



## AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM – A DEFINITION LIBERALS AND CONSERVATIVES CAN AGREE ON

Stephen L. Bakke  December 26, 2011

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed .....*  
– from the Declaration of Independence



*We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and to our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America. –*  
Preamble to the United States Constitution

***The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one.*** – from French Political Thinker and Historian Alexis de Tocqueville's work, "Democracy in America, Volume I" 1835 (Yes, I have it and have read "at it" – tough goin'!)

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### Is There Really an Issue? Is American Exceptionalism a Controversial Term?

The term "American Exceptionalism" (also referred to this as AE) has come into common usage in recent years, and it has been the fuse for disagreement as to its meaning and related policy implications. I decided to devote a section of my website to the subject, and since that decision my concept of AE has changed a bit. The change is for the better I think, as it not only clarifies for me its original intended meaning, but it actually provides a broader basis for agreement between liberals and conservatives – **and we need a good dose of that!**

My hope is that after one understands the appropriate meaning of AE, all the areas of disagreement no longer should shadow the term "American Exceptionalism." The controversial issues represent attitudes, opinions, and manifestations of policy, regarding national and international issues. **That's a debate for a different time!** Future reports will deal with something like this: **"Has this exceptionally conceived country performed in an exceptional way?"**

## American Exceptionalism? – It's About Our Country's Unique DIFFERENCES! – It's NOT a Statement of Superiority

*The ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence, and the unique American identity that arose from an American civilization that honored them, form what we call today "American Exceptionalism" ..... extraordinary nation ..... is **not a statement of nationalist hubris** ..... – Newt Gingrich*

***America is exceptional because, unlike any other nation, it is dedicated to the principles of human liberty, grounded on the truths that all men are created equal and endowed with equal rights. .... To this day, so many years after the American Revolution, these principles—proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence and promulgated by the United States Constitution—still define America as a nation and a people.** – Matthew Spalding, Ph.D., Director of the B. Kenneth Simon Center for American Studies at The Heritage Foundation.*

*If the ideas in the Declaration were not new or particularly radical, then why did this single document fundamentally alter world history? The answer is this: no nation had ever before embraced human equality and God-given individual rights as its fundamental organizing principle. **America was the exception, because never before had a nation recognized sovereignty in the citizen rather than the government.** – Newt Gingrich*

Here is what we need to remember:

- **At the highest level of analysis, American Exceptionalism declares America's unique differences, not its superiority!** These differences spring from the original motivation of our founders, the extent to which they studied history to learn about various forms of governments, and the basic tenants expressed in the Declaration of Independence and our constitution – endowed by creator, unalienable rights, emphasis on **liberty**, with **power derived from consent of the governed** (hence "We the People).



AE has nothing to do with blind nationalism. It really is all about the form of government that was selected, and the concepts and philosophies behind the final choices. **This form of government was never attempted anywhere else before, or after, the birth of the U.S. – i.e. exceptional!**

*A Mrs. Powel of Philadelphia asked Benjamin Franklin, "Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?" With no hesitation whatsoever, Franklin responded, **"A republic, if you can keep it."** – Comments made outside Independence Hall after adjournment of the Constitutional Convention of 1787*

*“A republic, if you can keep it.” In a single sentence, Dr. Franklin summed up the extraordinary drama that would play out for all of American history between **the two vital forces that sustain American Exceptionalism: freedom and responsibility** ..... Notably, the Founding Fathers created a republic instead of a direct democracy. – Newt Gingrich*

- The Founding Principles manifested themselves by inspiring a “representative republic,” checks and balances among the branches of government and between that government, the states, and its citizens - and very importantly, specific limitations on the power of the federal government. **This was never done before and hasn’t really been accomplished since our founding – whence cometh American Exceptionalism.**

I believe this original concept of American Exceptionalism can be agreed upon by a majority from both ends of the political spectrum. Nevertheless, there will be disagreements, and they are real. I understand them, and grant them legitimacy even when I disagree.

### **Superiority? That’s a Separate Debate!**

I believe most can agree on **why** we are exceptional – in the sense of being “unique.” But we will have real disagreements in our analysis of “how we should proceed from there,” and that’s something that we should expect and accept. Political and philosophical extremes will have very different reactions and opinions. I think that former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich acknowledged inevitable disagreement, at some level of discussion, when he wrote:

*We need to acknowledge that **American Exceptionalism is something deeper than [history and our political institutions], it’s also visceral, emotional attachment to America and to the common destiny we Americans share.** – Newt Gingrich*

When we start analyzing, applying and projecting the implications of American Exceptionalism, it’s inevitable that we eventually get to those things that cause serious disagreement and rigorous argument. **This “visceral, emotional” reaction** is often what is considered to be the American Exceptionalism argument. That is so wrong!

### **OK, So the U.S. is Unique – Now What!**

I believe that the inevitable disagreements stem from the variety of attitudes, opinions, cultural identification, and political affiliations. They most often relate to vastly different visions for the role of the federal government in the lives of citizens, and in the international community. The debate is about how this exceptional form of government has manifested itself and whether or not we like or dislike what has happened. We will debate whether or not we have used our uniqueness and exceptionalism appropriately! Have we appropriately seized our opportunity? Have we used our exceptionalism in a way we can praise ..... or in a way we should reject?

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*There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. – American author and poet Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)*