

4. Slavery was first introduced about the year 1620 by a Dutch ship, which landed twenty Negroes on the banks of the James River. See Chalmer.
5. The states of New England are those states which lie east of the Hudson, and there are now six of them: Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine.
6. Amendments introduced into the constitution of Maryland in 1801 and 1809.

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM – A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Seymour Martin Lipset

The idea of American exceptionalism has interested many outside the United States. One of the most important bodies of writing dealing with this country is referred to as the 'foreign traveler' literature. These are articles and books written by visitors, largely European, dealing with the way in which America works as compared with their home country or area. Perhaps the best known and still most influential is Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.¹ The French aristocrat came here in the 1830s to find out why the efforts at establishing democracy in his native country, starting with the French Revolution, had failed while the American Revolution had produced a stable democratic republic. The comparison, of course, was broader than just with France; no other European country with the partial exception of Great Britain was then a democracy. In his great book, Tocqueville is the first to refer to the United States as exceptional – that is, qualitatively different from all other countries.² He is, therefore, the initiator of the writings on American exceptionalism.

The concept could only have arisen by comparing this country with other societies. Tocqueville looked at the United States through the eyes of someone who knew other cultures well, particularly that of his native country, but also to some considerable degree Great Britain. *Democracy in America* deals only with the United States and has almost no references to France or any other country, but Tocqueville emphasized in his notes that he never wrote a word about

From: Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism – A Double-Edged Sword* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996).

America without thinking about France. A book based on his research notes, George Pierson's *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America*, makes clear the ways in which Tocqueville systematically compared the United States and France.³ At one point, he became sensitive to the fact that America was a very decentralized country, while France was reputed to be the opposite. Tocqueville commented that he had never given much thought to what centralization in France meant since as a Frenchman, he did what came naturally. He then wrote to his father, a prefect of one of the regional administrative districts, and asked him to describe the concentration of political power in France. His father apparently sat down and wrote a lengthy memorandum dealing with the subject.

When Tocqueville or other 'foreign traveler' writers or social scientists have used the term 'exceptional' to describe the United States, they have not meant, as some critics of the concept assume, that America is better than other countries or has a superior culture. Rather, they have simply been suggesting that it is qualitatively different, that it is an outlier. Exceptionalism is a double-edged concept. As I shall elaborate, we are the worst as well as the best, depending on which quality is being addressed.

The United States is exceptional in starting from a revolutionary event, in being 'the first new nation', the first colony, other than Iceland, to become independent. It has defined its *raison d'être* ideologically. As historian Richard Hofstadter has noted, It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies, but to be one.⁴ In saying this, Hofstadter reiterated Ralph Waldo Emerson and Abraham Lincoln's emphases on the country's 'political religion', alluding in effect to the former's statement that becoming American was a religious, that is, ideological act. The ex-Soviet Union apart, other countries define themselves by a common history as birthright communities, not by ideology.

The American Creed can be described in five terms: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire. Egalitarianism, in its American meaning, as Tocqueville emphasized, involves equality of opportunity and respect, not of result or condition. These values reflect the absence of feudal structures, monarchies and aristocracies. As a new society, the country lacked the emphasis on social hierarchy and status differences characteristic of post-feudal and monarchical cultures. Postfeudal societies have resulted in systems in which awareness of class divisions and respect for the state have remained important, or at least much more important than in the United States. European countries, Canada, and Japan have placed greater emphasis on obedience to political authority and on deference to superiors.

Tocqueville noted, and contemporary survey data document quantitatively, that the United States has been the most religious country in Christendom. It has exhibited greater acceptance of biblical beliefs and higher levels of church attendance than elsewhere, with the possible exception of a few Catholic countries, such as Poland and Ireland, where nationalism and religion have been interwoven. The American religious pattern, as Tocqueville emphasized in seeking to account for American individualism, is voluntary, in other words,

not state-supported. All denominations must raise their own funds, engaging in a constant struggle to retain or expand the number of their adherents if they are to survive and grow. This task is not incumbent upon state-financed denominations.

The United States is the only country where most churchgoers adhere to *sects*, mainly the Methodists and Baptists, but also hundreds of others.⁵ Elsewhere in Christendom the Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran, and Orthodox *churches* dominate. The churches are hierarchical in structure and membership is secured by birthright. Parishioners are expected to follow the lead of their priests and bishops. Sects, by contrast, are predominantly congregational; each local unit adheres voluntarily, while the youth are asked to make a religious commitment only upon reaching the age of decision. Churches outside of the United States historically have been linked to the state; their clergy are paid by public authorities, their hierarchy is formally appointed or confirmed by the government, and their schools are subsidized by taxes.

American Protestant sectarianism has both reinforced and been strengthened by social and political individualism. The sectarian is expected to follow a moral code, as determined by his/her own sense of rectitude, reflecting a personal relationship with God, and in many cases an interpretation of biblical truth, one not mediated by bishops or determined by the state. The American sects assume the perfectibility of human nature and have produced a moralistic people. Countries dominated by churches which view human institutions as corrupt are much less moralistic. The churches stress inherent sinfulness, human weakness, and do not hold individuals or nations up to the same standards as do the sectarians who are more bitter about code violations.

The strength of sectarian values and their implications for the political process may be seen in reactions to the supreme test of citizenship and adherence to the national will, war.⁶ State churches have not only legitimated government, for example, the divine role of kings; they have invariably approved of the wars their nations have engaged in, and have called on people to serve and obey. And the citizens have done so, unless and until it becomes clear their country is being defeated. Americans, however, have been different. A major anti-war movement sprang up in every conflict in which the United States has been involved, with the notable exception of World War II, which for the country began with an attack. Americans have put primacy not to 'my country right or wrong', but rather to 'obedience to my conscience'. Hence, those who opposed going to war before it was declared continued to be against it after Congress voted for war.

Protestant-inspired moralism not only has affected opposition to wars, it has determined the American style in foreign relations generally, including the ways we go to war. Support for a war is as moralistic as resistance to it. To endorse a war and call on people to kill others and die for the country, Americans must define their role in a conflict as being on God's side against Satan – for morality, against evil.⁷ The United States primarily goes to war against evil, not, in its

self-perception, to defend material interests. And comparative public opinion data reveal that Americans are more patriotic ('proud to be an American') and more willing to fight if their country goes to war than citizens of the thirty or so other countries polled by Gallup.

The emphasis in the American value system, in the American Creed, has been on the individual. Citizens have been expected to demand and protect their rights on a personal basis. The exceptional focus on law here as compared to Europe, derived from the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, has stressed rights against the state and other powers. America began and continues as the most anti-statist, legalistic, and rights-oriented nation.

The American Constitution intensifies the commitment to individualism and concern for the protection of rights through legal actions. The American Bill of Rights, designed to protect the citizenry against the abuse of power by government, has produced excessive litigiousness. It has fostered the propensity of Americans to go to court not only against the government, but against each other. The rights of minorities, blacks and others, women, even of animals and plants, have grown extensively since World War II through legal action.

The American disdain of authority, for conforming to the rules laid down by the state, has been related by some observers to other unique American traits, such as the highest crime rate, as well as the lowest level of voting participation, in the developed world. Basically, the American revolutionary libertarian tradition does not encourage obedience to the state and the law. This point may be illustrated by examining the results when the American and Canadian governments tried to change the system of measurements and weights to metric from the ancient and less logical system of miles and inches, pounds and ounces. A quarter century ago, both countries told their citizens that in fifteen years, they must use only metric measurements, but that both systems could be used until a given date. The Canadians, whose Torymonarchical history and structures have made for much greater respect for and reliance on the state, and who have lower per capita crime, deviance, and litigiousness rates than Americans, conformed to the decision of their leaders and now follow the metric system, as anyone who has driven in Canada is aware. Americans ignored the new policy, and their highway signs still refer to miles, weights are in pounds and ounces, and temperature readings are in Fahrenheit.

An emphasis on group characteristics, the perception of status in collectivity terms, necessarily encourages group solutions. In Europe, the emphasis on explicit social classes in postfeudal societies promoted class-consciousness on the part of the lower strata and to some extent *noblesse oblige* by the privileged. The politics of these countries, some led by Tories such as Disraeli and Bismarck, and later by the lower-class-based, social democratic left, favored policies designed to help the less affluent by means of state solutions such as welfare, public housing, public employment, and medical care. Americans, on the other hand, have placed greater stress on opening the door to individual mobility and personal achievement through heavy investment in mass education.

The cross-national differences are striking. This country has led the world by far in the proportion of people completing different levels of mass education from early in the nineteenth century, first for elementary and high schools, later for colleges and graduate institutions.

While America has long predominated in the ratio of those of college and university age attending or completing tertiary education, the numbers and proportions involved have been massive since World War II. A report on the proportion of 20- to 24-year-olds in higher education, as of 1994, indicates that it is almost double, 59 per cent in the United States to that in most affluent European countries and Japan: the Netherlands (33 per cent), Belgium (32 per cent), Spain (32 per cent), France (30 per cent), Germany (30 per cent), Japan (30 per cent), and Austria (29 per cent).⁸ And America spends a greater proportion of its gross domestic product (GDP) on education, 7.0 per cent, than does the European Union, 5.3 per cent, or Japan, 5.0 per cent.⁹

Conversely, European countries have devoted a much larger share of their GNP, of their public funds, to bettering the living conditions of their working classes and the less privileged generally. The European social democrats have had frequent opportunities to hold office since the 1930s. To transform the situation of the working class, they have emphasized group improvement policies, such as public housing, family allowances and state medicine. Until recently, however, they preserved a class-segregated educational system with elite high schools and failed to focus on the expansion of university education.

American values were modified sharply by forces stemming from the Great Depression and World War II. These led to a much greater reliance on the state and acceptance of welfare and planning policies, the growth of trade unions and of class divisions in voting. While these changes continue to differentiate the contemporary United States from the pre-Depression era, the prosperous conditions which characterized most of the postwar period led the population to revert in some part to the values of the founders, especially distrust of a strong state. Support for diverse welfare entitlement policies has declined; trade union membership has dropped considerably, from a third to a sixth of the employed labor force; and class-linked electoral patterns have fallen off. Americans remain much more individualistic, meritocratic-oriented, and anti-statist than peoples elsewhere. Hence, the values which form the context for public policy are quite different from those in other developed countries, as the results of the 1994 congressional elections demonstrated.

These differences can be elaborated by considering the variations between the American Constitution and those of 'most other liberal democracies . . . [which contain] language establishing affirmative welfare rights or obligations'.¹⁰ Some writers explain the difference by the fact that except for the American, almost all other constitutions were drawn up since World War II and, therefore, reflect a commitment to the welfare state, to upgrading the bottom level. But as Mary Ann Glendon has emphasized,

The differences long predate the postwar era. They are legal manifestations of divergent, and deeply rooted, cultural attitudes toward the state and its functions. Historically, even eighteenth- and nineteenth-century continental European constitutions and codes acknowledged state obligations to provide food, work, and financial aid to persons in need. And continental Europeans today, whether of the right or the left, are much more likely than Americans to assume that governments have affirmative duties . . . By contrast, it is almost obligatory for American politicians of both the right and the left to profess mistrust of government.¹¹

In much of the writing on the subject, American exceptionalism is defined by the absence of a significant socialist movement in the United States. This again is a comparative generalization, emphasizing that socialist parties and movements have been weaker in the United States than anywhere else in the industrialized world, and also that the membership of trade unions has been proportionately smaller than in other countries. Analysts have linked those facts to the nature of the class system as well as to attitudes toward the state. Where workers are led by the social structure to think in fixed class terms, as they are in postfeudal societies, they have been more likely to support socialist or labor parties or join unions. But class has been a theoretical construct in America. The weakness of socialism is undoubtedly also related to the lower legitimacy Americans grant to state intervention and state authority.

NOTES

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vols I and II (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948).
2. *Ibid.*, II, pp. 36–7. For a sophisticated critique which emphasizes external influences on America, see Lon Tyrell, 'American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History', *American Historical Review*, 96 (October 1991), pp. 1031–55. For a detailed reply, see Michael McGerr, 'The Price of the "New Transnational History"', *American Historical Review*, 98 (October 1991), pp. 1056–67.
3. George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1969).
4. Quoted in Michael Kazin, 'The Right's Unsung Prophet'. *The Nation*, 248 (20 February 1989), p. 242.
5. For a brilliant analysis of the religious background of the United States, see David Fischer, *Albion's Seed. Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
6. See Seymour Martin Lipset, *Revolution in the University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 12–14.
7. See Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, passim.
8. Charles Hampden-Turner and Alfons Trompenaars, *The Seven Cultures of Capitalism* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 245.
9. 'The European Union', *The Economist*, 22 October 1994, Survey, p. 4.
10. Mary Ann Glendon, 'Rights in Twentieth Century Constitutions', in Geoffrey R. Stone, Richard A. Epstein, and Cass R. Sunstein (eds), *The Bill of Rights in the Modern State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 521.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 524–5. See also Gerhard Casper, 'Changing Concepts of Constitutionalism: 18th to 20th Century', *Supreme Court Review*, 311 (1989), pp. 318–19.

SECTION 2
POLITICAL THEOLOGY

The readings under the heading Political Theology discuss the long-lasting and complex relationship between religious thought and the broader aspects of American culture and politics. In 1904 the German sociologist Max Weber visited the United States. The result was a larger essay entitled 'The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism', in which Weber discussed the links between religious affiliation, middle-class ascendancy and American political culture. For Weber the Protestant sects – mainly late formations of Puritan history – provided the infrastructure for the entrepreneurial class and it functioned as a kind of test run for local democracy. In other words, while looking at the Protestant Spirit, Weber hinted at the various levels of interconnectedness between capitalism and democracy. Of course, Weber had a predecessor in Alexis de Tocqueville, who had been the first one to point out that in America there was and still continued to be a genuine relationship between the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom. The missing link that Tocqueville referred to in *Democracy in America* was mores. It was the moral conduct of daily life, taught in the multitude of Protestant sects, churches and congregations that helped to develop a certain habit and create early American political culture.

However, as Tom Paine's famous pamphlet *The Age of Reason* together with Thomas Jefferson's letters reveal, not all American revolutionaries were followers of a sect or church, or a member of a religious group. Most of the early American intellectuals and founders were actually Deists, that is they believed in a higher being but were appalled by what they saw as repressive and mainly European forms of religious affiliation of either the Catholic or the Anglican sort. The exact relationship between religious belief systems and habits and