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“Let This Be the Death Knell for American Exceptionalism”

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The American past is a contentious place (though perhaps not as contentious as the present) and in recent years, efforts to reframe or reclaim American history have prompted a great deal of debate both in academic circles and in wider public conversations about American identity. It is within this context that two prominent American historians, Kevin Kruse and Julian Zelizer, published their 2022 volume of essays called *Myth America*, in which, as the book is subtitled, “Historians Take On the Biggest Legends and Lies About Our Past.”

The first chapter in *Myth America* is titled “American Exceptionalism.” Written by David A. Bell, the chapter provides a broad overview of the history of the idea of American exceptionalism, noting that there are two different meanings embedded in the term—one that he says is “analytical” and another that he says is “moralizing.” Bell tells us that the analytical meaning emerged first and focused on the idea that the pattern of development of the United States was an “historical aberration,”[1] but it is the moralistic use of the term that most people think about when they think about the United States as an exceptional nation. As Bell puts it, the moralistic sense implies that “the United States has desirable qualities that other nations lack and has a special, chosen, superior role in human history.”[2]

Bell’s overview of the history and current usage of the idea of American exceptionalism is strong, and he notes that the concept’s “vacuity … has been its strength, for it can be filled with whatever content is desired, even as it flatters US audiences by assuring them of their membership in the elect.”[3] However, even as he describes the flaws in conceptions of American exceptionalism, he succumbs to the temptation that maybe, just maybe, exceptionalism is within our grasp. The chapter’s last sentence reads: “But the mere notion of being exceptional can do very little to inspire Americans actually to *be* exceptional and to aspire to become a better

people."[4] I don't disagree with the desire for Americans "to become a better people," but can they be exceptional? Should they be? Why would we expect them to be?

In 2012, during the presidential campaign between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, the *New York Times* reporter Scott Shane published an article called "The Opiate of Exceptionalism," in which he lamented the unwillingness of either presidential candidate to speak "with blunt honesty about American problems"[5] such as economic inequality, the growing national debt, or sagging educational outcomes. Politicians tend to promise voters that they have the means to fix these problems, and that they will do so just as soon as they get in office. Many Americans buy into these promises, believing themselves to be part of a special nation whose exceptional status is both right and natural.

I mention Shane's article in part because he interviewed me for it and the article includes a number of statistics from a blog I used to maintain called "Ranking America," in which I provided hundreds of rankings that position the United States in a global context. I created the blog in order to provide a ready resource for myself and others to show how the United States compares to other nations in a wide range of categories, including multiple metrics of freedom, virtually none of which places the United States at number one. I started the blog because my students regularly parroted the talking points of American exceptionalism, and I wanted to disabuse them of many of their misperceptions that the United States was a uniquely free and special country.

In retrospect, it is unclear how successful I was in prompting my students to rethink their presumption that the United States is the greatest nation on Earth in some way that mere rankings cannot capture. The mythology of American exceptionalism is powerful, and its power helps explain some of the appeal of Donald Trump as a politician, despite Trump's early protestations to the contrary. In 2015, shortly after launching his bid to become president, Trump said that he didn't like the idea of American exceptionalism and didn't believe in it.[6] This came at a time when then-President Obama was busy at work articulating and rearticulating his own vision of what American exceptionalism meant to him, as detailed in a 2015 article in *The Washington Post* titled "Obama's New Patriotism."[7]

At that time, in the early days of the 2016 presidential campaign, many Republican candidates were criticizing Obama for what they charged was his "failure to grasp America's exceptional nature" despite the fact that, as the article goes on to say, "no president has talked about American exceptionalism more often and in more varied ways than Obama."[8] While Trump might not have directly criticized Obama based on the idea of American exceptionalism, Trump's birtherism served the same cause: How could Obama really embrace American exceptionalism if he wasn't even really an American?

While he distanced himself from the idea of American exceptionalism, Trump didn't rule out the concept completely: "I want to take everything back from the world that we've given them.… I'd like to make us exceptional."[9] Saying that he wanted to

make the country exceptional was another way of saying that he wanted to "Make America Great Again," but there are important distinctions between greatness and exceptionality, the most important being that greatness exists along a continuum that connects it with goodness and mediocrity and badness. Exceptionality, on the other hand, exists off of this continuum; it is an exception to the usual scales of goodness and badness. The idea of American exceptionalism relies on this supposedly inherent and immutable difference between the United States and other countries.

During Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, and also during his first administration, not all observers recognized that Trump's exhortation to make America great again was another way of framing American exceptionalism. In April of 2016, the journalist Tom Engelhardt proclaimed on his blog, *TomDispatch*, that Trump was "the first American leader or potential leader of recent times not to feel the need or obligation to insist that the United States, the 'sole' superpower of Planet Earth, is an 'exceptional' nation.… His claim is the opposite. That, at present, America is anything but exceptional."[10] Three years into the first Trump administration, the Norwegian scholar of international studies Hilde Eliassen Restad wrote: "Trump breaks with all modern presidents not just because he challenges the postwar 'liberal international order,' but because he rejects its underlying master narrative—American exceptionalism."[11]

Both of these proclamations were premature. Indeed, far from disbelieving in American exceptionalism, Trump believed, and continues to believe, that America just wasn't exceptional enough. Elect him, and that would change. In the minds of Trump and his supporters, they did exactly that during his first term, which helps explain why he changed his slogan from "Make America Great Again" to "Keep America Great." This is also why in his 2020 reelection campaign, one of Trump's campaign promises was to "teach American exceptionalism" in the schools.[12]

Nearly five years later, in his 2025 inauguration speech, Trump said that under his leadership, "America will soon be greater, stronger, and far more exceptional than ever before." Elsewhere in that speech he said that the United States "will be a nation like no other, full of compassion, courage, and exceptionalism." It's unclear exactly what it means to be "full of exceptionalism," but to connect that claim with claims of compassion and courage being attributes that no other country has underscores the absurdity of his use of American exceptionalism.

The reality is, the United States is not exceptional and it never has been, especially in the moral sense of the word. The fact that so many wish it to be so, and act as though it is, has been detrimental both to American domestic politics and to many American foreign policy actions. Despite all of its undeniable wealth and power, the United States is a country like other countries, and it is not exempt from macro trends in global politics. The political ascendancy of Donald Trump is best understood not as an anomaly, but as part of a wider international shift away from liberal democratic values to authoritarian values. There is nothing exceptional about it or about him.

As David Bell noted in *Myth America*, at this stage in the narratives of American exceptionalism, the term has lost any real meaning. It is a vacuous catchphrase, though one that, unfortunately, continues to entrance many people, blinding them to the possibilities of mere goodness over presumed exceptionality. As long as Americans of all political stripes continue to believe and act like America is an exceptional nation wanting only the right leader to take charge, then the United States will continue to be caught in a trap of its own making.

Notes

[1] David A. Bell, "American Exceptionalism," in *Myth America: Historians Take on the Biggest Legends and Lies About Our Past*, ed. Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer (Basic Books, 2022), 13.

[2] Bell, "American Exceptionalism," 14.

[3] Bell, "American Exceptionalism," 25.

[4] Bell, "American Exceptionalism," 25 (emphasis in the original).

[5] Scott Shane, "The Opiate of Exceptionalism," *The New York Times*, October 19, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/21/sunday-review/candidates-and-the-truth-about-america.html

[6] Quoted in David Corn, "Donald Trump Says He Doesn't Believe in American Exceptionalism," *Mother Jones*, June 7, 2016.

[7] Greg Jaffe, "Obama's New Patriotism," *Washington Post*, June 3, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2015/06/03/obama-and-american-exceptionalism/. This article appeared on the front page of the *Washington Post* a day later under the title "Obama's American Exceptionalism"; see Greg Jaffe, "Obama's American Exceptionalism," *Washington Post*, June 4, 2015.

[8] Jaffe, "Obama's New Patriotism."

[9] Quoted in Corn, "Donald Trump Says He Doesn't Believe in American Exceptionalism."

[10] Tom Engelhardt, "The Real Meaning of Donald Trump," *TomDispatch*, https://tomdispatch.com/engelhardt-has-the-american-age-of-decline-begun/

[11] Hilde Eliassen Restad, "Whither the 'City Upon a Hill'? Donald Trump, America First, and American Exceptionalism," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 1 (2019): 63.

[12] Nicole Gaudiano, "Trump Wants to Teach 'American Exceptionalism,' an Idea He Once Disavowed," *Politico*, August 24, 2020,

https://www.politico.com/news/2020/08/24/trump-teach-american-exceptionalism-401060

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