

To Be or Not to Be Exceptional

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Every now and again, the notion that America is "exceptional" comes back to haunt us. This is one of those times when it's popping up in the crazy quilt flurry of jabber about this country's role in the world.

At its worst, it's an appeal to blind arrogance, built on the pride that might makes right and that God underwrites our adventures as the Koch brothers back the crusade to crush unions.

It is a term so easily prone to misuse by a multitude of greedy, self-righteous causes that it deserves to be banished.

But since it won't likely go away, it's worth remembering that the basis for the pompous word has a kinder, gentler side.

The derivation is religious, of course, and drawn from the naive but innocent hope by those 17th century migrants to New England that they might establish a society that escaped the evils of Europe. They held the illusion that they could give birth to a Christian community as it was meant to be. Soon their own forms of intolerance and waywardness would testify against that idealism but somehow it never left our collective system. The belief that we are the light of the world lives on.

For the most part, that's worked against our professed values, warping our mission toward a stream of victims from Native Americans to Afghanistanis, but there still seems to me a spark of redemption in the original vision.

No matter the destruction brought about by its perversion, an aspect of exceptionalism justifiably prods us to go beyond the sordid history of our planet to a more humane way of conducting ourselves -- that the chains which bound monarchical Europe and tyrannical regimes isn't satisfactory. We have an idea of democracy even though we've squandered opportunities to fulfill it. Moreover, we have the resources and heart to inspire the world to a standard of justice that is noble however much we violate it in practice.

Though I protest the use of exceptionalism to foster smugness and violence, I wish we were more exceptional in ways that define the Beatitudes and live up to our own promises. The Pilgrims and Puritans fell into traps familiar to all of us, but before falling completely they were on to something worth considering.

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