

The Idea of American Exceptionalism: From the Puritans to President Obama

An Online Professional Development Seminar

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1990-91 and 2002-03

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AMERICA *in* CLASS[®]

from the National Humanities Center

We will begin promptly on the hour.

The silence you hear is normal.

If you do not hear anything when the images change, e-mail Caryn Koplik
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for assistance.

GOALS

- To provide fresh primary resources and instructional approaches for use with students
- Understanding:

That since the earliest days of our national existence Americans have believed that this country possesses a peculiar centrality in the world and that the meaning of that centrality has always been contested.

FROM THE FORUM

Challenges, Issues, Questions

- How did the idea of American exceptionalism originate?
- How did it become part of our identity and culture?
- How has it been contested?
- How has the idea of American exceptionalism changed from generation to generation?
- Resources:

The current issue of *Foreign Policy*, “Just How Special Is America Anyway?”
http://www.foreignpolicy.com/america_issue.

On the Puritan idea of exceptionalism:

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*

Sarah Vowell’s *The Wordy Shipmates*

(“She helps to make those fusty old Puritans fascinating and relevant!”)

On Americanization, immigration, inclusion and exclusion:

Graphic novel, *American Born Chinese*



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College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be (Forthcoming in 2012)
Melville: His World and Work (2005)
The Death of Satan (1995)
Required Reading: Why Our American Classics Matter Now (1997)
The Real American Dream (1999)
The Puritan Ordeal (1989)

Of Plymouth Plantation

“But here I cannot but stay and make a pause, and stand half amazed at this poor people’s present condition; and so I think will the reader, too, when he well considers the same. Being thus passed the vast ocean, and a sea of troubles before in their preparation (as may be remembered by that which went before), they had now no friends to welcome them nor inns to entertain or refresh their weatherbeaten bodies; no houses or much less town to repair to, to seek for succour. It is recorded in Scripture 12 as a mercy to the Apostle and his shipwrecked company, that the barbarians showed them no small kindness in refreshing them, but these savage barbarians, when they met with them (as after will appear) were readier to fill their sides full of arrows than otherwise. And for the season it was winter, and they that know the winters of that country know them to be sharp and violent, and subject-to cruel and fierce storms, dangerous to travel to known places, much more to search an unknown coast. Besides, what could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men—and what multitudes there might be of them they knew not. **Neither could they, as it were, go up to the top of Pisgah to view from this wilderness a more goodly country to feed their hopes; for which way soever they turned their eyes (save upward to the heavens) they could have little solace or content in respect of any outward objects.** For summer being done, all things stand upon them with a weatherbeaten face, and the whole country, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hue. If they looked behind them, there was the mighty ocean which they had passed and was now as a main bar and gulf to separate them from all the civil parts of the world.”

A Model of Christian Charity

“For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.”

“Escaped from the house of bondage, Israel of old did not follow after the ways of the Egyptians. To her was given an express dispensation; to her were given new things under the sun. And we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. Seventy years ago we escaped from thrall; and, besides our first birthright—embracing one continent of earth—God has given to us, for a future inheritance, the broad domains of the political pagans, that shall yet come and lie down under the shade of our ark, without bloody hands being lifted. God has predestinated, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls. The rest of the nations must soon be in our rear. We are the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours. In our youth is our strength; in our inexperience, our wisdom. At a period when other nations have but lisped, our deep voice is heard afar. Long enough, have we been skeptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether, indeed, the political Messiah had come. But he has come in us, if we would but give utterance to his promptings. And let us always remember that with ourselves, almost for the first time in the history of earth, national selfishness is unbounded philanthropy; for we can not do a good to America but we give alms to the world.”

The Course of Empire: The Savage State



Thomas Cole. Oil on canvas, 1834. Collection of The New-York Historical Society.

The Course of Empire: The Arcadian or Pastoral State



Thomas Cole. Oil on canvas, 1834. Collection of The New-York Historical Society.

The Course of Empire: The Consummation of Empire



Thomas Cole. Oil on canvas, 1836. Collection of The New-York Historical Society.

The Course of Empire: Destruction



Thomas Cole. Oil on canvas, 1836. Collection of The New-York Historical Society.

The Course of Empire: Desolation



Thomas Cole. Oil on canvas, 1836. Collection of The New-York Historical Society.

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

“Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes — a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.”

“America is a unique sociological fabric, and it bespeaks poverty of imagination not to be thrilled at the incalculable potentialities of so novel a union of men. To seek no other goal than the weary old nationalism,—belligerent, exclusive, inbreeding, the poison of which we are witnessing now in Europe,—is to make patriotism a hollow sham, and to declare that, in spite of our boastings, America must ever be a follower and not a leader of nations.”

President Johnson

“I want to leave the footprints of America there. I want them to say, ‘This is what the Americans left—schools and hospitals and dams.’” Shortly afterward, he said: ‘We can turn the Mekong into a Tennessee Valley.’”

“The past few days when I’ve been at that window upstairs, I’ve thought a bit of the ‘shining city upon a hill.’ The phrase comes from John Winthrop, who wrote it to describe the America he imagined. What he imagined was important because he was an early Pilgrim, an early freedom man. He journeyed here on what today we’d call a little wooden boat; and like the other Pilgrims, he was looking for a home that would be free. I’ve spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don’t know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That’s how I saw it, and see it still.”

Have we heard the rhetoric of American exceptionalism in the speeches of President Obama?

Final slide.

Thank you