

---

# A look at American exceptionalism

## MARTIN SELLEVOLD

Martin Sellevold is about to become a student of journalism at LaTrobe University. A Norwegian citizen, he has lived in Australia before for a little over one year. He writes fiction as well as non-fiction, and hopes to one day support himself as a freelance writer. He is currently Editorial Assistant of the *Australian Rationalist*.

We are Americans; we have a unique responsibility to do the hard work of freedom. And when we do, freedom works.

George Bush Senior,  
29 January 1991

In 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt stated that the US assumed the right to intervene as necessary to control and correct the 'wrongdoings of uncivilised nations'. Nearly a hundred years on, it seems that this is still very much the position of US foreign policy makers. Teddy Roosevelt was also the man who popularised the phrase 'Speak softly and carry a big stick'. Over the past century that stick has grown considerably in size, and the words, perhaps, have become less soft.

There seems, in the general American mentality, to be a notion of 'moral right' when it comes to dealing with the rest of the world that has no equal in any other Western nation today. Wherever American interests are involved, the US assumes the right to take whatever action it considers necessary to protect those interests, even in the face of broad international opposition. This was of course seen most recently in Iraq, when the US ignored the United Nations as it became clear that this organisation would not sanction a war based only on the slimmest of evidence of weapons of mass destruction.

But of course this was far from the first time the US has used military force to protect its own interests. Starting as early as the 1890s with old-fashioned European-style imperialistic conquests, including the annexation of Hawaii and the overthrow of the independent Hawaiian kingdom in 1893, the US proceeded to invade virtually every Caribbean and Central American country between 1904 and 1934. Since World War II, the US has engaged both militarily and economically, directly and indirectly, in the

affairs of sovereign nations in Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa. It has consistently supported totalitarian and undemocratic regimes all over the world in countries where American interests have been threatened. And yet, despite all this, the average American still considers her country to be 'the greatest democracy in the world'. How is this possible?

The United States of America was founded on principles of freedom, equality and democracy. In 1831, a young Frenchman by the name of Alexis de Tocqueville went to the US, ostensibly to study its penal system. But what de Tocqueville really wanted to explore was the essence of the American spirit. The America this French aristocrat encountered was an infant nation, less than fifty years old. It is fair to say that de Tocqueville was swept away by what he saw. Upon his return to Paris he wrote a book, *De la démocratie en Amérique* (*Democracy In America*), the first part of which was published in 1835. In his introduction, de Tocqueville writes:

Among the novel objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of condition among the people. I readily discovered the prodigious influence that this primary fact exercises on the whole course of society; it gives a peculiar direction to public opinion and a peculiar tenor to the laws; it imparts new maxims to the governing authorities and peculiar habits to the governed.

I soon perceived that the influence of this fact extends far beyond the political character and the laws of the country, and that it has no less effect on civil society than on the government; it creates opinions, gives birth to new sentiments, founds novel customs, and modifies whatever it does not produce. The more I advanced in the study of American society, the more I perceived that this equality of con-

dition is the fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived and the central point at which all my observations constantly terminated.

The book became an instant success. It seems de Toqueville's writings captured and expressed something that must have been felt by a lot of people at the time. It was with this book that the idea of 'American exceptionalism' rooted itself in the Western consciousness, not least in America's own. Although the expression is to be found nowhere in his book, Alexis de Tocqueville is still credited for having coined the phrase.

But whether he said it or not, the feeling that the US is something special and set apart from everything else has been a long-term constant in American culture, dating back virtually to the founding of the nation as an independent entity.

It is found again in the concept of 'Manifest Destiny'. This idea was first verbalised by the editor and Democratic leader John L O'Sullivan in 1845. Simply put, it was a belief that the US had a God-given right, or even duty, to expand west. Such notions were not new among Americans at the time. What was new in 1845 was that the movement got a name.

So what is in fact this 'American exceptionalism'? In the relevant literature it has been defined as Americans' deprecation of power politics and old-fashioned diplomacy, mistrust of powerful standing armies and entangling peacetime commitments, their supposedly moralistic judgements about other people's domestic systems, and belief that liberal values transfer readily to foreign affairs.

In the 1995 autumn issue of *Political Science Quarterly*, Joseph Leggold and Timothy McKeown attempted to make an empirical analysis of whether there indeed was such a thing as American exceptionalism in US foreign policy. In their article 'Is American Foreign Policy Exceptional? An Empirical Analysis', Leggold and McKeown proceeded to demonstrate that there is little or no basis to the claims that US foreign policy has differed greatly from that of other large nations in the period 1871 to 1914. But the researchers do speculate — with the help of, among others, Stanley Hoffmann, whom they quote — that the 'exceptionalism' in foreign policy might not be found abroad at all, but in the way American leaders justify their overseas actions to the American public.

When President Johnson went to war in Vietnam in the 1960s it was to 'combat world communism' and 'preserve the American way of life'. To this day, Vietnam veterans might still say they 'fought for



America'. To the outside observer, the feat of convincing an entire nation of some 200 million (1969) that supporting one side in what was basically about to become a civil war in Indochina was imperative to the survival of that powerful nation seems astonishing. True, as the war progressed and for the first time independent television was able to broadcast the horror of armed conflict into the comfort of people's homes, support turned into opposition. But the lesson, nonetheless, appears not to have been learned well.

The US's latest war was sold to its public in very much the same way as Vietnam and other conflicts: as something necessary in order that 'the American way of life' be preserved. It is fairly well known that the heavyweights of the current US administration, including Donald Rumsfeld et al, had a strong interest in expanding US influence in the Middle East long before attaining their present positions of power. Their proposed link between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein was, to say the least, dubious. Still, they were able to sell a war on Iraq to the American public relatively easily by playing on the new fears instilled by September 11, and once again US military forces went overseas to preserve 'the American way of life'. Sceptics were branded 'unpatriotic', 'un-American'.

So what is this 'American way of life'? Is it the 'equality of condition among the people' that de Tocqueville was talking about? Or is it free enterprise, or that hazy concept of 'the American Dream'? Equality of condition is something we in Australia experience to at least as great an extent as US citizens do. This is true also of Canada and most European countries. The same goes for free enterprise and even 'the American Dream', if this means the possibility of working oneself up from nothing to something. These are all *Western ideals*, and not exclusive to the United States. But ask an American and eight times out of ten they will say these are American attributes.

---

This statement of eight out of ten is, of course, an inaccurate estimate based on this writer's own experience, but the trend cannot be denied. Have a look at Hollywood movies or American TV. How often aren't the villains non-American, usually European? Even when the foreigners are supposed to be friends or allies, as in Steven Spielberg's World War II television epic *Band of Brothers*, they are invariably depicted as incompetent, uncooperative or just plain stupid, and an American is needed to come in and save the day.

It seems the idea of American exceptionalism is not so much manifested in an actual difference between the US and other countries in terms of outward behaviour, but more in terms of a 'truth' about the mental and moral superiority of Americans being actively reiterated by American culture to the American public via movies, television and political rhetoric. To generalise, all Americans are told every day in the media that only *they* know how the world really works, and only they know how it *should* be worked. In this way, the myth is kept alive.

It has been said that the US does not have an ideology, it *is* an ideology. One needs only to look at the ubiquitous American flag to realise that there might be some truth in this. US culture is riddled with patriotism, and too often it is not a 'clean' patriotism, in that pride is felt about the United States in and of itself, but rather a 'dirty' patriotism wherein everything that is not American is actively put down, 'dumbified' or ridiculed.

If one accepts this as being the case, then the question arises: Why? What is the basis for this American need to constantly glorify itself, to make itself out to be special, set apart, almost holy, in relation to all other nations? At first glance it might seem like something of a paradox. If we disregard the comparatively minute number of Native Americans, the US is entirely made up of the historically recent descendants of European and Asian immigrants, the descendants of African slaves, and, even more recent, immigrants from Central America and the Caribbean. One would think, then, that if there were one nation on the planet devoid of national prejudice, the United States would be it. Clearly, this is not the case.

But the paradox is only apparent, for it is indeed from this very multicultural nature that the aggressive American patriotism arises. This kind of patriotism has no place in more homogenous democracies for the simple reason that it isn't needed. Only in totalitarian states does one find similar tendencies. In those states its purpose is obvious: it knits the people together around a ruling party or despot, using threats from the outside or a righteous holy war as ways to

divert attention from internal problems. Nazi Germany is the prime example of this process. But in the allegedly free societies of modern democracies, internal problems are addressed and, although not always solved, are at least usually recognised. Most modern democracies work reasonably well because a majority of citizens are in reasonable agreement about what kind of society they would like to have. This unity of majority is the direct result of shared values, which in turn is the result of similar backgrounds and shared culture.

It is in this that the United States of America truly *is* unique and set apart from other Western nations. In Australia we have a majority of white European descent. Asian minorities are growing, but it is still white European culture that sets the agenda. But in the US there are no real majorities. White European-descended Americans still dominate US politics, but unlike Australia the US has, ever since the days of the American Revolution, wished to distance itself from the Old World. This is a very important point. It created a unique starting position, from which a nation was to be created by incorporating elements from a multitude of cultures into something that was all of these different cultures at once, and yet at the same time not really any of them.

In other places in the world, such a mix of cultures, religions and races have time and time again proved to be potentially explosive. One needs only to look at the Balkans to get the general idea. But unlike the different peoples of that crossroads of continents, the immigrants to the New World had one important thing in common: the *idea* of the United States, of a new world in which to start again. For all their differences, they shared that one brave idea, and that idea became the point around which they gathered. After two hundred years this is still the glue that keeps the nation together. It's a fragile construct. And the constant American need for reaffirmation of America's greatness — their exceptionalism — affirms its fragility.

To what extent American exceptionalism is responsible for the country's neo-imperialistic foreign policy is difficult to judge, but as no man or woman exists outside his or her culture, it seems likely that the people making US foreign policy do so with the inherent belief of the American: that they know best. And as long as they have the power, they will, in all likelihood, continue 'to know best'.

Understanding this American need to feel special, unappealing as it may be to the outsider, might nonetheless prompt one to be less judgemental about their floundering self-glorification. They are, after all, for better or for worse, exceptional.