

# Sample essay on american exceptionalism

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



Whether one believes that the United States is exceptional or not, one thing is for certain; Americans themselves certainly think it is. The people believe in it, therefore it exists (or at least that is what Americans are led to believe). The question of whether or not American exceptionalism exists is beside the point because exceptionalism is just as much an attitude and a regime as much as it is an abstract concept. The important question is whether or not this has a positive impact on America as a nation. Ted Bromund seems to think it has a positive impact; he claims that this attitude is a shining light upon the world, an example for the rest of the powerful nations to follow (Bromund 2004). Bromund goes on to say that as the (currently) world's oldest and longest running functioning democracy to date, the U. S. has experience on its side to not only set such an example, but to continue blazing the trail for all future generations of the world's nations. Indeed, sometimes it would seem that the United States has acquired a great many skills through its age-old trade; establishing and spreading what it believes to be the best possible system of government in the world. In contrast, Harold Koh points out the fact that while America's exceptionalist mindset has carried it through great trials and tribulations, it is not without its disadvantages, as sometimes believing one's self to be "the best", or even simply exceptional, can interfere with progress and arguably result in widespread naïveté (Koh 112). One might interpret this as a widespread sense of national pride. If one is to agree with Koh on the matter of exceptionalism, then at what cost is this mindset employed? Koh certainly isn't passing off exceptionalism as useless, as he does explain that it has its place in public policy, but it can be taken too far, transforming into

something far more harmful: ultra nationalism. One could argue that self promotion and overconfidence can lead to arrogance, and if arrogance is taken to such an extreme degree, then the risk the U. S. population runs is becoming disillusioned with the rest of the world. What can happen is that the United States will be lost in its own fantasy of remaining the dominant nation on earth from now until the end of time, and the result of such ignorance is being left behind by far more eager and innovative nations on the rise. Exceptionalism, while a positive resource for inspiration and innovation, can turn into apathy if the element of innovation is removed, and apathy can lead to a population blinded by greed and eventually, socioeconomic ruin if left unchecked. In short, American exceptionalism is neither good nor bad on its own; it simply depends on its level of application and on the way it is used by the people.

The main problem with arguments like Bromunds -which try to make the claim that everything about what the United States stands for, and especially everything that it does, is great beyond all reason- is the fact that such arguments are typically one-sided and lack multi-dimensional perspective. The one-sided argument claims that, as long as it is a plan carried out or executed by the United States, then any opposition, both locally and abroad, will eventually come to see things America's way sooner or later. While coming at the risk of sounding politically judgmental, commentators like Ted Bromund tend to fall on the conservative end of the political spectrum, even though Bromund himself is heavily critical of conservative excess and comes to the support of liberalism as the true nature of the nation's exceptional outlook on the future. While there is nothing wrong with having one's own

political views, it also has a tendency to shroud a person's judgment, causing them to say and claim what they wish to be true according to their desired political reality rather than the way things are. For instance, Bromund goes into detail in his article, *American Exceptionalism and its Enemies*, about those who oppose the titular American Exceptionalism and point fingers at members of his own nation, focusing solely on political opposition to his own views as "enemies" of what makes America great. For instance, Bromund names President Barrack Obama as one such hindrance to exceptionalism because of his realist perspective and how conservative voters and politicians have lashed out against all things brought upon by the President (Bromund 2009). The issue here is that Bromund is placing responsibility on the President, almost as if he is the attacker of exceptionalism, without taking into account the possibility that the mindset, itself, may be to blame for its own undoing.

In an article by Ron Jacobs entitled *A Disease of Conceit*, Jacobs cites not only the overconfidence in American superiority, but also the blind faith in what makes America exceptional for the mess that was brought about by the U. S.'s involvement in Iraq in 2003 (Jacobs 2004). During the 2004 Presidential election, voters were faced with a bit of a dilemma in that, not only did George W. Bush believe in the campaign in Iraq, but his opponent at the time, John Kerry, did as well. Not only did John Kerry support the continuation of the occupation and further invasion of Iraq, but he also proposed a more intensified international presence in the region (Jacobs 2004). The reason why the United States had the "right" to do what it did (blatantly lying about there being weapons of mass destruction in Iraq) was

the fact that it was simply the most powerful nation up to the challenge (or so it would seem). Indeed, once the excuses made for invading the country turned out to be either misguided or false, it would seem the only reason the U. S. had for conducting the invasion was simply because it had the ability to. If anyone cites the brutality of Saddam Hussein as incentive enough to forcibly remove him from power and replace Saddam's regime with one of America's own design, then one could easily point out the fact that the United States has yet to remove North Korea's even more brutal and oppressive regime from power. This relates to blind faith in American exceptionalism in that only an exceptional nation like the United States can lead the way to war (which had nothing to do with the retaliation against Al Qaeda). True, exceptionalism can inspire the populace to rise above adversity and march forward into the next generation with new innovations and breakthroughs, but the aforementioned faulty Iraq campaign was an example of the dark side of this kind of faith in one's national power. After all, power does corrupt. Some of America's self-entitled attitude towards intervention in foreign conflicts dates back to the days of Theodore Roosevelt, and the allied victory in World War II only perpetuated this attitude by the Americans due to their contribution to the war effort (Sellevoid 127).

The belief in American exceptional qualities, specifically, stems from the romanticization of the landing on Plymouth rock by the puritans; seeing the shining city of the future that the nation would one day become (Phillips 2008). Certainly, discovery, foundation, and ascension from a cluster of small colonies to a great world superpower is a very inspiring tale, and one that all

Americans can be proud of, but the takeaway message is that such power is wielded at a price. Any and all sources of power should be used responsibly, and the United States must wield this power with caution and a sensitivity to other nations; even America's enemies. This is not to say that the United States must give into blind appeasement of war criminals, but there needs to be a certain degree of compassion for those who lack the same amount of power that the U. S. wields with such fervor. America's origins differing from the context in which many modern European governments were formed does make it "exceptional" in that regard, but the notion of regarding the United States as the sole example of free-thinking and democracy is inherently flawed in that the power and privilege Americans have given themselves has been earned through a different kind of conflict than that of many European nations, which grew to their current state. Since the United States did not have to undergo the same stages of social evolution, there are certain things taken for granted by Americans as a population, including the significance of one's freedom to choose or reject spiritual beliefs. It is for this, and similar reasons that 19th century French author Alexis de Tocqueville believed that the United States should not be considered the shining example of true democracy, especially because of the average 19th century American's rejection of what is ironically truly "democratic" (de Tocqueville Ch. 9).

In short, it is not necessarily wrong for the people of the United States to believe in America's exceptionality in many areas, but the danger comes from the all-encompassing belief that the United States of America is "number 1" in any and all categories. Not only does this have a negative

impact on their dealings on the international stage, but it also works against their own civilian population when all are assuming that their nation remains on top, they can and will become an apathetic nation and therefore become left behind as a result. Again, American exceptionalism is neither positive nor negative as a concept alone, but what counts is its application; and that depends on voters and politicians. The unfortunate reality is that when a nation begins to sink in terms of status due to apathy and widespread greed, the general population notices sooner or later, and if a country's leadership shows no interest in changing things for the better, then the entire nation suffers. Widespread frustration by the common people against the corrupt machine that is the apathetic nation can lead to mass protests (as can be seen in recent years by the American " occupy" movements), and if worse comes to worse; revolution. However, one does not expect that such travesty will take place in the United States anytime soon.

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