radix" suggests they should. The radicalism of the American Revolution insisted that the idea of natural rights is the surest foundation for a great regime.

The founders were mostly grateful for their British patrimony, but in the Revolution they also effected a break from the British.

What's exceptional about America's birth? Let me suggest five key components:

1. The natural rights foundation of the American regime;

2. A written constitution whose structure is indebted to but not subsumed in the natural law and common law traditions;
3. The combination of a national legislature that guards against majority tyranny, a powerful executive, and an independent judiciary, each of which is subservient to the “supreme law of the land”;
4. An unmatched commitment to universal equality, with the recognition that it is a gift from God; and
5. The establishment of religious freedom, as opposed to toleration or some other system of grudging accommodation.

These uniquenesses of America’s founding made possible our exceptionalism, which we can see clearly in five major accomplishments: the bold spirit of American individualism, the rule of law, responsible constitutionalism, unparalleled opportunity, and unmatched generosity. What’s entailed in each exceptional accomplishment?

1. **A bold spirit of individualism:** The affirmation of the natural rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” has enabled individual Americans to chart their own course—to the acquisition of wealth, the exploration of new territory, and the discovery of new inventions. This has translated, economically, into an entrepreneurial culture that still boasts the highest productivity rates in the world.
2. **The rule of law:** Our Constitution enables the rule of law. The American Constitution is the oldest national charter still in force in the world.
3. **Responsible constitutionalism:** The separation of powers and the system of federalism that results from a limited grant of power to the national legislature allows more than half a million Americans, every year, to hold elective political office. America has more than 87,000 units of government.
4. **Unparalleled opportunity:** Opportunity for high achievement by those who start on lower ground, in education, income, and business and political leadership, is more widespread and longer-enduring than in any other nation on Earth, large or small.
5. **Unmatched generosity:** Americans, many of whom are motivated by religious impulse, give away \$250 billion each year. No other developed country in the world, Arthur Brooks reports, comes close to American philanthropic and voluntary activity.

The topic of this panel is the question, “Is America *Still* An Exceptional Nation?”

However much we might believe that we have been an exceptional nation in the past, this conviction is no longer commonplace in our schools. Still, despite the “social studies” pabulum” that American students have been fed for well over a generation, most Americans yet believe, however inchoately, that they are citizens of an exceptional country.

These citizens seek statesmen who can tell them why this was the case, why it is still true, and why America can continue to be exceptional in the future. Even more, citizens seek statesmen who will prudently act on that understanding.

I believe America is still an exceptional nation, but one now greatly tempted by pride.

America’s greatest moments have been marked by humility. But we are not always humble. In fact, we struggle to avoid arrogance. As Benjamin Franklin concluded more than 225 years ago, “In reality, there is, perhaps, no one of our national passions so hard to subdue as pride.” What he meant, really, was arrogance, or disordered pride. And what he set out to reform in his life he saw as our national challenge as well. It is a vexing challenge, indeed, for, as Franklin said, “even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome [pride], I should probably be proud of my humility.”

Humility keeps our national vices in check at the same time it ennobles our other virtues. Humility of heart and mind makes prudence possible; it prepares the way for wisdom, enables justice, and encourages temperance. *Humility helps us to be courageous for the right causes.*

Humility by Americans:

1. keeps individualism from degenerating into subjectivism or relativism;
2. prevents the rule of law from degenerating into the rule of lawyers;
3. precludes responsible constitutionalism from degenerating into government being responsible for all;
4. keeps unparalleled opportunity from degenerating into unvarnished greed; and finally,
5. can help unmatched generosity from degenerating into unequalled redistribution of wealth.

For the last hundred years America’s original experiment of self-government under law has been at odds with an alternative political experiment started by Progressives. Doubting the underlying ideas and efficacy of the Founding experiment, the Progressives, proud of their German learning and theoretical expertise, sought “a new republic,” in the term advanced by Herbert Croly, founder of the magazine that still bears that name.

The Progressive project that resulted elevates the collective over the individual. It exalts not the rule of law but the reign of experts. Instead of a government responsible to the people it gives us a government responsible for them. In place of opportunity and generosity we get dependency.

Progressivism attacks the genuine pride we should have in our country with the claim that every country is exceptional in its own way. America has much about which we should be sorry, Progressives proclaim. America is guilty of hubris.

It's impossible to pin every current problem in America on Progressivism. Being exceptional does not exempt a nation's people from original sin, after all. But Progressivism, I would suggest, and the political experiment it has substituted in place of that of the Founders, has produced a country far less exceptional today than we could be.

As a people and even as a nation we are sometimes guilty of hubris. But not for the same reason that Progressives purport. We are arrogant when we subscribe to Progressive ideology and suppose that we can throw off the wisdom of our founding principles and yet continue to achieve the same exceptional results. We see this ideological arrogance at work in President Obama's repeated declaration that America needs "a new foundation."

It is tempting at this point in a program on America at the crossroads to suggest that we live in a uniquely arrogant age. However, to proclaim one age more arrogant than another is to ignore history and human nature, for both the undulations of history and the fixity of human nature reveal that throughout history excessive pride has preceded countless falls.

After the fifth century fall of Rome, one of the most spectacular of political failures, St. Augustine tried to explain the Eternal City's demise in a book written "to *convince* the proud of the power and excellence of humility." Arrogance, not just pride, Augustine argued, is natural to politics. Both are endemic to the human condition; each is ineradicable.

The age in which imperial Rome fell was no less stained by arrogance than the day on which republican Rome was founded. According to Augustine, all regimes have sinned and fallen short of real glory. None is perfect, nor is any capable of perfection. Political pride could be tempered by humility, he argued, but even then any success would itself be accompanied by constant sorrows. As one of the biblical passages Augustine most often quoted says, "The greater you are, the more you must humble yourself."

Humble yourself—or you may be humbled.

Today, exactly 1,600 years since the fall of Rome, America stands as the world's sole superpower. But for how long?

Stretched thin with a global war and prodigious debt, and infatuated with fatuousness, America looks like imperial Rome in its dotage. Our domestic disregard for the sanctity

of human life and anemic public education system, among many other strong indicators of decline, can only make us wonder whether we will meet a fate similar to that of Rome.

Yesterday, April 9, was Tax Freedom Day. The average American worked from January 1 until yesterday, the Tax Foundation tells us, to pay his federal, state, and income taxes. So from today forward we get to keep what we earn.

Despite all of this, America is not Rome. Our founding principles are as exceptional today as they were in 1776. The principles do not change, however much the adherence to them does.

That these principles are besieged in practice means that we must more ably rise to their defense.

The Great Seal of the United States reminds us that today this defense must proceed with humility. Looking to republican Rome for inspiration in 1782, the creators of the Great Seal emblazoned it with a quotation from the *Aeneid*: *annuit coeptis*. “God has smiled on our beginnings.”

Taken one way, this could be seen as an arrogant claim: we have God’s blessing, and no one else does. Taken another way—the way I think is most reasonable—this claim was humble: Divine Providence helped make our founding successful, but to ensure future blessings we must keep to a humble path in which we also love mercy and do justice, as is required by the Almighty.

This humility does not mean an abandonment of proper pride in America’s exceptionalism. It does, however, guard against national arrogance. Even more, it helps us to act worthy of the blessings of liberty.

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