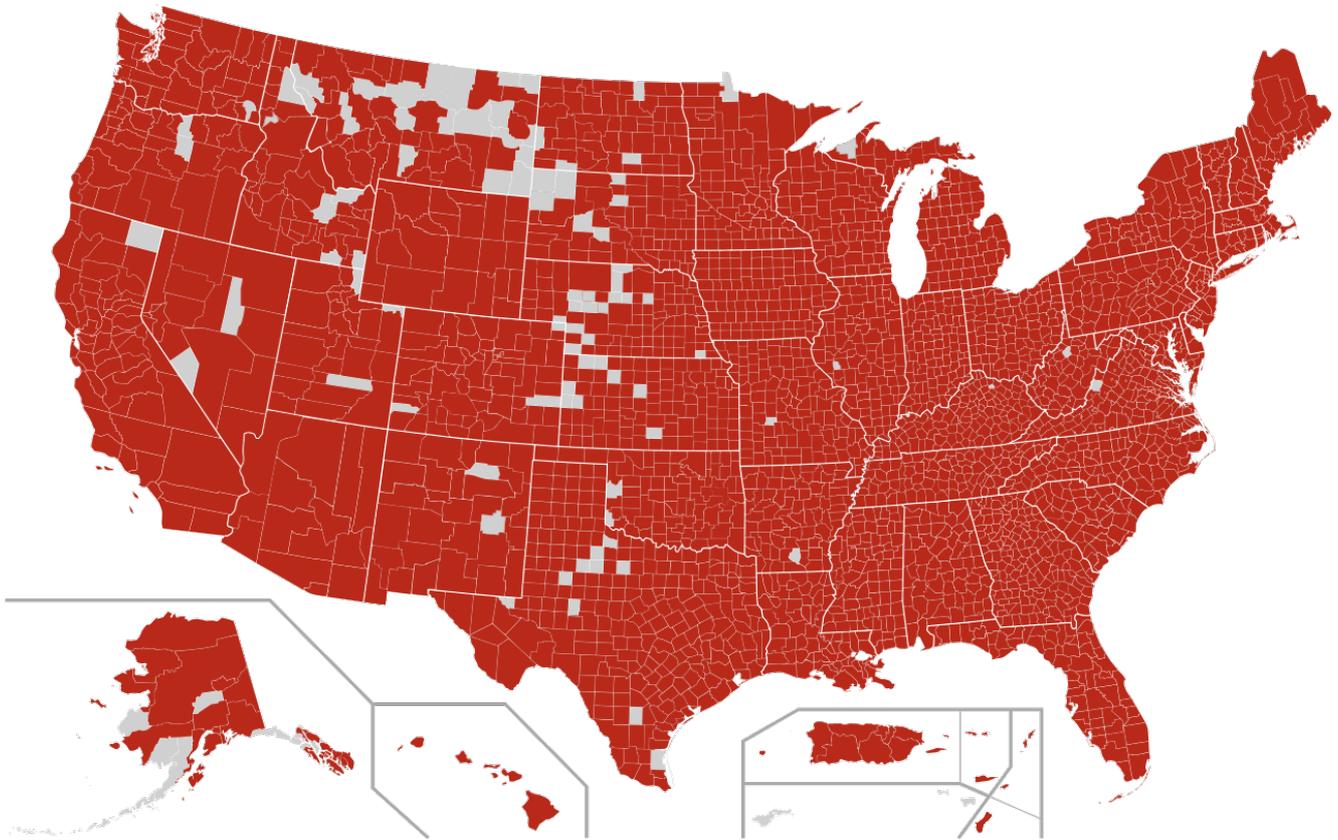


American Exceptionalism: Quo Vadis?



In view of the failures of the COVID-19 pandemic in the USA, which has seen over 2 million cases and more than 115,000 deaths as of this writing, the very idea of American exceptionalism has unraveled. The expected arrival of the pandemic in the USA was met with overwhelming failures. A country with unmatched military and economic power came up with a shortfall of equipment to deal with the crisis, as well as a lack of leadership from the Federal Government, leaving states and hospitals to fend for themselves and even compete with each other. One nurse taking care of a doctor severely ill with COVID-19 stepped out of the ER weeping and cursing: "I felt incredible anger," she said – at America's lack of preparation, at shortages of protective equipment, at official dithering that had left the doctor and other medical workers at risk."¹ According to an unofficial list kept by Medscape, at

least 145 health care professionals died of Covid-19 in the USA,² and the pandemic is far from over.

A Brief Overview of American Exceptionalism

In 1630, even before there was a USA, John Winthrop delivered a sermon in which he called the Puritan community, “a city on a hill.” This city upon a hill is a phrase from the [parable](#) of [Salt and Light](#) in [Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount](#). In Matthew 5:15, he tells his listeners, “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.”

The reference to this city on a hill was mentioned both by President Kennedy and Ronald Reagan. During an address delivered to the General Court of Massachusetts, President elect Kennedy said: “I have been guided by the standard John Winthrop set before his shipmates on the flagship *Arbella* three hundred and thirty-one years ago, as they, too, faced the task of building a new government on a perilous frontier. We must always consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill—the eyes of all people are upon us.”⁴ On the eve of his election in 1980, Ronald Reagan said: “I have quoted John Winthrop’s words more than once on the campaign trail this year—for I believe that Americans in 1980 are every bit as committed to that vision of a shining *city on a hill*, as were those long-ago settlers.”⁵

The term American exceptionalism gained considerable traction in the 1950s after World War II, when American historians hotly debated why their country escaped the violent disruptions that occurred in Europe, such as revolutions, dethroning of monarchies, class uprisings, two world wars and genocide over the previous two centuries. Since none of this happened in the US, they attributed it to our exceptional qualities. Historian Joshua Zeitz notes: “They conveniently

glossed over the violently repressive regimes of chattel slavery, redemption (the return of white supremacy and the removal of rights for blacks – instead of Reconstruction), war on Indian nations, and Jim Crow, which, of course, most historians writing in these years blithely did.”⁶

During the colonial period from the 16-20th Century, the world was Eurocentric. The end of World War II saw the rise of an American-dominated world. While European powers in-particular Great Britain and France–had used both their hard and soft power to dominate, colonize, and control the countries of the Far East, Middle East and Africa, the American approach of projecting global power has been different, tailored for a divergent time in history, as a consequence to the end of colonialism in the latter part of the 20th Century.

However, as US power accumulated in many countries including those of South and Central America and the Middle East, a double standard prevailed, supporting dictators and despots who did our bidding, and overthrowing democratically-elected governments that refused to abide by an American dictated economic agenda. Today, most young Americans, perhaps frustrated with the Iraq War and the lengthy engagement in Afghanistan, are less likely to endorse an all-encompassing global role for the USA. Similar views are held by the libertarian senator, Rand Paul. The recent polls showing a lack of interest in the US direct involvement in Syria and in the Ukrainian crisis, as well as Trump’s ‘presumed’ isolationist views, are a fallout of our long engagement in Afghanistan and the Iraq War championed by conservatives and neo-cons.

The 2016 Presidential election saw Trump’s trademark slogans: “Make America Great Again,” and “America First.” Referring to American exceptionalism, he said: “I don’t think it’s a very nice term. I think you’re insulting the world.” That doesn’t necessarily mean that Trump shied away from the exceptional

principle. He has replaced it with a different yet familiar tag line that conveys the same sense of national power and entitlement—America First, itself a term that was associated with opponents of the US entering World War II.⁷

The other single most important feature of American exceptionalism is that at one time, the U.S. was a classless society with considerable upward mobility—or, at least, for white Americans, though it did not apply to African Americans or Native Americans. Furthermore, in view of our capitalist economy—a presumed hallmark of exceptionalism—most Americans were not tempted by socialism, unlike their European counterparts. The fall of Communism, the acceptance of capitalist economies in such socialist countries like Sweden and government-sponsored capitalism in China, the opening up of India to foreign capital, all implied the ascent and the universal triumph of American capitalism over socialism.

The Exposé of American Exceptionalism: The Coronavirus Pandemic

Perhaps no other event in modern American history unraveled the very idea of American exceptionalism as has the Coronavirus pandemic. Its crushing arrival in the US—despite substantial warning—was met with failures in organization, lack of materials to handle the crisis, denial, and empty bravado. A country with unmatched hard and soft power failed to come up with enough cotton swabs, N95 masks, gloves, face shields, ventilators, special lab chemicals and enough ICU beds.

What was most distressing was that our paramedical and medical personnel had to work with inadequate protection at the very risk of their own lives despite wartime manufacturing and supply powers assumed by the President. I saw doctors in New

York City turned into beggars for ponchos because they couldn't get proper medical gowns. I have seen fear, anxiety, and trepidation on the faces of doctors and nurses as they surged ahead to care for COVID patients and when they had to keep away from their spouses and children following their shifts. Several dedicated doctors, my friends and colleagues, lived in their apartments in New York City caring for COVID patients while their wives and children stayed for weeks on end with in-laws or relatives away from the city and even left for other states. This was the norm of the day for medical personnel, rather than the exception.

It is deplorable that for effective diagnostic testing of COVID-19, the US was far behind many other countries, such as Germany, New Zealand, and South Korea. Indeed, Maryland's Republican governor, Larry Hogan, accepted a planeload of 500,000 testing kits from Seoul to make up for the U.S. shortfall. The aid was dubbed Operation Enduring Friendship and annoyed Trump, the "America First" president.⁹

There is no question that the pandemic has laid bare and ripped apart our patchwork health care system, even though it is the most expensive in the world, accounting for 27% of the Federal Budget. Indeed, in their latest report, The Commonwealth Fund ranked the US last among the most developed countries of Europe including Canada and Australia, whereas we were first in expenditure.⁸ Undoubtedly, the US possesses high-end health care of exceptional quality that has been the envy of the world; however, the Census Bureau estimated that a total of 27.5 million people in the U.S. were uninsured in 2018. The controversial Affordable Health Care Act, popularly known as "Obamacare," was on the verge of remedying some of these inadequacies in our health care system; however, the recent Republican administration under Donald J. Trump has ramped up its attack on the Affordable Care Act by backing a federal judge's decision to declare the entire law unconstitutional without an alternative plan.

The effects of COVID-19 have also exposed striking inequality within our health care system. Current data suggests a disproportionate burden of illness and death among racial and ethnic minorities. In New York, the epicenter of the epidemic in the US, wealthy private hospitals, primarily in Manhattan, were able to increase bed capacity, ramp up testing and acquire protective gear due to their political and financial clout. The Mount Sinai Health System, the institution where I work, was able to get the N95 masks from China delivered by Warren Buffett's private planes.¹⁰ On the other hand, a Brooklyn hospital which is publicly funded and part of SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University tried to raise money for protective gear through a [GoFundMe page](#) started by a resident physician. The patients attending the hospital are poor and people of color; furthermore, the hospital gets most of its revenue from Medicare and Medicaid.

The US had advanced warning of the possibility of a pandemic 15 years ago and still wasn't prepared. "If a pandemic strikes, our country must have a surge capacity in place that will allow us to bring a new vaccine online quickly and manufacture enough to immunize every American against the pandemic strain," President George W. Bush said in a call for readiness in 2005.¹¹ Nearly 10 years later, President Obama sounded the alarm: "There may and likely will come a time in which we have likely both an airborne disease that is deadly. And in order for us to deal with that effectively, we have to put in place an infrastructure—not just here at home, but globally—that allows us to see it quickly, isolate it quickly, respond to it quickly. So that, if and when a new strain of flu like the Spanish flu crops up five years from now, or a decade from now, we've made the investment, and we are further along to be able to catch it. It is a smart investment for us to make."¹² Similarly, Bill Gates warned us of a COVID-19-like pandemic in 2015.¹³

The Future of American Exceptionalism

American exceptionalism should not be defined or viewed as global political dominance different from Eurocentrism, as if we are superior to the rest of the world, nor should it be a rhetorical political slogan. Although Trump expressed the view that the word 'exceptional' is offensive, 'America First' implies a degree of arrogance irrespective of right or wrong—the interests of the US come First, rupturing the central pillars of multilateralism. In this regard, Trump's 'America First' more likely implies an isolationist view, a slogan to make his base feel good, even in this, our multipolar world.

In my opinion, American exceptionalism should be viewed as our immense contributions in science and technology in the 20th century to today, which have benefited and uplifted the lives of ordinary people the world over. For example, since its founding by President John F. Kennedy more than five decades ago, the Peace Corps has contributed to solving critical challenges alongside local community leaders in 140 countries. Similarly, the Ford Foundation—and more recently the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—aim to improve health and reduce poverty and could be considered forms of exceptionalism. And it's arguable that the American system of free enterprise and venture capitalism has fostered companies with a great positive impact on the modern world.

Most countries acknowledge that the USA is a nation with vast economic and military power, and its leadership role is widely accepted. The world needs America's global engagement and its stand on human rights by the force of example, not by rhetoric and double standards.

The killing of unarmed African-Americans in liberal as well conservative cities and states—reaching a boiling point with

the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police—has gone on far too long without accountability. This violence further exposes the lie of American exceptionalism. Protestors are now taking to the streets in the U.S. and worldwide. One transformational event has intersected with yet another—a once-in-a-century public health crisis overlapping with a nationwide anti-racism movement. As stated previously, these two elements are connected. Health outcomes across the US are linked to race and socioeconomic status, and are strong predictors of life expectancy.

Rather than engage in political slogans, the US needs to realize that the economic and technological command it has on a global scale cannot be sustained with the rise of other economies in Asia and Europe. It needs to pare down the economic divide in our country: the rich getting richer, the middle class getting poorer, and the working class losing jobs to globalization. This divide needs to be addressed, not necessarily by over-taxing the rich, but by the rich and multi-billion dollar corporations paying their fair share in taxes, by creating greater opportunity with a focus on education, by bringing back manufacturing, by rebuilding our crumbling infrastructure, and by creating new sources of energy to safeguard the planet from climate change. Globalization over the last several decades has shifted the country from a manufacturing to a service economy. Corporations and government officials who lobbied for tax loopholes and higher profits bear significant responsibility for these changes.

Our disorganized health care system has to be addressed seriously, devoid of political underpinnings and patchwork solutions. A bipartisan Task Force inclusive of scientists and health care professionals must be created to deal with future pandemics.

The events of the last few months, the previous Iraq War and its consequences, our lengthy engagement in Afghanistan, gun

violence, economic inequality and racism, all beg the questions: 1) Whether American exceptionalism currently conveys the concept originally proposed by Alexis de Tocqueville nearly two centuries ago, and extolled by politicians of both parties; and 2) whether the seeming end of exceptionalism discussed in this article might be a chance for a new awakening, allowing a path forward to a kinder, gentler, and more inclusive America.

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