

American exceptionalism



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How have Americans' attitudes towards the appropriate role of the government in society and economy changed since the Great Depression? Before the 1930s the United States enjoyed a period of prosperity and stability, the Americans have favored the laissez-faire capitalism wherein the role of the government is severely restricted. By 1930s, however, with the onset of the Great Depression and the Second World War, the New Deal policy was introduced by the Roosevelt government, offering public program innovations and greatly expanding the size, activity and role of the American government in response to these two national contingencies (Lockhart 29). This development wherein the role of the government in society and economy has increased demonstrated the attitude that favored economic security, economic equity and peace. In the 1960s, America experienced another contingency, the onset of poverty along with the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement. Lyndon Johnson embarked on his ambitious Great Society program, declaring war on poverty, by further increasing the role of public institutions through strong economic and social policies. After this period, America was tempted to revert back to its previous laissez-faire capitalist model of government. The economy was booming and the series of administrations were, in the words of Lockhart, " drifting in a direction reminiscent of the historical baseline suggested by the bulk of the nineteenth century involving a relatively small and inactive national government" (p29). This period was partly driven by the emergence of the liberalist attitude that invoked the sense of prohibition against arbitrary rule. This was however, interrupted. Several shocks recently occurred, prompting Americans to favor a stronger interventionist government. First, the 9/11 terrorist attacks happened, then, a series of economic crises ensued. During

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this period, the public attitude clamored for the stronger public institution's role in addressing issues of national security, economic meltdown and unemployment. As a result, the US has enacted several laws such as the Patriot Act, which severely empowered the state to encroach on individual rights for the sake of public security and recently adopted a soft socialist strategy that sought to combine comprehensive government regulation of private businesses with a steadily enlarging public sector (Kurtz, 356). The increased governmental role is underpinned by the distinct attitude called American "exceptionalism." America has assumed itself a special role, purpose and destiny - that of a special country or that of being exceptional one. This is particularly dominant in the American political culture.

Exceptionalism built the idea that the government, the law and how political and government institutions operate are also exceptional and that it can intervene in society and in the economy for the sake of public good. The New Deal, the Great Society and the 9/11 terrorist attacks elicited this sentiment, demonstrating how societal approval sanctioned increased role of public institutions. Even the seemingly, anti-state or anti-establishment attitude adopted by liberals today are based on American exceptionalism concept, only that their version emphasize the exceptionalism or "speciality" of individuals and personal freedom. Works Cited Kurtz, Stanley. *Radical-in-Chief: Barack Obama and the Untold Story of American Socialism*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010. Lockhart, Charles. *The roots of American exceptionalism: history, institutions and culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.