



Government

The GOP's Insipid American Exceptionalism

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I've had it with "American exceptionalism." Enough already.

The phrase has garnered a considerable amount of attention lately, namely because Republicans are saying it over and over again. The *Atlantic* [points out](#) that the term itself was coined by Joseph Stalin, lamenting America's inability to go communist (cf. [Louis Hartz](#)). Of course, the concept that America was different than Europe goes back at least to Tocqueville, but is it too much to ask that we recall Tocqueville was writing nearly 200 years ago? Might we not pause, at least momentarily, to reconsider the argument from authority and subject it to a bit of scrutiny?

I complained about the pervasive theme at the Republican convention in my [podcast](#) yesterday, and Alex Massie [holds forth](#) against the exceptionally exceptionalistic speechifying at *Foreign Policy* today. Republicans—and the rest of us—ought to just shut up about exceptionalism already. As it stands now, a few word substitutions could make Herder or Fichte feel right at home at a GOP convention. We ought not to like this.

Encouraging citizens to reify, then flutter with excitement at the uniqueness of their own "[imagined community](#)" lubricates both the administrative capacity of and enthusiasm for the Great American Welfare/Warfare State that is presently bankrupting our unborn children. Those of us who would like a bit more federalism, veering toward sectionalism even, do so realizing that this would create downward pressure on the centralization of our lives in the body of the national government. ("Who *is* this fellow 2,000 miles away from me and why should I subsidize his career and pay his flood insurance and pension?") That the disgrace of slavery accompanied the last era of sectionalism in this country is no reason to throw out the concept itself.

Bizarrely, the GOP married this nationalistic theme with an ostensible concern for how America is viewed across the world. Might we not consider that the world finds this constant self-congratulation unseemly and perhaps even dangerous? Imagine your coworker, or neighbor, or spouse, constantly parading about, preening and pronouncing that he is the greatest person ever to have been made and marveling at how lucky are those subject to his ministrations. Any impartial

observer would forgive you for nudging him off a pier, and all the more so if he were, in fact, great.

This is perhaps the saddest part of the whole garish spectacle. The United States is a great country. Take a look around you. Saying it over and over again doesn't make it any more so; in fact it makes it less. All the bleating about our exceptionalism from our leaders is enough to make you think that they don't really believe it. The party doth protest too much, methinks.

The next time your would-be ruler holds forth about exceptionalism, remind yourself what Mencken said:

Democratic man, as I have remarked, is quite unable to think of himself as a free individual; he must belong to a group, or shake with fear and loneliness—and the group, of course, must have its leaders. It would be hard to find a country in which such brummagem serene highnesses are revered with more passionate devotion than they get in the United States. The distinction that goes with mere office runs far ahead of the distinction that goes with actual achievement.

That's what this is all about: If we allow the other party or candidate to insert its peculiar and grotesque proboscides into our homes, wallets and lives—well, we'll be just that much less exceptional.