

History essays - american exceptionalism



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

It's been the prevailing concept driving American foreign policy for the last century and provided the impetus for the building of a nation over two centuries ago. As an ideology, it's survived and reinvented itself numerous times since its introduction to academia in the mid-20th century. As a term typically tossed about by cynics providing tongue-in-cheek commentary on contemporary politics and America's foreign affairs, it's rarely used anymore in the spirit from which it evolved. To critics of American foreign policy over the last half-decade and to those who oppose American intervention world-wide, the term translates as American superiority-complex, but to those who study the concept and can trace its beginning back to the very roots of American society, it means something else entirely.

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

A CITY ON A HILL

Early English colonists who settled the Eastern seaboard of North America were part of what Robert Rosenbaum called a Great Migration of English Puritans who by their very beliefs were already exceptional in that they saw themselves as different from the Roman Catholicism which pervaded the Church of England. The heart of the Puritan doctrine was essentially that God had already pre-ordained individuals for salvation, and it was simply up to the individual to know it through the authenticity of their conversion experience and through lives of sober, pious and prosperous work. These Puritans settled the Massachusetts Bay colony led by John Winthrop who admonished his followers that we shall be as a city upon a hill and the eyes of all peoples are upon us.

It was Winthrop and his followers, 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 great was their own sense of purity and of single-mindedness in this belief that these English colonies weren't seeking to isolate themselves from the rest of the world, they sought to serve as a model for it — hoping, by example, to inspire a transformation of English society into something resembling their own..

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

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

Brinkley goes on to further describe how the Puritan mindset was spread throughout New England and to other parts of English America as a result of an eventual exodus out of Massachusetts due to the unproductiveness of the stony soil around Boston and the oppressiveness of the Massachusetts government.

So from seeds sown in the stony Massachusetts soil during the early part of the 17th century, outgrows this fruit of self-realized exceptionalism and when allowed to grow and spread, would serve to form this moral and intellectual foundation, as William Pfaff describes, that would help construct the logical conclusion Americans have drawn that the world is eventually destined to become integrated into an elaboration of the American system. Pfaff summarizes the impact that these early Puritans had on the eventual course of the United States by stating that from the beginning, the American nation has operated on the conviction that it is destined to lead the way for humanity. This has been fundamental to the American conception of the nation's historical role.

After another century, colonial America has flourished, both in numbers and in quality of life. In 1760, colonials enjoyed a status unlike any people in the world. In this respect, they certainly saw themselves as privileged if not

exceptional. Alan Taylor observes that the 13 colonies prior to the revolution of 1776, sought to preserve their special place in the British Empire as virtually untaxed beneficiaries of imperial trade and protection. They didn't seek independence, but events that began in 1760 would force them to assume the mantle of their calling, and see themselves for what they were.

AN EXCEPTIONAL PEOPLE

American colonies at 1760 were beginning to formulate a broader concept of exceptionalism, which had its roots in a century's-worth of evolving and refining of this notion brought to colonies like Massachusetts in the form of Puritanism. It was there where a people with pre-conceived notions of divine-right used their faith as a mechanism for developing a political and social structure which would soon permeate the entire New England region beyond the simple scope of their small colony. Already with a belief in a future for themselves greater than that of their ancestors, colonials began to see themselves differently from their English brethren across the ocean. Over time, colonials would seek to maintain both American and British ties which allowed them to benefit from that unique mix, both politically, economically and spiritually. However, combined American-British victories over French forces in 1760 renewed the British commitment to its colonial pursuits, and not in a positive way for the colonies. Soon afterwards, British control was increased and its grip tightened to the point where the 13 colonies had to make a choice between remaining tied to its British homeland or accepting that role which their predecessors in the New World knew they were divinely-endowed to fulfill. That choice was based upon a revolutionary concept comprised of contemporary socio-political forces and Puritan values espoused

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by revolutionaries in New England and throughout the colonies during the period leading up to 1776 and beyond.

Nobody evoked the spirit of the colonies at this time better than Thomas Jefferson, referred to this unique calling that Americans believed themselves had in the Declaration of Independence claiming the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them. This reference and belief in Natural Laws in conjunction with God was a wholly unique concept in Western political ideology and best summarizes what the colonials' political and social self-esteem was like at that time. They clearly saw themselves in an exalted position, completely justified within that position by the grace of God and his Natural Laws.

American Exceptionalism as an early American concept was introduced as Puritan religious belief and evolved into a concept which helped colonials visualize a life as exclusively Americans and not the British/American mixture they had enjoyed to that point. Understanding that in 1760, colonials had a concept of American Exceptionalism, even if it was mixed in with pride as a British citizen, allows for one to understand how in the years following, that concept would drive the spirit of revolution that would manifest itself as a nation free from British influence and dignified by God.

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