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 **AMERICAN  
EXCEPTIONALISM:  
A MISUNDERSTOOD  
CONCEPT**

Stephen L. Bakke  May 1, 2018



*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.....Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.....- **from the Declaration of Independence***

*We the People.....establish this Constitution for the United States of America. - **from the Preamble to the United States Constitution***

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Craziness and confusion dominates today's world. It's time to back up and take stock of the basis for my feelings about America, and my conduct as a "wannabe" pundit. In my idealistic younger years, I imagined one "world-wide nation," and seriously considered world-wide governance as a great way to achieve peace and prosperity. I even lined up a few potential candidates for "President of the World." I have trouble admitting that – but it's true.

What I didn't know, or simply ignored, was that a worldwide marketplace, and uninterrupted information channels, wouldn't eliminate irreconcilable differences, country-to-country. We've learned from unbalanced multi-lateral trade agreements, and especially from the doomed European Union, that most nations' priorities differ immensely, and cultural differences frustrate uniformity of thought and governance. Borders mean something, and nationalism is a societal instinct.

There's confusion as to the meaning and policy implications of American Exceptionalism. Because I wanted my personal feelings about America to be free of blind faith and wishful thinking, I began studying the subject – and my ideas changed. I now realize that the original intended meaning of our "exceptionalism" comes with a real bonus – it can provide a basis for agreement between political extremes – and we need a good dose of that!

The concept started with our Founders and is manifested by the form of government they selected, and the philosophies behind their choices. American Exceptionalism declares America's uniqueness, not its superiority – that's a separate debate. These unique differences spring from the basic tenants expressed in the Declaration of Independence and our

Constitution – endowed by a creator, unalienable rights, emphasis on liberty, with power derived from consent of the governed. It's wrong to define American Exceptionalism as a visceral emotional reaction to feelings of superiority.

Newt Gingrich stated it well: “The ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence.....form what we call today ‘American Exceptionalism’.....[it's] not a statement of nationalist hubris.....never before had a nation recognized sovereignty in the citizen rather than the government.” This form of government was never attempted anywhere else before, or after, the birth of the United States – that's exceptional!

I don't underestimate the extent of this misunderstood concept of exceptionalism. Some of the more “patriotic” treatises about America don't line up with the concepts I'm promoting here. Patriotism is fine, but that's another discussion. And clearly, the Obama Administration was using a different definition than I'm presenting. Obama himself was known for soft-selling American Exceptionalism because he didn't know what it meant. He could have promoted the origins of exceptionalism without being offensively prideful.

Nevertheless, I believe the original concept of exceptionalism can be agreed upon by a majority from both sides of the political spectrum. And this discussion will inevitably lead to another relevant, but separate, question: Has this exceptionally conceived nation performed in an exceptional way? And we're also sure to debate vastly different visions for the role of the federal government in our lives, and in international affairs.

The Founders understood the imperfections of human nature, which is central to our form of government, and we are bound to make mistakes. But our performance evaluation should be separate from this discussion. In spite of our flaws, let's agree that the United States is unique and very exceptional.