

## Opinion – Eulogy for American Exceptionalism

Written by Morgan Bazilian

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# Opinion – Eulogy for American Exceptionalism

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MORGAN BAZILIAN, JUL 7 2020

The romantic notion of American exceptionalism undermines the effectiveness of US foreign policy, and clinging to this outdated notion harms specific areas of international cooperation. It should by now be clear that we aren't special, and if we run foreign policy on deluded notions and poorly-earned arrogance it will only cause harm to those forming useful coalitions and partnerships. For example, on climate change, hubris will make a new administration focus on shaming other countries, when a show of some level of stability and making real changes domestically would go a long way towards real leadership.

Alexis de Tocqueville coined the term for the U.S. over 150 years ago ("The position of the Americans is...quite exceptional"). In a much less oft quoted sentence in that same paragraph, de Tocqueville goes on to say, "Their strictly Puritanical origin, their exclusively commercial habits, even the country they inhabit...seems to divert their minds from the pursuit of science, literature, and the arts..." And yet this notion lingers, not only in political language and symbols, but at the core of foreign policy formulation

In 2009, Barack Obama (quoted by the Atlantic) reasonably noted, "I believe in American exceptionalism ... [American] leadership is incumbent—depends on—our ability to create partnerships because we can't solve these problems alone." This seems to be taken to its logical conclusion by Thanassis Cambanis, who calls for an embrace of a diminished international role. Still, the idea has been at the heart of political campaigning for most of the country's history, and not typically with the thoughtfulness of Obama. Of course, the notion is almost only used in the pejorative under the current administration.

The U.S. is not alone in claiming exceptionalism, the notion percolates in many other countries. Stephen Walt was clear on the myth of American exceptionalism almost ten years ago, noting, "By focusing on their supposedly exceptional qualities, Americans blind themselves to the ways that they are a lot like everyone else." While it has some lasting appeal to those in the foreign policy apparatus in Washington DC and political operatives nationwide, it:

1. has almost no continuing basis in American actions or experience, and has not for decades
2. breeds arrogance
3. undermines leverage to tackle real problems

The economics profession carries significant weight in policy decisions such as climate change. Recently, Paul Romer called for a new humility in economics, as a result of decades of large egos, bad predictions, and unhelpful "insights" from analysis. Vice President, and now presidential candidate Joe Biden notes in his climate plan that he will, "use every tool of American foreign policy to push the rest of the world to raise their ambitions alongside the United States." It goes on to say that: "the Biden Administration will...hold countries to account for meeting, or failing to meet, their Paris commitments and for other steps that promote or undermine global climate solutions."

It is difficult to see how this posturing will be received as anything but hubris by the U.S., given the utterly unreliable partner it has been through decades of climate negotiations. At the same time, the rest of the world is well aware that the U.S. is exceptional in one related area—the largest producer of oil and gas in the world. Hubris is the enemy of good decision-making. Couple it with incompetence, greed, and laziness and you get a mess. We have the sad privilege in the United States to witness this terrible mixture in government every day for the last three and half years.

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Many DC insiders cheered at the majestic images from the Supreme Court's DACA decisions recently as useful for showing the world the "American ideal". Yes, the images are powerful. Yes, the Court's decision is correct and righteous. But it does not support progressive policy or regulation, rather it simply slashes down racist and regressive policies. It is not leadership *per se*, it is simply decent. They are not the same thing. The U.S. government puts in far more political appointees in the civil service than any other OECD country. While these are talented or politically astute people, they tend to be inexperienced and lack historical depth in service. Additionally, few of these experts have spent much time living abroad, at least outside of embassies and bases. They are thus more prone to notions of exceptionalism.

The COVID-19 pandemic shines a particularly harsh light on U.S. leadership as well as underlying structural issues such as embedded racism and a deeply flawed, and unique, health system. It is time for a new international relations theory of humility. That is, an American foreign policy apparatus that acknowledges inexperience and mistakes, and recognizes the deeply interconnected international space, and supports other countries to lead. As the famous musical Hamilton comes to television, it is clear that the founding of the United States was exceptional. But to navigate the deeply interconnected world, there must be a more humble and cooperative set of ideals embedded in our foreign policy tone and positions.

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