



America's Machiavellian Moment: Origins of the Atlantic Republican Tradition

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Abstract: In this article, the author answers the question: Where did America's Founders get their ideas? The essay delves deeply into the origins of the American political tradition by exploring the legacies of Medieval and Renaissance Europe and the transmission of these ideas across time and space. Of particular note is the role of "civic humanism" and "civic virtue," ideas that can be traced to Niccolò Machiavelli and conveyed into the English political tradition by James Harrington and others. This understanding of republicanism helped to shape the views of America's Founders and those who came after them.

What does it mean to speak of American Exceptionalism? If it just means unique, then the claim is unexceptional because no two countries are alike. If it means Americans *believe* their great country is special, then again that's nothing exceptional because all great nations cherish national myths. If it means Americans are exceptionally virtuous given their devotion to liberty, equality, justice, prosperity, social mobility, and peace, then ipso facto they have also been exceptionally vicious for having fallen so short of those ideals. If it means that Americans are exempted from the laws of entropy because—as Bismarck reportedly quipped—"God looks after fools, drunks, and the United States of America," then such exceptionalism can only be proven *sub specie aeternitatis*. Indeed, the very illusion that one's nation is under divine dispensation may perversely inspire the pride that goeth before a fall ("thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God") or the many bad ends to which reckless adolescents are prone. Finally, if Exceptionalism means that its "indispensable" status renders the United States exempt from the rules of behavior *it makes and enforces on other nations*, then enemies, neutrals, and allies alike are sure to push back.

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Hence, “exceptionalism” is more trouble than it’s worth: it either means nothing or altogether too much. But the principal reason to banish the term from *historical* discourse is that the moniker did not even exist until the mid-twentieth century. No Puritan colonist, founding Patriot, Civil War statesman, nineteenth century poet, pastor, or propagandist ever invoked the term. To be sure, Alexis de Tocqueville called America’s geography exceptional insofar as it was separated from Europe, and German sociologist Werner Sombart thought American society an exception to Europe’s rules in that Socialism had little appeal for workers in the United States. But neither wrote of “American exceptionalism.”

The first ones who did—Pope Leo XIII in the 1890s and American Communist Jay Lovestone in the 1930s—used exceptionalism as a term of opprobrium. Not until the 1950s did Max Lerner, then Daniel Boorstin and many more authors turn American Exceptionalism into a badge of honor and trace its roots to Puritan New England.

Finally, Presidents John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan made it a benign household phrase in order to exhort Americans to victory in the Cold War. But its malign implications became apparent after the Cold War when Americans pretended their exceptional values and institutions ought to become universal, whether or not other cultures wanted them.

So what if the *///*-historical claims made for American Exceptionalism amount to a civil religious myth? Do not the truths they symbolize about Americans’ New World character remain valid? Not really because common sense tells us New Worlds cannot baptize themselves. Only people from a self-conscious Old World can conjure a New World, which is exactly what happened in the centuries since 1492.

As a British skeptic has observed, “Not even the Puritans were impelled by a unique or exceptional American impulse. On the contrary, they were products of European education, European culture, European piety, and were engaged in a great European quarrel called the Protestant Reformation.” Some 140 years later, representatives of the American colonies did gather in Philadelphia to reject European rule, but the principles they invoked were “the beliefs of the English Revolution and the Whig tradition, in the English, Scottish, and French Enlightenments, and in the ancient principles of English Common Law—in short, in the core beliefs of a European civilization.”

Historians have in fact dug deeply into the political theories of early modern Britain and unearthed the ideas that led, in the fullness of time, to the American Founding. One familiar source is the Bible, especially the Hebrew Republicanism mandated in the book of Deuteronomy and realized during the three centuries after the conquest of Canaan as recounted in the book of Judges. Former Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, Sir Jonathan Sacks, has explained that the Covenant made by the Lord through Moses was a blessing, but also a curse: a blessing if the children of Israel obeyed God’s commandments, but a curse if they turned away to other gods in the Promised Land. “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. . . . Therefore, choose life, that you and your offspring may live.”

Thus, did the Torah establish, for the first time in history, the spiritual principle of free will, but Rabbi Sacks points out that it also established three *political* principles. First, divine sovereignty does not remove human responsibility. Moses

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