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Exceptionalism more a fantasy than ever

Colman McCarthy | Nov. 28, 2011

Viewpoint

?America is a unique and exceptional nation.? -- Mitt Romney

Along with flags pinned on lapels and hands over hearts during the national anthem, expressions of American exceptionalism are all but a requirement for anyone seeking political office. Mitt Romney?s use of the phrase is a staple of his stump speeches, as it is of the other Republican candidates now roaming the land in the quadrennial exercise in self-promotion.

American exceptionalism is the belief that the American nation and its people are not only different from all others but are superior. Greatness is in our national gene pool. Our values are higher. We are leaders of the free world. No other nation can match our achievements. Our destiny is to be No. 1. We are the role model for the world, for what Lyndon Johnson called ?all those little nations.? We are ?the land of opportunity? for those stuck in lands of no opportunity. The American way of life is the best way of life. The world looks to us and sighs, ?Only in America.?

Exceptionalism is traceable to Alexis de Tocqueville?s Democracy in America: ?The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no other democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one.? Exceptionalism is the basis for American foreign policy, as when Madeleine Albright, Bill Clinton?s secretary of state, said on Feb. 19, 1998, as she demanded that Saddam Hussein ?get rid of his weapons of mass destruction?: Diplomacy is fine ?but if we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future.?

Exceptionalism is little more than national pride gone wild, a nation overrun by leaders consumed with bragging rights. The mouthings of the Romneys and Albrights lie somewhere between wishful thinking and self-serving myths, with neither having any discernable ties to reality. America -- the name itself has Italian, not native, origins -- is one nation among nearly 200 in the world, with the same share of virtues and flaws. Americans are about 5 percent of the Earth?s population, the planet itself once described by Alfred North Whitehead as a third-rate rock spinning around a second-rate sun.

At this particular moment, when our economy is in shambles, banks are failing, disdain for politicians grows, half of our work force have salaries below $26,000, energy independence is a dream, the gulf between rich and poor widens, well more than half the country believes the Iraq War was not worth it, and schools are failing, exceptional is more of a fantasy than ever. This should be a time for humility, not boasting.

?One of the consequences of exceptionalism,? Howard Zinn wrote in 2005, ?is that the U.S. government considers itself exempt from legal and moral standards accepted by other nations in the world. There is a long list of self-exemptions: the refusal to sign the Kyoto Treaty regulating the pollution of the environment, the refusal to strengthen the convention on biological weapons. The United States has failed to join the 100-plus nations that have agreed to ban land mines. ? It refuses to ban napalm and cluster bombs. It insists that it must

not be subject, as are other countries, to the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court.?

Zinn represents the kind of citizen Newt Gingrich attacks in his book, *A Nation Like No Other: Why American Exceptionalism Matters*: ?There is a determined group of radicals in the United States who outright oppose American exceptionalism. Often convinced America is a uniquely brutal, racist and malevolent country, these malcontents struggle to reduce American power and transform our political and economic systems into the kind of statist socialist model that is now failing across Europe.?

When it comes to power, radicals and malcontents do indeed seek reductions -- if by power is meant military power. They are looking to increase the nation?s moral power, of a kind that would make America truly unique. As one nation among many, it would strive to bully less and listen more, compete less and cooperate more, pound its chest less and share its wealth more, reject peace through strength and embrace strength through peace. Do that and America might have a claim to be exceptional.

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