

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Published on *The National Interest* (<http://nationalinterest.org>)

Source URL (retrieved on *Mar 31, 2011*): <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/what%E2%80%99s-wrong-american-%E2%80%9Cexceptionalism%E2%80%9D-5099>

## What's Wrong with American "Exceptionalism"

| [More](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

|  
March 31, 2011

[Justin Logan](#) <sup>[2]</sup>

The term "American exceptionalism" has an effect in American political rhetoric similar to the effect that a fog machine has on a crowded dance floor. It obscures and makes easier things that would be more difficult without its presence.

Some people use "exceptionalism" to describe allegiance to the principles espoused in the U.S. Constitution. I agree that in the age of Tocqueville, American exceptionalism described America's distinctions from (particularly continental) Europe. The establishment of a new country provided an opportunity to do things differently.

However, an assemblage of phenomena like Congress's half-century shrug and sigh at imperial presidentialism and [visuals like this](#) <sup>[3]</sup> call into question the extent to which the republican constitutional vision of the nation's founders and the institutions it spawned actually constrain American politics today.

More common in the modern era is the version of American exceptionalism that centers on the American state, not America itself. The biggest effect of this form of exceptionalism is to help fuel American activism overseas. President Obama's recent speech about his unconstitutional war in Libya was a good example. The speech received gushing plaudits from [William Kristol](#) <sup>[4]</sup> and [Robert Kagan](#) <sup>[5]</sup>, both of whom I would suggest are not animated by great fealty to the constitutional vision of the founders, but rather by something else.

What is that something else? Ernest Gellner [wrote](#) <sup>[6]</sup> that "Durkheim taught that in religious worship, society adores its own camouflaged image. In a nationalist age, societies worship themselves brazenly and openly, spurning the camouflage." American exceptionalism, as practiced today, is just nationalism. It is the substitution of politics for religion, the state for God, and it is uncamouflaged self-worship.

Andrew Sullivan has a very elegant post on the subject [here](#) <sup>[7]</sup>, and Glenn Greenwald takes up the question [here](#) <sup>[8]</sup>.

## More by

**Source URL (retrieved on *Mar 31, 2011*):** <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/what%E2%80%99s-wrong-american-%E2%80%9Cexceptionalism%E2%80%9D-5099>

### Links:

- [1] <http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=250&username=nationalinterest>
- [2] <http://nationalinterest.org/profile/justin-logan>
- [3] [http://www.usgovernmentspending.com/us\\_20th\\_century\\_chart.html](http://www.usgovernmentspending.com/us_20th_century_chart.html)
- [4] [http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/you-ve-come-long-way-baby\\_555622.html](http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/you-ve-come-long-way-baby_555622.html)
- [5] [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/in-obamas-speech-echoes-of-jfk/2011/03/28/AF1WXHrB\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/in-obamas-speech-echoes-of-jfk/2011/03/28/AF1WXHrB_blog.html)
- [6] <http://www.amazon.com/Nations-Nationalism-New-Perspectives-Past/dp/0801492637>
- [7] [http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the\\_daily\\_dish/2011/03/but-is-it-true.html](http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the_daily_dish/2011/03/but-is-it-true.html)
- [8] [http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/glenn\\_greenwald/2011/03/29/exceptionalism/index.html](http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/glenn_greenwald/2011/03/29/exceptionalism/index.html)