



Taking Exception to Exceptional

Benjamin Friedman

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Dick and Liz Cheney's *Exceptional: Why the World Needs a Powerful America* is a bestseller, but I doubt many people are reading it. This book is a call to prayer, evocative for the faithful because of the very predictability that makes reading it unnecessary. The title and flag-draped cover testify to the former vice president and his daughter's purpose: to excoriate President Barack Obama's sins against the militarized conservative denomination of our civic religion.

The prologue begins with a quote from Daniel Webster's 1825 oration celebrating the laying of the cornerstone of Boston's Bunker Hill Monument, where Webster asked for "honest exultation" of the nation's role in delivering freedom to the world. It's a fitting start. One reason is that the Cheneys immediately make an error: They misattribute Webster's speech to the monument's dedication, which occurred in 1847. Another is that Webster's speech includes a subtle push for U.S. intervention in Greece's civil war. Were that intervention occurring today, the book would surely call it as insufficient, accuse Obama of abandoning Greece, and cast its fate as vital to U.S. security.

But what's especially fitting is that Webster's speech imagines the United States as the agent of divine purpose. The Cheneys similarly worship U.S. state power, insisting its virtue be taken on faith. That faith, and a penchant for argumentation by assertion and adjectives, is evident by the end of their first paragraph: "We are, as a matter of empirical fact and undeniable history, the greatest force for good the world has ever known." Alternatives (England, capitalism, language, God) are not worth considering. Empirics stay on script, unquestioning.

Hence the first section: 110 pages of U.S. national security history since World War II. By the Cheneys' account, despite the occasional Democratic stumble, military might, leaders' fortitude, and florid speeches prevailed until 2008. Part two, somehow of equal length, attacks the Obama administration for "retreating," "appeasing," an "apology" tour, Bhenghazi, the Iran deal, undoing surge magic in Iraq, inviting EMP pulse attacks, etc. The conclusion maps a road to resurrection in bullets points and bold-face.

Even most fervent acolytes can safely not read this book. The style is that of an undergraduate Young Republican hurriedly assembling cribbed facts and talking points, only with better

proofreading. Given the structure just described, anyone with a passing familiarity with the Cheneys will know what's here.

If you're still unsure, a few numbers will give you the gist. Ten of the many quotations belong to Ronald Reagan. Seven are John F. Kennedy, four Winston Churchill, and three Franklin Roosevelt. Their subject is mostly America's martial prowess and greatness. Twice we're told how Truman ended debate about whether to build thermonuclear weapons upon hearing that the Soviets might. Dick Cheney himself is quoted six times, often at considerable length. On page 100, he even quotes himself quoting himself.

The Cheneys depict zero U.S. wars as unwise. (Vietnam is presented as a good cause lost by civilian interference with military requests.) The closest they come to expressing any doubt is when they predict the Iran deal will "more than likely" cause nuclear war.

Several factual errors recur. My favorite: "Barack Obama is the only president in American history—perhaps the only leader in world history—to slash defense spending." Tell that to Richard Nixon, who cut military outlays by almost 29 percent from 1969 to 1973, as the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam. Adjusting for inflation and including war spending, that's slightly larger than the drawdown that's occurred under Obama (whose stated desire to end the drawdown the Cheneys ignore). There is also the first Bush administration, which was slashing Pentagon spending as it launched the Gulf War, with outlays falling nearly 13 percent from 1990 to 1991.

Dick Cheney, by the way, served in the Nixon administration and was George H.W. Bush's defense secretary during the Gulf War. It's also worth noting, because the Cheneys don't, that the recent military cuts came through a bipartisan deficit-reduction deal motivated partly by the Bush/Cheney administration's profligacy.

There are also a bevy of implausible opinions, one of which the Cheneys themselves refute. We're assured on page two that the United States "did not seek" to become a preponderant superpower. The point of the following paragraph and, indeed, the whole history lesson, is that wise leaders sought and maintained that status.

I was surprised only once, sort of, while reading *Exceptional*. After three lengthy chapters attacking Obama's alleged passivity and before an epilogue hoping for a Lincoln-like president to deliver us from our unprecedented peril, the Cheneys' bullet points endorse no additional wars or military alliances. They compare the Iran deal to Munich, making Obama Chamberlin and the Iranians Nazis, but do not suggest attacking Iran. They just want a better Munich. They portray ISIS as a cataclysmic threat in rapid advance, but they do not call for regular U.S. ground forces to directly fight it. Despite worrying that continuing Obama policies will leave Europe wholly "controlled" and "enslaved" by Vladimir Putin—and suggesting, incorrectly, that the 1994 Bucharest Agreement compels the United States to defend Ukraine—the Cheneys offer Kiev only more aid and sanctions against Russia.

That shows why *Exceptional's* thesis is wrong. Like almost everyone, Obama is more dovish than the Cheneys, but his foreign policy still fits squarely in the tradition of militarized global hegemony that they celebrate. Under Obama, the United States has exited no alliance. Instead it has mildly heightened troop commitments to European and Asian allies while looking to do more

for its clients in the Gulf region. Military spending remains near Cold War highs, and wars are underway in six countries. Obama's counterterrorism policies mostly continue Bush's.

Today in U.S. security politics, the hawkish confront the very hawkish. The parties share foreign policy goals and differ mostly in the details of how to best deliver liberty abroad. The Cheneys' exceptionalist creed is healthy. They should more honestly exult.

Benjamin H. Friedman is a research fellow in defense and homeland security studies at the Cato Institute.