

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Is American Exceptionalism Valid?

Last week, the concept of "American exceptionalism" got attention through an exchange between Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin. Both employed the term to define something about American society. What was most particularly disturbing was Vladimir Putin's statement in an op-ed essay in the *New York Times*: "And I would rather disagree with a case made on American exceptionalism, stating that the United States' policy is 'what makes America different. It's what makes us exceptional.' It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation. There are big countries and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions and those still finding their way to democracy. Their policies differ, too. We are all different, but when we ask the Lord's blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal." This statement was part of a much larger essay, focusing primarily on the crisis in Syria, entitled "A Plea for Caution from Russia." In it, Putin pleaded for UN involvement, painted his own picture of what is occurring in Syria, and made the case for moderation, negotiation and no-military strike by the US. Two important observations about Putin's essay and Obama's response:

- First, one cannot read Putin's essay without the terms inconsistency and hypocrisy coming to mind.
 1. What is rather bewildering is that Putin has played a strategic role in the continuing violence in Syria, which has produced the Syrian Islamic extremism he now laments. Putin cannot criticize the US without admitting that there is much blood on his hands. The brutality and atrocities of Bashar al-Assad would not be possible if Vladimir Putin had not done everything possible to protect Assad from international pressure and military action. Russia has blocked every single attempt to impose sanctions against Syria. Many lives would have been saved if Putin had not protected Assad and, without Putin's support of Assad, Islamic extremism would not now be flourishing in Syria.
 2. There is not one human being on earth who has more leverage over Assad than Putin. His veto power in the UN has protected Assad and only he can force Assad to the negotiating table. He has exerted no such pressure on Assad in the past; will he now do so?
 3. Further, Putin writes that "force is permitted only in self-defense or by decision of the Security Council. Anything else . . . would constitute an act of aggression." However, Putin did not follow that standard when he launched his war against Georgia five years ago. It was not approved by the UN Security Council and it was not done in self-defense. Georgia is a tiny nation and his brutality in that war was quite horrific.

4. Putin is in effect mocking President Obama and to some extent the entire US. Columnist Peggy Noonan correctly observes that “Clearly he is looking at President Obama and seeing weakness, lostness, lack of popularity. His essay is intended to exploit this and make larger points, often sanctimoniously, about how the US should conduct itself in the world. And so he chided American leadership, implicitly challenged its position as world leader, posited the UN Security Council, where Russia has done so much mischief, as the only appropriate decision-making body for international military action, and worried the UN will ‘suffer the fate’ of the League of Nations if ‘influential countries’ continue to take action without authorization.”

Second, Putin challenged the entire concept of American exceptionalism, but, in doing so, he betrayed a complete lack of understanding as to what this really means. America is exceptional and unique. Its exceptionalism has a moral, an ethical, a spiritual and a political dimension to it. There really is no other nation quite like the US—and that is at the heart of its exceptionalism. Let me highlight a few of these distinctive aspects. The United States was birthed as a nation when two powerful forces came together in the 18th century—political liberty and religious liberty. The 13 colonies of Great Britain were each planted separately and for different reasons. Each developed uniquely with diverse institutions. The first unifying event in the colonies was the First Great Awakening, which occurred during the 1720s through the 1760s. Virtually every person in the 13 colonies was affected by this revival, especially through the ministry of George Whitefield. Historians have long documented the enormous impact of this revival—denominationalism, a desire for the separation of church and state and a strong sense of the spiritual significance of life. Religious liberty emerged as a core value of the colonies as every expression of the Protestant Reformation came to America. The pluralism of choice ensured that there would be no established church and that religious conscience would be protected. The commitment to political liberty came from the European Enlightenment and the Declaration of Independence, penned by Jefferson, offers the best example of this. As historian Henry May has argued in *The Enlightenment in America*, the revival of the First Awakening balanced the Enlightenment producing what he called America’s Moderate Enlightenment of balance, order and freedom. There was no guillotine in America. Further, Abraham Lincoln, in the Emancipation Proclamation and in his Gettysburg Address, applied these life-changing principles to slavery and declared that the Civil War was not only about preserving the Union; it was about applying “all men are created equal” to the African-American slave. They would be freed. This same understanding was applied to women in their enfranchisement through the 19th Amendment. America is something new in human history and it is quite **exceptional**. That is why tens-of-millions of human beings have sought passage to America, the land of freedom. People are not beating down the doors to get into Russia; we still have millions of people who would do anything to come to America. The Russian Revolution of 1917 with its radical Marxism-Leninism and its militant atheism almost destroyed Putin’s nation. Russia is still reeling from that horrific experiment in communist radicalism. Quite frankly, I am offended by Vladimir Putin’s glib, condescending criticism of American exceptionalism. He does not understand it; yet he rejects everything it stands for.

What is equally unsettling for me as an American and as a Christian is that our president, President Obama, does not seem to understand the essence of American exceptionalism either. Once when he was asked about it, he declared that he believes in it just as Greeks believe in

Greek exceptionalism. Clearly, he does not understand American exceptionalism. It is far more than simple patriotism or egotistic nationalism, which is what Obama seems to focus on. Rather, it is a conviction that, because of its history and its values, its commitment to limited government, individual freedom, human rights and religious liberty, the United States is unique and, consequently, has been a force for dynamic good in this world.

But we are losing that uniqueness. The unique combination of religious liberty and political liberty that produced the Independence movement and the gradual expansion of what “all men are created equal” really means, is deteriorating into a destructive embrace of Postmodern autonomy, relativism and radical pluralism. Our values, morals and ethical standards now resemble the socialist nations of Europe. Individual initiative and trust are being replaced by an entitlement mentality that eats away at liberty and freedom. American exceptionalism is vulnerable now, and our president, through his actions and his words, accentuates that vulnerability. I believe that we should defend the notion of American exceptionalism in a robust and forceful manner, but with humility. Our nation is a product of unique forces, including the providence of God. That Vladimir Putin was dead wrong about American exceptionalism is obvious. That President Obama should more vigorously defend that exceptionalism is likewise obvious. We are all diminished by his failure to do so.

See Vladimir Putin in the *New York Times* (12 September 2013); Max Fisher in www.washingtonpost.com (12 September 2013); and Peggy Noonan in the *Wall Street Journal* (14-15 September 2013).