

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - The U.S. And The World: The Unexpressed Premises Of American Exceptionalism



On June 21, 2006, while attending a conference with leaders of the European Union, U.S. President George W. Bush met with reporters in Vienna. Asked by one European reporter about a poll suggesting that many Europeans regarded the United States as a greater threat to peace and stability than North Korea, the President, in apparent irritation, responded, “That’s absurd!” (Stolberg, 2006, p. A14). Mr. Bush literally could not imagine how what he called post-September 11 thinking could threaten anyone, just as his questioner probably could not imagine how the President of the United States could seem to disregard the concerns of the Old World.

This episode illustrates in microcosm the problem I wish to discuss. It can be safely stipulated that recent years have seen a rather sharp discontinuity between American and European attitudes about the place of the U.S. in the world. Although it is tempting to do so, I cannot attribute this discrepancy merely to the character of the current President or to national differences in interpretation of the tragedy of September 11. Rather, it is the most recent manifestation of a long-standing tension in the discourse of U.S. foreign policy.

The claim I wish to advance is that American arguments about the U.S. role in the world frequently contain a premise, often unstated because widely accepted across American culture, that is not supported by many in other lands and indeed that would be offensive if it were made more explicit. Hence what functions successfully as an enthymeme in U.S. domestic discourse often falls flat when U.S. representatives attempt to defend their policies for an international audience.

The premise of which I speak is American exceptionalism, the belief that the United States *is* qualitatively different from other nations. Usually there is more to it than this stark statement. Being different, Americans do not see themselves

as properly subject to the same norms and rules that govern others, and they are not prepared to acknowledge that the experience of other nations is necessarily relevant to them. Moreover, for many, the implication of saying that the U.S. is different is that it is better, for reasons that I will discuss.

Lest there be any doubt, I should make clear that my goal is neither to defend nor to attack this premise, but to explain its deep resonance in American culture and to assess its implications for public argument.

1. *Dimensions of American exceptionalism*

The historian Thomas Bender recently has argued that the development of the United States can be seen in the context of larger global patterns of cultural development and expansion during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Bender, 2006, pp. B6-B8). The dominant perspective by which Americans understand their history, however, is to focus on their national distinctiveness. On this view, such events as the settlement of the North American continent by European powers, the American Revolution, and the American Civil War are epochal in nature, marking a distinct “before” and “after” and distinguishing the American experience from contemporaneous events elsewhere. The recent claim by President Bush that “for Europe, September the 11th was a moment; for us, it was a change of thinking” (Stolberg, 2006, p. A14) is only the latest example of this tendency toward epochal thinking.

American exceptionalism could be understood as just a descriptive matter, an acknowledgment that in some respects the United States is different from other nations. That is the approach taken, for example, by Seymour Martin Lipset, who finds the U.S. in a superior relative position in some respects and a weaker one in others (Lipset, 1996). Moreover, Lipset contends, the relative strengths and weaknesses emanate from the same factors in American culture. But this is a tamer version of exceptionalism than is common in public discourse.

In general usage, “exceptionalism” has the meaning of “chosenness,” of having been selected (presumably by God) to play a distinct role on the stage of history. On this reading, of course, exceptionalism implies not just difference but superiority. Americans are unlike other people because they have been given a special mission to fulfill. God is with them, guiding and directing them. President Bush’s first inaugural address was explicit on this point, citing Thomas Jefferson’s belief that an angel is guiding the U.S. ship of state through the storm.

The assumption of God-given American superiority has several consequences for

public argument. First, it gives policy discussions a moral tone. This is not just a stylistic preference for religious references and allusions; it is also part of an argument's substance. Lipset describes the United States as the most religious country in the world and notes that moralism influences the discussion of questions of policy. "A majority," he notes, "tell pollsters that God is the moral guiding force of American democracy" (Lipset, 1996, p. 63). This situation, of course, makes policy discussions not just problem-solving dialogues or searches for practical wisdom, but places to decide matters of moral principle, to make choices between good and evil. It is easy in such an atmosphere for any policy disagreement to be seen as an ultimate moral question.

Second, it becomes difficult for American advocates to compromise on argumentative commitments that they believe to be divinely inspired. If Americans "know" that their actions represent the fulfillment of God's plan, then it is hard to be patient with other points of view. The task is to show others the light of truth and, failing that, to work around them. Meanwhile, of course, what American arguers see as carrying out God's plan can be seen by those in other countries as arrogance and belligerence. It is very hard for those of other lands and cultures to take American pretensions to know God's will with equanimity, much less appreciation.

Third, the premise of American exceptionalism provides its believers with a teleological explanation for events. The person who is convinced that God is directing our national course knows how the story will end. Even if current realities seem discouraging, even as God's chosen suffer setbacks when they fall from divine favor, one should not fear: God's people will be redeemed in the end. A contemporary manifestation of this belief is President Bush's proclamation in his speech to a joint session of Congress following the terrorist attacks, "The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain" (Bush, 2001).

The fourth consequence of American exceptionalism, closely related, is that it minimizes the need for self-reflection or self-doubt. Since history is the working out of God's plan, human agency is significantly minimized. It is not our choices and actions that set the course of history; we are carrying out some larger, more cosmic plan. And who are humans to second-guess God's plan? Confident that they have been chosen to do God's will, that is what they must be about; if they have doubts, they must overcome them. And they certainly must not weaken in the face of criticism by others.

Finally, belief in this strain of American exceptionalism works to reduce or

eliminate the need for justification of policies to an external audience. A traditional dialectical or rhetorical view of argument would suggest that the audience is the ultimate judge of the argument. The arguer must make the appeal in the context of the audience's values and beliefs. So, for example, an argument about international cooperation would be tailored to the priorities of the other nations involved. But an all-powerful God does not require the approval of other nations. If God's truth is evident to American leaders, as a result of their having been "chosen," then their task is to proclaim and to act upon this truth. It is hoped that others will see the light, but whether or not they do, the position of the United States should not change. "Look, people didn't agree with my decision on Iraq, and I understand that," President Bush said last week (Stolberg, 2006, p. A14), without giving any evidence that the objections of others were taken into account as a factor influencing the choice of American policy.

What these five characteristics have in common, of course, is that they call for a different kind of argument. It is prophetic rather than petitionary, declarative more than collaborative, certain more than tentative. It does not invite the reciprocal risk-taking that characterizes dialectic and rhetoric. If those with whom American arguers interact do not share their vision and commitments, then the result of public discourse is likely to be the growing gap in understanding that I described at the outset.

2. The historical resonance of American exceptionalism

American commitment to this version of exceptionalism is not a new thing; it can be traced back to the establishment of European civilization in the New World. Although not the first settlers, the New England Puritans represent the rhetorical foundation of what is now the United States. On board the *Arbella* before landing, John Winthrop exhorted his fellows about the kind of society they would make. The goal of their community would be "to improve our lives to do more service to the Lord" and this required their keeping their covenant with God. If they met their responsibilities, then "the Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and will commend a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness, and truth than formerly we have been acquainted with." The community would be "as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us" (Winthrop in Miller, 1956, p. 83). The reason, of course, is that all would recognize that the community had been chosen by God, charged with special responsibilities but also singled out for favor.

The argument that the Puritans were exceptional was strategically useful for

them. It justified their leaving the comfort of England and accepting the risks of a long ocean voyage and the uncertainties of frontier life. It justified their seeming rebellion against the Church of England and their seemingly arrogant claim to “purify” the church. The confident promise of divine favor and ultimate success, in return for proper conduct, would offset the hardships and hazards of the journey.

At the time of the American Revolution, similar lines of argument were deployed. The colonists retained a strong attraction to England that was strengthened by the frequent use of the family metaphor. To break that metaphorical connection, influential pamphleteers such as Thomas Paine argued that monarchy was abnormal. Even so, they had to overcome the fear that England, with its superior strength, would crush any incipient revolt. In response to this fear, Paine stressed American advantages of natural resources and geographic position, but then he went further, speaking more cosmically about the American promise: “... we have every opportunity and every encouragement before us, to form the noblest, purest constitution on the face of the earth. We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now” (Paine, 1776 [1986], p. 120). Although much of Paine’s tone is secular, the Biblical reference is unmistakable: God will re-enact the flood and, as He showed favor to the descendants of Noah, He will favor the saving remnant of His people, the American colonists, by enabling them to establish a new nation and thereby to rebuild civilization.

As with the Puritans, this use of the argument from exceptionalism was strategically useful. For readers who might accept in principle that the colonies should separate from England yet be deterred by the prospect of failure, the assurance of divine help and favor would be a powerful weight on the other side of the scale, shifting the balance of considerations and helping to justify revolution. The unlikely victory of the Americans over the British was sign evidence that Providence indeed had shined on the new nation. It validated their chosenness and their special relationship with God. And there would be other such validations across the years: the availability of George Washington as leader of the country at just the time that he was needed, the successful conclusion of the Louisiana Purchase which added immensely to the national domain, Andrew Jackson’s miraculous victory over the British in 1815 in the battle of New Orleans, the simultaneous deaths of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson on the jubilee fiftieth anniversary of American independence, the miraculous ascension of Abraham Lincoln who was credited with saving the union during its most difficult

hour. Each of these events, and many others over the years (including, in recent times, the successful end of the Cold War), convinced American leaders anew that their nation was indeed special, singled out for favor by God.

These frequent validations unmoored American exceptionalism from the strategic context of assuaging colonial fears, the context in which it originally was so useful. Over time it became a functionally autonomous belief. As such, it was not only a conclusion that was derived by inference from successful results; it was also a premise in arguments about how the U.S. should behave. In his Farewell Address, Washington used a geopolitical rather than theological explanation for American exceptionalism. To maximize its freedom of action, the new nation should not become embroiled in European quarrels, nor should it become involved in permanent alliances with European powers. The option to hold out and to chart our own course was available because of the exceptional position of the United States, separated from Europe by a wide ocean yet offering the lure of trading markets for all of Europe.

From Washington's warning to remain apart from the affairs of Europe (a warning that Thomas Jefferson, in his first inaugural address, codified into the principle of no "entangling alliances"), Americans reached the conclusion that they could and should act alone. Military might would not make them one of the world's great powers, but the fact that they were chosen by God embodied them to claim pride of place among the leading nations. That was why, for example, James Monroe and John Quincy Adams rejected the proposal for a joint declaration with Britain and instead chose a unilateral proclamation that the western hemisphere was off limits to European powers. This document, known as the Monroe Doctrine, was issued in 1823, and in the ensuing years the nations of Europe did largely leave the Americas alone (with exceptions such as the Falkland Islands and the establishment of British, French, and Dutch colonies in the West Indies and Guiana). This fact was no mere coincidence; for many Americans it "proved" that there was power in American *words*, in proclamations of our intention and desire. These documents had moral force - far outweighing military force - because America enjoyed God's favor (see Perkins, 1963).

A similar argument was used to justify further expansion to the west, even at the risk of war with Mexico. It was America's "manifest destiny," wrote newspaper columnist John L. O'Sullivan in the 1840's, to spread westward to the Pacific Ocean (see O'Sullivan, 1845 [1949], pp. 717-719). The popular "manifest destiny"

phrase emphasized the inevitable course of history and the fact that it was a working out of God's plan. In seizing western lands, displacing Mexicans and Native Americans, the U.S. was not practicing conquest, because the normal relationships between nations did not apply. An editorial in the *Boston Times* captured this sentiment:

The "conquest" which carries peace into a land where the sword has always been the sole arbiter between factions equally base, which institutes the reign of law where license has existed for a generation; which provides for the education and elevation of the great mass of the people, ... and which causes religious liberty and full freedom of mind to prevail where a priesthood has long been enabled to prevent all religion save that of its worship, - such a "conquest," stigmatize it as you please, must necessarily be a great blessing to the conquered (cited in Welter, 1975, p. 69).

A similar argument was used during the 1890's to justify the American venture into imperialism. Further proof of American exceptionalism was the claim that we did not plan to occupy territories permanently, nor to turn them into colonies, but to bring the benefits of American freedom to those in the far corners of the earth. One consequence of a widespread commitment to American exceptionalism was that involvement in war typically relied on moral rather than material justification. There is probably no clearer example than American entry into World War I. Relying on the belief that we were above dirtying our hands in European wars, the country refrained from joining the struggle until neutral rights were violated, and then justified its entry into the war with Woodrow Wilson's insistence that we had the responsibility to "make the world safe for democracy" by convincing the warring nations of Europe to transfer some measure of sovereignty to a new international body, the League of Nations. Wilson's war message assured his listeners that "we have no selfish ends to serve" and that America shall fight "for the principles that gave her birth and happiness" (Wilson, 1917; cited in Graebner, 1964, pp. 448-449). His steadfast - some say stubborn - insistence on the League of Nations covenant without reservations would lead to his political doom. That the U.S. ultimately would choose not to join the League was an ironic end to the story, but it does not belie Wilson's reliance on the exceptional moral position of the United States as a justification for war. It is the failure of other nations to share the high moral convictions of the U.S. that makes it necessary to make the world safe for democracy over and over again.

Belief in the special status of the United States and the special power of its declarations was particularly marked during the years of the Cold War. This belief again was useful: it gave to the nation a way out of the dilemma posed by the advent of nuclear weapons. They were so powerful that they could not be used without risking nuclear annihilation. Yet the United States must convince other nations that we would be willing to use them as necessary; otherwise they would not function as a deterrent to a Soviet attack. As a substitute for bombs, national leaders issued declarations of American policy - calling for a rollback of the Iron Curtain, encouraging captive peoples of Eastern Europe to rise up against tyrannical regimes, "unleashing" Chiang Kai-shek to recapture the mainland if he were able to do so. If events turned out in our favor, that proved the moral force of American declarations; if they were adverse, that proved only that we had not been strong and forceful enough. When the Berlin Wall fell and the Cold War ended, these events were widely taken as proof that the United States had "won" the Cold War, yet further evidence that the U.S. enjoyed God's special favor.

It is not surprising, then, that following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, many in the United States resorted to this same frame of reference to explain the dastardly deeds and to determine their response. In President Bush's account, the terrorists hate us because of our freedom, but we ultimately will prevail over them because we know that "God is not neutral" between freedom and fear. He also is reported to have said about the same time that God had placed him in office at just that moment for a special reason: to lead the world toward the conquest of terrorism. The conviction that he is carrying out a God-given mission is the source of the self-confidence and assurance that seems to many Europeans to be arrogance and closed-minded unwillingness to re-examine assumptions. His decisions are taken independently of military results, American public opinion, or criticism on the part of European allies. And many Americans, whether or not they like the results, admire the resoluteness of his stance and the self-assurance he displays. This fact helps to explain why 60 million Americans, including many who were opposed to this or that specific policy, nevertheless supported him for re-election. And it may help to explain why, even now, the U.S. Republican Party is rallying support for the midterm Congressional elections by insisting that the nation stay the course in Iraq, even though that is a policy with which a majority of Americans disagree. It does not matter what setbacks and reverses we suffer at any given moment; we are confident of how the conflict ultimately will end, because of the special role that God has called us to play.

What I have tried to suggest is that, across time, a variety of American actions in

the world have been justified by the argument, often unstated, that they are the fulfillment of a divine plan which has been vouchsafed to Americans by virtue of their being God's chosen. Yet many in other nations, especially in Europe, are unwilling to accept that often unstated argument, so they find American foreign policy to be belligerent and often incoherent. This helps to explain why justifications for America's role in the world are often seen so much differently in the U.S. and in Europe.

3. *The contemporary moment*

An obvious question presents itself, however. If the strand of American exceptionalism traces back over 300 years, how can we explain the fact that it is only in recent years that the U.S. has been so heavily criticized in Europe? The central answer is that until now, for the most part, uncomfortable American pronouncements did not need to be taken seriously by other nations.

For much of the 19th century, the United States was so weak that its pronouncements about its exceptional status could be safely ignored by others. The historian C. Vann Woodward has maintained that those years constituted an era of "free security," in which it was actually the British navy, protecting British interests, which served American interests at the same time (Woodward, 1960). If he is correct, then Americans could convince themselves that their safety resulted from God's favor, even as a hypothetical third-party observer would say that it resulted from British naval power. Similarly, most of the European powers had their own reasons for limiting the colonization of the New World in the aftermath of the Monroe Doctrine. So no harm is done in allowing the Americans to believe that their Doctrine really had some deterrent power in and of itself. And the recognition that American entry into World War I was a means to break a stalemate and bring the Allied Powers to victory need not obscure the oft-made claim that entering the war to vindicate a principle was a fulfillment of our God-given mission.

The strategic position of the United States dramatically changed, of course, as a result of World War II. Now, suddenly, along with the Soviet Union, the United States *did* occupy a position not unlike that about which her leaders spoke - whether or not they did so at the direction of God. To the degree that they signaled a course of action, the words of the U.S. *did* mean something. The U.S., abandoning a policy that went back to George Washington, did join alliances and help to lead them. The suddenly huge power of the United States demanded that

other nations take American statements seriously, even if they did not always agree with them.

The bipolar world of the Cold War years began to come apart during the 1960's, with the Sino-Soviet split undermining the unity of the East and the Vietnam war that of the West. For the most part, the ensuing years were occupied with the search for East-West détente and with multilateral initiatives such as the assembly of the Persian Gulf War coalition in 1990 and 1991. It is only in relatively recent years that a particular combination of challenges presents itself: the asymmetrical warfare threats posed by terrorism that are virtually impossible to counteract by a nation acting alone, the persistent belief in American exceptionalism among those in the U.S., and the unwillingness of several European nations to defer to American perspectives or American leadership. This is a volatile combination.

Does the study of public argument offer any resources to deal with this situation? Perhaps so, if we return to the origins of American exceptionalism in U.S. foreign policy. The belief that Americans are “chosen” and have a special mission was used to justify intervening in other nations and becoming involved in conflicts. But it also was used to justify the opposite. From time to time a powerful line of argument was that the United States, as an exceptional nation, did not need to sully itself with diplomatic and military intrigue. If its power was moral, it could exercise that power as a role model, by providing a standard that others would wish to imitate – to be, in the 19th century parlance, the “beacon on the western shore.” Choices *not* to become involved in some of the world's conflicts, such as the Greek revolution of the 1820's or the paroxysm that swept Europe in 1848, were defended by arguing that it was the special role of the United States to transcend these individual conflicts and instead to uphold model behavior that could be emulated by people everywhere who aspired to be free. Indeed, it was thought that the U.S. would *sacrifice* its moral advantage if it descended to the level of realpolitik. This notion was at least alluded to in an under-studied part of President Bush's September 20, 2001 speech, when he said, “We are in a fight for our principles, and our first responsibility is to live by them.” If Americans put their principles at risk by the way they responded to terrorism, they risked jeopardizing both.

The appeal to function as the “beacon” was used sometimes to justify isolationism, which is clearly not an option in the contemporary world. But multilateralism is. Sharing sovereignty between state and national governments is at the heart of the American experiment. It is possible to argue that today's

international bodies, ranging from the European Union to the International Court of Justice, represent the next natural step in that evolution. And, of course, in such bodies the claim of American exceptionalism would need to be tempered by the practical necessities of building coalitions and counting votes, just as rhetorical argumentation is always adapted to the needs imposed by the speaker's view of the audience.

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