



An exceptional America is more than just American exceptionalism

By: Gene Healy
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“We are exceptional in a certain way that no other nation is,” Secretary of State John Kerry told U.S. embassy staffers in Vienna last week.

We're the only country founded on “the idea that people are created equal and that all people have a chance to aspire for greatness. ... Pretty amazing, right?” Kerry enthused.

So far, so patriotically correct -- but Kerry really stepped in it when he admitted getting “a little uptight when I hear politicians say how exceptional we are.”

“Not because we're not exceptional,” he hastened to add -- but because bragging about it is “kind of in-your-face.”

Hit the Drudge siren! Mobilize the shock troops of righteous indignation!

“This guy is America's Chief Diplomat? Shameful,” tweeted Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal.

“Deeply offensive,” huffed Ben Shapiro.

“These people are laden with self-hatred and self-guilt,” Rush Limbaugh proclaimed.

Here we go again. The Kerry kerfuffle is an even-more-tedious replay of the conservative rage-spasm over President Obama's 2009 comments at a NATO summit in France. “I believe in American exceptionalism,” Obama affirmed when asked by a reporter. But he ran into a conservative buzzsaw when he allowed that “the Brits” (who gave us Magna Carta) and “the Greeks” (who invented philosophy and drama) probably have their own versions of exceptionalism as well.

There's something sweaty and desperate about a patriotism that cannot tolerate the diplomatic acknowledgment, on foreign soil, that other countries might have their own reasons for national pride. You'd think a great-souled nation could afford a little magnanimity — but too many conservatives think it betrays weakness. We're well on our way to becoming the first hyperpower with short-guy syndrome.

Worse still, some neoconservative ideologues have turned American Exceptionalism into an ersatz religion, fidelity to which demands reshaping the rest of the world in our Image, by force, if necessary.

In a recent column, David Brooks laments Americans' waning faith in the “democratic gospel,” our “sacred purpose” and sole reason for being. Brooks can't see any point to an America that minds its own business at home and abroad: “If America isn't a champion of universal democracy, what is the country for?” he sputters. We'll be condemned to “just go our own separate ways making individual choices.”

Jefferson called that “the pursuit of happiness”; apparently, it's David Brooks's vision of Hell. But the older, wiser version of American Exceptionalism held that the source of our national greatness was a system that gave Americans space to pursue their own dreams. As the sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset put it, America's founding creed “can be described in five words: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire.”

When it comes to living up to that creed, though, lately we're not doing so hot. As conservative legal scholar F.H. Buckley points out in his new book, *The Once and Future King: The Rise of Crown Government in America*, the U.S. is no longer “even in the top tier of economic freedom” in cross-country comparisons. In the latest edition of the Cato and Fraser Institutes' *Economic Freedom of the World* rankings, we're number 17 and we don't try harder.

We're not exactly lighting up the scoreboard on measures of civil and political liberty, either.

No wonder, then, that a recent Pew poll notes a significant drop in the percentage of Americans who think the US “stands above all other countries in the world” -- a decline that's been “particularly acute among Republicans.” Meanwhile, record numbers of us tell pollsters that the federal government is “the biggest threat to the country in the future.”

Maybe conservatives should take a break from chest-thumping about American Exceptionalism and focus on restoring the limits to government power that made us exceptional in the first place.

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