

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

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American Exceptionalism is the idea that America is somehow different—in a good way—from all other civilizations. This idea has roots in Puritan Massachusetts, although it has developed considerably in the centuries since.

American Exceptionalism is NOT the same thing as a belief that America is perfect, or that it has always lived up to the ideals that American Exceptionalism sets forth. Many forces in American history have fought against these ideals, and in fact, the United States has deviated grossly from them in many instances, among them slavery and the destruction of native American civilization. (On the other hand, while most civilization historically have had slavery and other legal inequality, the United States was the first country in history to raise an army for the purpose of *freeing* slaves). Furthermore, some of these ideals—for instance, the emphasis on individual liberty—have led to disregard of legal authority, high levels of crime, voter apathy, and other social problems. But in general, Americans and the immigrants who continue to move to America in large numbers see these ideals as positive and distinctive things.

These elements have produced a country with one of the greatest degrees of human freedom and the greatest wealth in human history; the level of equality, while somewhat lower, has increased considerably in the last century and a half. As a result of these relatively high levels of individualism, prosperity, and to a lesser extent equality, America has served as a model for much of the rest of the world.

The elements of American exceptionalism include, among other things:

- I. Republicanism (not the Republican Party, but *res publica* (“thing of the people”)):
 - A. Individual liberty/freedom of action/individualism, including
 1. Political freedoms/individual civil liberties (speech, press, religion, etc.)
 2. Economic freedom/private property rights/market capitalism
 3. Limits on the power of the majority or the community to take away these rights from an individual or group
 - B. The rule of law/limits on arbitrary exercise of authority or government power:
 1. Legal equality/equal justice under law/no special privilege for certain classes (i.e., no hereditary aristocracy; great social mobility)
- II. Participation in government/representative democracy (from *dēmos*, “people,” and *kratos*, “rule”); extensive voting rights
- III. A belief in the universal importance of these elements, i.e., A mission to spread these principles to all of humanity, not just to Americans