

# [History essays - american exceptionalism](https://assignbuster.com/history-essays-american-exceptionalism/)

## Explain what is meant by American Exceptionalism and consider how valid and useful a concept this is to anunderstanding of the thirteen colonies at 1760.

It’s been theprevailing concept driving American foreign policy for the last century andprovided the impetus for the building of a nation over two centuries ago. As anideology, it’s survived and reinvented itself numerous times since itsintroduction to academia in the mid-20 th century. As a termtypically tossed about cynics providing tongue-in-cheek commentary oncontemporary politics and America’s foreign affairs, it’s rarely used anymorein the spirit from which it evolved. To critics of American foreign policy overthe last half-decade and to those who oppose American intervention world-wide, theterm translates as American superiority-complex, but to those who study theconcept and can trace its beginning back to the very roots of American society, it means something else entirely.

Any discussionof the concept of American Exceptionalism should include an analysis of wherewe as a country have been and where we are currently. The very definition ofthe term implies that America is different, or is an exception to the rest ofthe world. This difference means different things depending on what point onAmerica’s 229-year timeline one cares to apply it to. If the definition of theterm is described from it’s very beginning and applied to America not longafter (in the year 1760), we see an emerging nation struggling to find itselfas a people and as a nationality, but we also see the beginnings ofexceptionality and we come to understand America before it was the UnitedStates. The roots of this term are almost exclusively traced to its colonial originand to one colony in particular.

A CITY ON A HILL

Early English colonists whosettled the Eastern seaboard of North America were part of what RobertRosenbaum called a Great Migration of English Puritans who by their verybeliefs were already exceptional in that they saw themselves as differentfrom the Roman Catholicism which pervaded the Church of England. The heart of the Puritandoctrine was essentially that God had already pre-ordained individuals forsalvation, and it was simply up to the individual to know it through theauthenticity of their conversion experience and through lives of sober, piousand prosperous work. These Puritans settled the Massachusetts Bay colony led by John Winthrop whoadmonished his followers that we shall be as a city upon a hill and the eyesof all peoples are upon us.

It was Winthrop and hisfollowers, who by their faith in God and faith in what He had called them to, already saw themselves as exceptional. Alan Brinkley points out that so greatwas their own sense of purity and of single-mindedness in this belief thatthese English colonies weren’t seeking to isolate themselves from the rest ofthe world, they sought to serve as a model for it — hoping, by example, toinspire a transformation of English society into something resembling theirown..

While other regions of theEastern coast were settled by individuals with differing motives, whether religiousor commercial, it would be Massachusetts and the Puritans who would make thebiggest imprint on Colonial America during the 17 th century:

Although it was in Virginia thatEnglishmen had established their first permanent colony, it was in New Englandthat English settlement most rapidly spread and flourished in the first half ofthe 17 th century. In this, the future of the region was shaped lessby the Pilgrim separatists, than by the Puritans

Brinkleygoes on to further describe how the Puritan mindset was spread throughout NewEngland and to other parts of English America as a result of an eventualexodus out of Massachusetts due to the unproductiveness of the stony soilaround Boston and the oppressiveness of the Massachusetts government.

So from seeds sown in the stonyMassachusetts soil during the early part of the 17 th century, outgrows this fruit of self-realized exceptionality and when allowed to grow andspread, would serve to form this moral and intellectual foundation, asWilliam Pfaff describes, that would help construct the logical conclusionAmericans have drawn that the world is eventually destined to become integratedinto an elaboration of the American system. Pfaff summarizes the impact that these early Puritans had on the eventualcourse of the United States by stating that from the beginning, the Americannation has operated on the conviction that it is destined to lead the way forhumanity. This has been fundamental to the American conception of the nation’shistorical role.

After anothercentury, colonial America has flourished, both in numbers and in quality oflife. In 1760, colonials enjoyed a status unlike any people in the world. Inthis respect, they certainly saw themselves as privileged if not exceptional. AlanTaylor observes that the 13 colonies prior to the revolution of 1776, sought topreserve their special place in the British Empire as virtually untaxedbeneficiaries of imperial trade and protection. They didn’t seek independence, but events that began in 1760 would force themto assume the mantle of their calling, and see themselves for what they were.

AN EXCEPTIONAL PEOPLE

American colonies at 1760 werebeginning to formulate a broader concept of exceptionalism, which had its rootsin a century’s-worth of evolving and refining of this notion brought tocolonies like Massachusetts in the form of Puritanism. It was there where apeople with pre-conceived notions of divine-right used their faith as amechanism for developing a political and social structure which would soonpermeate the entire New England region beyond the simple scope of their smallcolony. Already with a belief in a future for themselves greater than that oftheir ancestors, colonials began to see themselves differently from theirEnglish brethren across the ocean. Over time, colonials would seek to maintainboth American and British ties which allowed them to benefit from that uniquemix, both politically, economically and spiritually. However, combinedAmerican-British victories over French forces in 1760 renewed the Britishcommitment to its colonial pursuits, and not in a positive way for thecolonies. Soon afterwards, British control was increased and its grip tightenedto the point where the 13 colonies had to make a choice between remaining tiedto its British homeland or accepting that role which their predecessors in theNew World knew they were divinely-endowed to fulfill. That choice was basedupon a revolutionary concept comprised of contemporary socio-political forcesand Puritan values espoused by revolutionaries in New England and throughoutthe colonies during the period leading up to 1776 and beyond.

Nobody evoked the spirit of thecolonies at this time better than Thomas Jefferson, referred to this uniquecalling that Americans believed themselves had in the Declaration of Independenceclaiming the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and ofNature’s God entitle them. This reference and belief in Natural Laws in conjunction with God was a whollyunique concept in Western political ideology and best summarizes what thecolonials’ political and social self-esteem was like at that time. They clearlysaw themselves in an exalted position, completely justified within thatposition by the grace of God and his Natural Laws.

AmericanExceptionalism as an early American concept was introduced as Puritan religiousbelief and evolved into a concept which helped colonials visualize a life asexclusively Americans and not the British/American mixture they had enjoyed tothat point. Understanding that in 1760, colonials had a concept of AmericanExceptionalism, even if it was mixed in with pride as a British citizen, allowsfor one to understand how in the years following, that concept would drive thespirit of revolution that would manifest itself as a nation free from Britishinfluence and dignified by God.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brinkley, Alan, et al. A Survey-AmericanHistory , New Jersey: Stratford Press 1983.

Onuf, Peter S., Jefferson’s Empire, TheLanguage of American Nationhood, Charlottesville: University Press ofVirginia 2000.

Pfaff, William. AmericanDestiny, Commonweal, 5/17/2002, Vol. 129 Issue 10,

Rosenbaum, Robert A., The PenguinEncyclopedia of American History , New York: The Penguin Group 2003.

Taylor, Alan, American Colonies , NewYork: The Penguin Group 2001