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Colonial cannibals and African goats

By: Glenn Harlan Reynolds – May 5, 2013

Last week, the story that starving settlers at the Jamestown colony — America’s first English-speaking settlement — appear to have resorted to cannibalism got a lot of attention. It even led columnist Walter Shapiro to tweet: “It complicates the myth of ‘American exceptionalism’ if evidence of cannibalism has been indeed found at Jamestown.”

But Shapiro is wrong. The Jamestown story doesn’t complicate the “myth” of American exceptionalism — this was over a century and a half before America existed as a nation. In fact, it underscores two key founding principles of that exceptionalism: private property and free enterprise.

As David Boaz noted on the 400th anniversary of Jamestown’s founding, the colony was initially unsuccessful. The settlers, mostly indentured servants, were supposed to work for the colony as a whole, with the product of their labor going into a common store. The result, predictably, was that no one worked any harder than he or she had to. People seldom do when the product of their labor goes to someone else. Most of the colonists starved, and the rest were preparing to sail back to England when relief arrived.

When a new colonial governor, Thomas Dale, arrived, he found the colonists still in a bad way, but with people bowling in the streets instead of working.

Dale quickly instituted reforms, allowing settlers three-acre plots of land that they could work for themselves. And — take note, Walter — *that’s* when the “American exceptionalism” part kicked in.

According to Virginia historian Matthew Page Andrews, “As soon as the settlers were thrown upon their own resources, and each freeman had acquired the right of owning property, the colonists quickly developed what became the distinguishing characteristic of Americans — an aptitude for all kinds of craftsmanship coupled with an innate genius for experimentation and invention.”

American exceptionalism — to the extent it remains — is not the product of some sort of genetic superiority. The settlers who made something of Jamestown after Dale’s reforms were the same ones who were bowling in the streets instead of working when he arrived.

What is exceptional about America — at least, what’s been exceptional up to now — is the extent to which individuals were allowed to keep the fruits of their own labor instead of having them seized by people in power for their own purposes. The insight behind American exceptionalism is that people work harder and better for themselves, as free people, than they do as servants for some alleged communal good.

But maybe Shapiro's right, and this insight isn't as exceptional as I make out. After all, it's also contained in a West African proverb, to the effect that "The goat owned in common dies of hunger."

Human nature isn't so different, whether you're in 17th century North America, 19th century Africa or the 21st century United States

What's striking isn't that human nature is the same, but that so many want to pretend that it's not. Politicians are always pushing "compassion" and "sharing," but the end result of such policies usually isn't very compassionate: power for politicians, but penury for the public.

The essence of "American exceptionalism" was that we as a nation understood that. If it is regarded as a myth today, well, then prepare for your goats to starve.