

The City on the Hill: American Exceptionalism and Redemptive Violence

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

"...we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people upon us; so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world, we shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God and all professors for Gods sake; we shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going." John Winthrop 1630

From the moment Winthrop wrote that sermon to encourage the Puritans setting off in the *Arbella* 10 years after the Mayflower with its Pilgrim Fathers, it was inevitable that what became the United States should see itself as 'exceptional', a nation above and beyond any other, above all others in its 'moral' righteousness, and beyond the laws and sanctions that govern other peoples. Escaping from a Europe ruled through 'divine right' by monarchs, they took upon themselves the divine right to claim the new land as their own, a land they [thought](#) of as the "vast and unpeopled countries of America, which are fruitful and fit for living. There are only savages and brutish men, just like wild beasts".

Part of this mission (always tainted by a hint of white supremacy) was to 'improve' the wilderness and civilise the savage, and there was never any recognition that they had set up camp in a land already governed by several Native American nations. As John Tirnan writes in *The Death of Others*, "The 'errand into the wilderness', the divine covenant to spread the word of God to the heathen, was not merely missionary, but military. The exceptionalism of the new colonists thus embraced a warrior ethos very soon upon its encounter with the indigenous tribes."

As the settlers moved outwards from the Eastern seaboard the myth/belief grew that the frontier had to be 'conquered and tamed' and the savages 'civilised' by waging war (always of course a 'defensive' war) on them. For the Puritan mind this was total war. Only in this way could they create a world that was occupied by none but God's people. And out of this mindset grew something really odd - redemptive violence. Only by visiting violence upon the other would you be doing God's work, and thus redeem your soul, or indeed the nation's soul.

Most people find this concept not just hard to understand, but quite horribly twisted in its logic. How can an individual or a society achieve spiritual redemption by visiting violence upon another? Yet one has only to look at the Westerns and war films Hollywood produces to see how deeply this is embedded in the American psyche. The hero always resorts to

violence, to using a gun to sort out a problem. And at the end he gets the girl or rides off into the sunset, or both. The message is clear: blazing guns always save the troubled community, the rancher under threat from cattle rustlers, or the tight little army unit fighting behind enemy lines. The 'bad men' always get killed; the guns always produce a happy ending for the violently righteous. Violence, in other words, is always justified and it always rewards you with a happy ending. And once the West was won, the frontier simply spread outwards across the world and the redemptive violence went with it.

The violence is justified because America is always 'acting for the best', invading with the intention of 'bringing freedom and democracy' until finally, as the AP correspondent Peter Arnett reported from Vietnam: "A US major said today, "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it". He was talking about the decision to bomb and shell the town of Ben Tre regardless of civilian casualties, to rout the Vietcong." That countless people across the world do not want America's freedom or their democracy is not up for discussion. Nor do they want governments foisted upon them. They've found out the hard way that elections do not guarantee democracy.

Nor is America a democracy. It is an oligarchy. The rulers of this promised land were, and despite Obama, still are rich white men. Hailed as a land of opportunity, the US has never been that kind to its powerless poor. Look at how the small farmers, leaving their land to fight in the American Revolution, were rewarded - returning home to face debt, stolen land and bank foreclosures. Look at the current poverty levels. Nor can you reach the political heights without money or if you are other than Republican or Democrat. Americans will never get the chance to vote in a politically independent president. And while they export their violence, Americans themselves live in a violent society, however much they refuse to see it. American Christians, who give so much to charitable works, are also in favour of execution when so many other, lesser, countries have got rid of the death penalty. The country that prides itself on 'liberty' has proportionately more of its population behind bars than any other country in the world. And, with their love of guns and their 'right to bear arms', the total firearm death toll in 2010 was a staggering [31,672](#).

There are two things that have become blindingly obvious to even the least politically-informed observer of the US position over Syria, the first being the 'exceptionalism' of the US in demanding that Syria obeys the international laws that the US itself ignores. Obama claims that President Assad 'crossed a red line' by using chemical weapons in the ongoing conflict, though absolute proof that it was the Syrian government that was responsible is not forthcoming, while assertions and accusations abound. Not a word is spoken about the American arsenal of chemical weapons; the fact that it has also used them (such as in the 2004 assaults on Fallujah in Iraq; the fact that it has passed a law preventing UN inspection of its weapons. How many 'red lines' has the US crossed that remain unpunished, while it insists that Syria is punished with missile strikes?

The second thing is that military action rather than real diplomacy is the American knee-jerk response to any perceived threat. The diplomacy is often along the lines of playground bullying: do as we say or else... I say 'perceived' threat because the US appears to view the whole of the world apart from itself as a threat, one that has to be dealt with by redemptive violence. And, if the past few years are anything to go by, America can only feel secure by attacking those 'threats'.

Americans go on believing they are 'exceptional' not just because it is a comfortable and comforting belief to hold about oneself but because the majority of Americans have no

experience of any society other than their own. Recent State statistics show that, out of a population of 316,663,000, under 40% hold valid [passports](#). According to one [survey](#) 54% have never travelled outside the US, 41per cent of travelers who have never been abroad feel that everything worth visiting is in the U.S. and 22% have never left their own state. And of course, the only way many Americans get to travel outside their borders is with the military, but you don't get to see much of the real side of any country when you're busy with regime change, invasion and missile strikes.

And how can you appreciate another's culture in the country you've just trashed, particularly when you blame the overthrown 'regime' for the ruined infrastructure, thus reinforcing your view that here is a place that needs 'civilising'? Under these circumstances Americans are often unable to make any true comparisons between themselves and others and, just as many ordinary Americans believe that Americans invented just about everything or were the ones at the heart of every major historical event (which means that most of history is a closed book to them; it just didn't happen) they are unable to accept that other nations may be more democratic or more *moral* than they are.

Their own history is selective, and much of the more embarrassing moments get 'forgotten' or rewritten.

I remember attending a Junior High school in Connecticut when I was 13. We were studying the 1812-14 war when the US declared war on Britain and attempted to [annexe](#) Canada, promising, as ever, 'emancipation from tyranny and oppression' - a minor episode in the grand tally of US wars and invasions, and certainly fairly unimportant where the British were concerned, being rather involved with Napoleon at the time.

My school's history textbook had a page or two about the outrageous, unforgivable [behaviour](#) of the British in attacking Washington, burning down the White House and various other state buildings. At the bottom were a tiny asterisk and an even smaller footnote saying this was in retaliation after the Americans invaded what is now Toronto and destroyed the Governor's residence. Obviously the textbook had been written by an historian who had some standards of honesty. But few 13-year-olds would ever trouble to read footnotes and learn the lesson they offer.

The myth of the frontier full of savages lives on. The paranoia, the view that people from other countries are somehow 'alien' affects the smallest things. I remember being in Crete before it got taken over by tourism, when the island grew everything from the kind of crops we grow in Britain through to subtropical fruit. It was a self-sufficient cornu copia of wonderful fresh food, but the American airbase at Malia imported everything down to the least lettuce to feed its personnel. A weird form of exceptionalism. And a cause of deep feelings of insult and resentment among the Cretans.

Obama's [address](#) to the nation on Syria was full of the 'exceptional' nature of the US, the (self-appointed) global policeman, fighting to make itself secure against the (non-existent) threat of Assad. "The burdens of leadership are often heavy," he said, "but the world's a better place because we have borne them...." No. The burdens have lain heavy, not on the shoulders of the self-appointed leaders, but on all those who have suffered under the violence of an America busily trying to redeem itself. That it has killed countless millions in its quest has gone unpunished - thus far, at least.

How many of the proud citizens of the City on the Hill have taken on board the chilling final

words of Winthrop's sermon - 'we shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going'?

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