WHAT *is* EXCEPTIONAL *About* AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM?

Americans like to believe that they are an exceptional people. We speak of ourselves as a city upon a hill, a nation lifting our light beside the golden door, a people who more than self their country loved and mercy more than life. The first person to apply the term to Americans, however, was a Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, in his illuminating and prescient survey of American life in the 1830s, *Democracy in America*. But the germ of the idea had been around for substantially longer than that, and has never lost its grip on the American imagination. If anything, it has taken on more of a life in our times than ever before. Ronald Reagan used the idea to rally Americans to his program for a new 'Morning in America,' and he described America in almost mystical terms as a "shining city on a hill." The light it shone with was like no other that ever lighted any other nation. "I've always believed that this blessed land was set apart in a special way," Reagan explained in 1983, "that there was some divine plan that placed the two great continents here between the oceans to be found by people from every corner of the Earth who had a deep love for freedom." Mitt Romney would follow Reagan during Romney's bid for the presidency in 2012 by hailing America as "an exceptional country with a unique destiny and role in the world." By contrast, the man who defeated Romney made an issue of exceptionalism by speaking of America in *unexceptional* terms, explaining to the *Financial Times* that if America was exceptional, it was only in the same sense that "the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism." By 2018, American exceptionalism has almost become a litmus test of one's political preferences.[1]

But what is 'American exceptionalism,' and what is exceptional about it? Reagan's invocation of the "shining city on a hill" echoed what many commentators have assumed is the basic statement of American exceptionalism, John Winthrop's famous layman's sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity," which he delivered to the colonists he was leading to found refuge for English Puritans in Massachusetts in 1629.[2] But none of the British north American colonies – not even Winthrop's Massachusetts – actually saw themselves as exceptions to the basic European assumptions about how a society should be organized. All of them, in varying measures, believed that societies were organized as hierarchies – pyramids, if you will – with the king at the top, the lords and nobility beneath, and the common folk on the bottom. Like all good pyramids, this one was supposed to be static; each layer was to work reciprocally with the others,

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[1] Reagan, "Remarks at the Fundraising Dinner of the Republican Hispanic Assembly" (September 14, 1983), in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1983* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 2:1278; Robert Golan-Vilella, "The World According to Mitt," *The National Interest* (June 11, 2012); Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

[2] "We shall be as a city upon a hill," Winthrop warned his followers, "the eyes of all people are upon us." I call this a *warning*, because this is not really a statement of exceptionalism. What Winthrop meant was that the Massachusetts Bay colony would become a test case for the viability of a Puritan political order which might, if successful, be re-imported back to England. He was not, in other words, talking about the exceptionalism of America – which scarcely existed as more than a remote destination in 1629 – so much as he was talking about what would, or would not, make Puritans like himself credible in the eyes of Old England. See Richard Gamble, *In Search of the City on a Hill: The Making and Unmaking of an American Myth* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 7.

not in competition. The idea that people could start small and poor and work their way up to the top was considered threatening, dangerous, and unbalanced. Those who did start out small and poor and got to the top of the hierarchy did so, not through work, but through the patronage of those already at the top. There would always remain differences between England and its colonies – as native-born Englishmen were not slow to remind their colonial brethren -- but those differences would only be differences within the same recognizable European hierarchy of kings, lords, and commons.

And that might have been the way America developed, too, had it not been for two events.

The first was an intellectual event – the Enlightenment – which really did propose a radically exceptional way of re-conceiving human societies. Taking their cue from the revolution in the natural sciences formulated by Galileo and Newton, which substituted a natural *physical* order of laws (like gravity) for the artificial physics of the Middle Ages, the Enlightenment's political philosophers sought to describe a natural *political* order, similarly free of the artificial hierarchy of kings, lords and commons. They dared to talk about equality rather than hierarchy, about universal natural rights rather than inherited privilege, about commerce rather than patronage, and to question why some half-wit should wear a crown merely because his father had done so.

But all the Enlightenment's political philosophers could offer in the way of alternatives were thought-experiments about desert islands or ideal commonwealths, and the kings continued to sit undisturbed on their thrones. It was the other event which really gave birth to American exceptionalism, and that was the American Revolution. For in one stupendous burst of political energy, Americans overturned the entire structure – political, constitutional, legal and social -- of hierarchy and applied the Enlightenment's thought-experiments about equality and natural rights to practical politics. They did not merely demand a corrected version of British common law or Britain's hierarchical society; they proclaimed that they were creating a *novus ordo seclorum.*[3]

Creating a new politics in America that broke decisively with the past proved to be surprisingly easier than we might have expected. Whatever lip-service the colonists had paid to the old theories of hierarchy during the century-and-a-half before 1776, in every-day practice the colonists had developed their own *ad hoc* legislatures, written their own laws, and spread land ownership so broadly across the face of the north Atlantic seaboard that by the time of the Revolution, 90% of the colonists were landowners.[4] They were, in effect, already desert islands and ideal commonwealths, and the political philosophy of the Enlightenment – which spoke of Nature's God creating them equal and endowing them with certain natural rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness -- gave them a theory that matched the practical realities they had been living with. Those colonial elites who clung to dreams of hierarchy were roughly given the heave-ho and shipped off to Canada.

The American mix of Enlightenment theory and their own practical experience in government produced a result which was seen from the first as (there is no other word for it) *exceptional.* In revolutionary America, reveled Tom Paine, Americans are about "to begin the world over again. ...The birthday of a new world is at hand, and a

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[3] Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 218-219; Harry V. Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 25.

[4] Stephanie Grauman Wolf, *As Various as Their Land: The Everyday Lives of Eighteenth-Century Americans* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 140.

race of men, perhaps as numerous as all Europe contains, are to receive their portion of freedom from the events of a few months."[5] That "portion of freedom" would be a political order with no ranks, no prelates, no hierarchy; a government that limited itself, and confined by a written Constitution; and an identity based, not on race or blood or soil or ancestry or even language, but on a single Enlightenment proposition as relentlessly logical as it was frighteningly brief, "that all men are created equal."[6]

In European eyes, this was all folly. The American decision to license equal citizens to govern themselves in a strictly limited manner was an invitation to anarchy. Too many areas of public life, argued Otto von Bismarck in 1870, required an authoritative government to intervene and direct, and the more that authority was based on hierarchy and monarchy, the better. "Believe me," prophesied Bismarck, "one cannot lead or bring to prosperity a great nation without the principle of authority —that is, the Monarchy."[7] But Americans compensated for whatever vacuum was made by limiting government through the invention of private, voluntary associations. "The extraordinary fragmentation of administrative power" in America, wrote de Tocqueville, is offset by the proliferation of "religious, moral...commercial and industrial associations" which substituted themselves for the lords and chancellors that choked European states. "Everywhere that, at the head of a new undertaking, you see the government in France and a great lord in England, count on it that you will perceive an association in the United States."[8]

Thus, we should say that American exceptionalism began as a new kind of politics. Americans had not merely done something different; they had captured in living form a natural order which made the old political systems of Europe look as artificial and irrational as fully as Newton's laws had made medieval physics irrelevant and silly.

But establishing a novel political framework was only to create the first leg of what became a three-legged stool of American exceptionalism.[9] If it was not inherited rank and titles that gave established authority in society, then it was up to the free initiative of equal citizens to make of themselves what they wanted, and with government itself so deliberately self-limited, their energies would run instead in the direction of commerce. They would create, not only a new politics, but a new economy.

"What, then, is the American, this new man?" asked the transplanted Frenchman, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur in 1782. "He is an American," Crevecoeur replied, who has stopped doing what others tell him he must do. He has escaped "from involun-

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[5] Paine, "Common Sense" (1776), in *The Essential Thomas Paine*, ed. John Dos Passos (1940; New York: Dover, 2008), 87.

[6] Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1922), 7; Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 31-32.

[7] *Bismarck's Table-Talk*, ed. Charles Lowe (London: H. Grevel & Co., 1895), 203.

[8] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, eds. H. Mansfield & D. Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 489, 494.

[9] It is, of course, possible to splice American exceptionalism into more than three aspects. Seymour Martin Lipset (*op. cit.*) identified five: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire economics. Deborah L. Madsen's *American Exceptionalism* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998) stresses the distinctiveness of American cultural habits, such as a messianic sense of national purpose; Robert Kagan emphasizes how exceptionalism is captured in the divergence of Americans and Europeans on solving foreign-policy problems (which he captures through the memorable phrased, 'Americans are from Mars; Europeans are from Venus') in *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004). Newt Gingrich, in *A Nation Like No Other: Why American Exceptionalism Matters* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2011), locates American exceptionalism in the nexus individualism, equality and religious freedom.

tary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labour," and has "passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence." Inside the stiff boundaries of hierarchy, Europeans looked down upon labor as slavery and trade as the smelly pursuit of the small-minded bourgeoisie – in America, there was almost nothing *except* a bourgeoisie, and it gloried in labor and commerce. In America, wrote the French evangelical pastor Georges Fisch, in 1863, "There is no restraint whatever on the liberty of business transactions." Nor did it matter much who succeeded on a given day and who didn't, because the next day those who were down were likely to be up.

> *If you succeed*, wrote Fisch, *you are a rich man; if not, you are not ruined,—for this word is not to be found in the vernacular of American commerce,—you have only to begin once more. In Europe we are indignant at the facility with which a New York merchant makes his fortune a second time, after having been bankrupt. In the United States, on the contrary, they glory in the fact. Here we crush the man who falls; there they endeavour to help him up.*[10]

Abraham Lincoln captured this perfectly when he said that Americans "stand at once the wonder and admiration of the whole world." And why? Because "every man can make himself." There would always be extremes of wealth and inequalities of enterprise. But what shaved the edge off those inequalities was the incessant tumbling-up and tumbling-down of that enterprise, so that one man's wealth achieved at one moment easily passed into the hands of others at another, and refused to calcify into a permanent hierarchy. "The prudent, penniless beginner in the world," Lincoln said in 1859 (with his own history very much in mind), "labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land, for himself; then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him." This, Lincoln believed, "is...the just and generous, and prosperous system, which opens the way for all." Not everyone would prosper in the same way, but that was no argument against the "system" as a whole.

> *Some of you will be successful*, Lincoln said, *and such will need but little philosophy to take them home in cheerful spirits; others will be disappointed, and will be in a less happy mood. To such, let it be said, "Lay it not too much to heart." Let them adopt the maxim, "Better luck next time;" and then, by renewed exertion, make that better luck for themselves.*[11]

Significantly, the energy with which Americans threw themselves into unfettered commercial exchange was soon seen as a primary obstacle in the path of a newer enemy of hierarchy, socialism, which emerged out of the self-inflicted wreckage of the aristocracies in the 19th century. Socialism's great architect, Karl Marx accepted as dogma the idea that every human society inevitably emerges out of the old world of hierarchy into what Marx called *capitalism*; but just as inevitably, capitalism yields to the emergence of socialism; hence, the more advanced a nation becomes in capitalism, the closer it must be to embracing socialism.

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[10] Crevecoeur, *Letters From an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*, ed. Albert Stone (New York: Penguin, 1981), 69-70; Trollope, "American Manners" (1832), in *The Leaven of Democracy: The Growth of the Democratic Spirit in the Time of Jackson*, ed. Clement Eaton (New York: George Braziller, 1963), 463; Georges Fisch, *Nine Months in the United States During the Crisis* (London: James Nisbet, 1863), 108-109.

[11] Lincoln, "Speech at Kalamazoo, Michigan" (August 27, 1856) and "Address before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, Milwaukee, Wisconsin" (September 19, 1859), in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. R.P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 2:364 and 3:478-9, 481.

But Marx was baffled by how the United States defied that rule; no nation seemed more fully imbued with capitalism, yet no nation showed less interest in becoming socialist. This became one of the unresolved puzzles of socialist theory, and it gave rise over and again to frustrated socialists (like Werner Sombart) who struggled with the question, *Why is there no socialism in America*? Sombart blamed it on the drug of simple material abundance: socialism, he complained, had foundered in America on "the shoals of roast beef and apple pie." But another socialist, Leon Samson, had seen better than Sombart that the real enemy of socialism was exceptionalism itself, because Americans give "a solemn assent to a handful of final notions – democracy, liberty, opportunity, to all of which the American adheres rationalistically much as a socialist adheres to his socialism."[12]

Actually, Marx and Sombart were wrong. There *had* been an American socialism, only they had failed to recognize it as such because it came in the form, not of a workers' rebellion against capital, but in the emergence of a plantation oligarchy in the slave-holding South. That oligarchy, based on a race, frankly called into question all of the premises of American exceptionalism, starting with the Declaration of Independence. Nor were slavery's apologists shy about linking this oligarchy to European socialism, since (as George Fitzhugh asserted in 1854), "slavery produces association of labor, and is one of the ends all Communists and Socialists desire."[13] What was extraordinary about the development of this vast step backwards from American exceptionalism was the titanic effort Americans made in the Civil War to expel it. That struggle – a civil war which (as Lincoln said) understood the American republic to be "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal," and aimed at the completion of the project of political equality for all of its people – may be the most exceptional moment in all of American history, for there is no record of any other conflict quite like the war Americans waged among themselves, to "die to make men free."

The emergence of an exceptional political and economic order inevitably raised a question which became the third leg of the exceptionalist stool, and that was the attitude and relationship the United States was to adopt toward the rest of the world, where hierarchy still ruled. This has proven to be the one wobbly leg of the stool – and indeed, as we shall see, it has been the weak leg which threatens the survival of the stool itself – if only because Americans' notions of what exceptionalism dictates in terms of policy toward other nations has changed since the founding.

The sheer novelty of exceptionalism's first two legs – politics and economics – was so great that it was difficult for Americans not to see them as the result of a deliberate plan. Even before the Revolution, Jonathan Edwards had been tempted to see America as the key part of a scheme of divine redemption for the world. "We may well look upon the discovery of so great a part of the world as America, and bringing the gospel into it," wrote Edwards, "as one thing by which divine Providence is preparing the way for the future glorious times of the church."[14] It did not take much for Edwards's grandson, Timothy Dwight, to translate his grandfather's expectations about America's role

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[12] Timothy Messer-Kruse, *The Yankee International: Marxism and the American Reform Tradition, 1848-1876* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 257; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1998), 431; Seymour Martin Lipset & Gary Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 16-18.

[13] Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South; or, The Failure of free Society* (Richmond, VA: A. Morris, 1854), 45.

[14] Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, ed. John F. Wilson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 434-435.

in redeeming the earth from Satan into a sacred mission to proclaim an American political gospel. Dwight took to poetry in 1785 to prophesy that

> *As the day-spring unbounded, thy splendor shall flow,*
> *And earth's little kingdoms before thee shall bow;*
> *While the ensigns of union, in triumph unfurl'd,*
> *Hush the tumult of war, and give peace to the world.*

Even Americans who shared little of Edwards's or Dwight's religious enthusiasm toyed with the idea that America had been specially situated to be the locus of a new, or at least revived, civilization. "Tis said," wrote Benjamin Franklin in 1763," "the Arts delight to travel Westward," and by 1786, John Adams believed they had already made that transit. "The Genius & taste for Poetry are much declined" in England, he wrote to Dwight, "and the encouragement of it, which was never very much is now nothing at all. The Muses have crossed the atlantic and there may be happy,[15]

But if God and the arts did have a special role for America, it was one which America was strictly charged to keep safe on its own shores; its role would be passive and self-protective. Far from any desire to share America's redemptive culture, the tendency was to regard the rest of the world as a potential threat, eager to strangle the American experiment either by the re-imposition of empire or by association with more unstable attempts at revolution, as in France. "Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will [America's] heart, her benedictions, and her prayers be," promised John Quincy Adams in 1821, "But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own." So, when the Hungarian revolutionary, Louis Kossuth, came to America in 1852 to drum up support for his rebellion against the Austrian Empire, Abraham Lincoln greeted him cordially on the basis of "our continued devotion to the principles of our free institutions." But Lincoln made it plain "that it is the duty of our government to neither foment, nor assist, such revolutions in other governments."[16]

We were not, however, always consistent in this. The oversize influence of Southern slaveholding interests in American politics in the 1840s helped drag us into a war with Mexico, for no better reason than to acquire large stretches of territory which Southerners hoped to convert into slave states. We half-blundered into the Spanish-American War in 1898 and found ourselves with a colonial empire on our hands, in the form of the Philippines, Puerto Rico and (for all practical purposes, Cuba). And in 1917, we thrust ourselves into the First World War behind President Woodrow Wilson's decidedly aggressive notion that American democracy ought to be vigorously exported to Europe. These attempts to convert American exceptionalism into a missionary endeavor

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[15] Dwight, in Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millenial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 109; Franklin to Miss Mary Stevenson (March 25, 1763), in *The Portable Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Larzar Ziff (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 238; Adams to Timothy Dwight (April 4, 1786), in *The Adams Papers: The Papers of John Adams*, eds. G. Lint *et al* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 18:228.

[16] Washington did not use the term exceptional, but this self-restraint was clearly what he had in mind when he urged Americans to guard their uniqueness from any taint of involvement with European affairs. "Why forgo the advantages of so peculiar a situation? Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground?" he asked in his farewell address in 1796. "'Tis our true policy to steer clear of permanent Alliances, with any portion of the foreign world." Washington, "Farewell Address" (September 19, 1776), in *George Washington: A Collection*, ed. W.B. Allen (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988), 524-525; "Mr. Adams' Oration," in *Niles' Weekly Register* 8 (July 21, 1821), 331; "Resolutions in Behalf of Hungarian Freedom" (January 9, 1852), in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 2:115.

nearly always met with sabotage by other nations, who resented our claims to some exceptional form of political virtue; and they met with serious criticism by other Americans -- and in the case of the League of Nations, outright rejection.[17]

But even those criticisms disappeared after the brutal attack on Pearl Harbor, which not only thrust us once more into a world-wide conflict, but also presented again the question of how we could prevent such a world crisis from erupting over us again. It had been demonstrated one-too-many-times to American policy-makers that the European states, left to themselves, were incapable of establishing a peaceful continental order; so, we have found ourselves, ever since, literally forced into the role of savior of civilization, whether through the Marshall Plan, NATO, NAFTA, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the International Criminal Tribunals or the Security Council, or sometimes through simple unilateralism.[18]

This is a role we have accepted, often because we believed we had little choice. But it is a role which has had an adverse effect on American exceptionalism by repeatedly involving the United States in foreign policy projects which do not yield easily to American solutions, and which then rebound in doubts about the exceptionalist assumptions behind those solutions. When we have turned to multi-lateral or multi-national solutions, we find ourselves yoked to European and other allies who, even if they have long since shucked-off the mantle of aristocracy and inherited hierarchy, have often replaced it with enormous social bureaucracies which serve much the same purpose and to which we are expected to adapt ourselves. If we act unilaterally, we find ourselves hounded by international condemnations of American claims of arrogance based on exceptionalism; if we fail to act, we are accused of isolationism and requested to attach ourselves to the multi-national strategies which frequently serve to discount the exceptionalism of our ideals and intentions.

When our view of the surrounding world shifted from being a threat to being a mission field, something went wobbly in the third leg of exceptionalism's stool. But it is not the only leg of the stool to suffer the wobbles:

- We are, for one thing, becoming less reliant on voluntary associations and more on state agencies and administrative law to accomplish the tasks of American society. This is partly a development hatched by the Progressivism of the past century, beginning with Woodrow Wilson and extending to our own Progressives, who believes that American society has become too complex to be left in the hands of ordinary citizens (or combinations of ordinary citizens) who lack the expertise to make government work efficiently. In the Progressive imagination, the place of voluntary associations must yield to a do-everything administrative state, illustrated by the notorious 2012 campaign video *The Life of Julia*, which casts the life of one American citizen as a progress through one European-style bureaucracy after another – which is to say, in terms utterly *unexceptional*.[19]
- We are also witnesses of the rise of identity politics, which has made us shy of asserting any form of the old exceptionalism because every identity is now un-

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[17] Richard Gamble, "Reconsidering American Exceptionalism: The old kept us out of conflict; the new leads to empire," *The Imaginative Conservative*, at www.theimaginativeconservative.org/2013/10/american-exceptionalism.html

[18] Harold H. Koh, "On American Exceptionalism," *Stanford Law Review* 55 (2202-2003), 1488.

[19] Peter Beinart, "The End of American Exceptionalism," *National Journal* (February 3, 2014); Gingrich, *A Nation Like No Other*, 8-9; Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, After All: What Middle-Class Americans Really Think About: God, Country, Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, the Right, the Left, and Each Other* (New York: Viking, 1998), 250-263.

derstood to considered exceptional by itself, and consequently untouchable. One's identity as an American fades – even becomes optional -- beside one's identity as part of an ethnic, racial, religious or cultural minority. This moves us a world's-distance away from Abraham Lincoln's belief in 1858 that the proposition set out in the Declaration of Independence was sufficient to trump all other identities.

> *We have* said Lincoln *among us perhaps half our people who...have come from Europe German, Irish, French and Scandinavia.... But when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal," and then they feel...as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are.*[20]

Today, we are no longer so sure that what "those old men say" in the Declaaration has any persuasive power. We are, writes Peter Beinart, "the products if an educational system that, more than in the past, emphasizes inclusion and diversity, which may breed a discontent with claims that America is better than other nations." No surprise, then, that far from regarding America as exceptional, even conservative jurists like the late William Rehnquist were willing to concede that "it is time that the United States courts begin looking to the decisions of other [nations'] constitutional courts to aid in their deliberative process."[21]

- But nothing in our national life has so directly undermined confidence in American exceptionalism as the erosion of economic mobility and opportunity. The force of a variety of what Robert J. Gordon calls "headwinds" has, since 2000, cost seven million manufacturing jobs. From the time we began measuring gross domestic product (GDP) in the 1940s until 1970, American GDP grew at an actual rate of 2.7%; from 1970 to 1994 it slid seriously to a growth-rate of only 1.54%, recovered briefly to 2.26%, and then began sliding to its recent bleak level of 1.21%. From 1948 til 1972, Americans in the lower 90% of income-earners saw their incomes rise by 2.65% annually, almost twice the income growth experienced by the same group between 1917 and 1948. Since 1972, however, the growth rate for the 90% has collapsed – in fact, turned negative – and middle-class workers who began their careers in the middle of the earnings curve saw their position decline by 20% since 1980. The United States has, in fact, become as economically immobile a society as the United Kingdom – a society in which the upper 10% calcify into a self-perpetuating aristocracy who see themselves as part of global networks of communications and exchange, and have little but disdain for those who left behind, clinging to their guns and religion.[22]

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[20] Lincoln, "Speech at Chicago, Illinois" (July 10, 1858), in *Collected Works*, 2:499-500.

[21] Beinart, "The End of American Exceptionalism"; Donald P. Kommers, "American Courts and Democracy: A Comparative Perspective," in *The Judicial Branch*, eds. Kermit T. Hall & Kevin T. McGuire (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005,) 220.

[22] Wallace C. Peterson, *Silent Depression: The Fate of the American Dream* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 127-128; Gordon, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth: The U.S. Standard of Living Since the Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 609, 633, 635; Alana Samuels, "Poor at 20, Poor for Life," *The Atlantic* (July 14, 2016); Raj Chetty *et al*, "The Fading American Dream: Trends in Absolute Income Mobility since 1940," National Bureau of Economic Research (December 2016), 2, at www.nber.org/papers/w22910.pdf; Markus Jäntti, "Mobility in the United States in Comparative Perspective," in *Changing Poverty, Changing Policies*, eds. Maria Cancian & Sheldon Danziger (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009), 196-197; Michael D. Carr & Emily E. Wiemers, "The Decline in Lifetime Earnings Mobility in the U.S.: Evidence from Survey-Linked Administrative Data," Washington Center

In short, American exceptionalism is today more blamed *by Americans* than at any previous time as an "ideology of arrogance," and good riddance to it.

So, is American exceptionalism merely an artifact of an earlier, more confident time in our history, which should now yield to the blandishments of globalization and conformity to multi-national expectations? Only, I think, if we regard the ideas of the American founders as being mere historical artifacts, too. What made the American experiment *exceptional* was precisely that it was *not* founded (like other national identities) on some epic myth or tribal legend, but on the discovery of natural laws and natural rights which are as unarguable as the law of gravity, and which were born from the same intellectual womb.

To discount American exceptionalism is to suggest that the American political order itself was really only the figment of one nation's imagination, and at one limited time. If there is no such natural law, then, yes, let us discard exceptionalism; but at the same time, let us then say that neither the old hierarchy nor the new bureaucracy are wrong, either, and accept that all politics is nothing more than an arena in which power rather than law or right determine our future, a place *where ignorant armies clash by night.*

I believe that the American experiment, based on the Declaration and embodied in the Constitution, *is* an exceptional moment in human history, and remains so. I believe that the American economy is vast enough and flexible enough to recover its vaunted mobility and astonish the world with its capacity to disrupt even the most artificial barriers. And I believe that we can repair the deviations we have sustained from an over-confident mission-mentality without needing to accommodate ourselves to the mores of globalization. Globalization, after all, has been no shining success, with the multiple failures of multi-national and multilateral agencies and initiatives, in trying to establish minimum baselines for international decency.[23]

The task of restoring confidence in our exceptionalism will, nevertheless, be a daunting one. Exceptionalism will have to become what Lincoln called a "civil religion," to be "breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap...taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges...written in Primmers, spelling books, and in Almanacs...preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice."[24] It will require a determined push-back against Progressive unexceptionalism, and the idea that only government can ensure efficiency and happiness. It will involve the revival of the rule of law (rather than agencies), the rejuvenation of our voluntary associations, and the celebration of their role in our public life. And it will force us to lift the burden of economic sclerosis, not merely with the aim of producing simple material abundance, but for promoting a national empathy in which, as Georges Fisch saw in 1863, Americans rise and fall, and rise and fall again, without the stigma that consigns one-half of the nation to the basket of deplorables.

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for Equitable Growth (May/August 2016), 1, at cdn.equitablegrowth.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/03113002/carr_wiemers_2016_earnings-mobility1.pdf; "US social mobility gap continues to widen," *Financial Times* (December 16, 2016). For a slightly more optimistic view, see Jonathan Davis & Bhashkar Mazumder, "The Decline in Intergenerational Mobility After 1980," Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago (July 2017), 17, at https://www.minneapolisfed.org/institute/working-papers/17-21.pdf.

[23] Koh, "On American Exceptionalism," 1503-1504, 1514; Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 47.

[24] Lincoln, "Address Before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois" (January 27, 1838), in *Collected Works*, 1:112.

Can this, realistically, be done? Can we disentangle our public life from the grasp of what one commentator called "Borg government"?[25] Can we realistically pull back from foreign-policy crusades, and even from multi-lateral entanglements?

Well, we did it once before.

[25] Stella Morabito, "American Exceptionalism Is Human Exceptionalism" (August 30, 2016), *The Federalist*, at http://thefederalist.com/2016/08/30/american-exceptionalism-human-exceptionalism/