

American Exceptionalism:

Myth or Reality?

Section 1: A Personal Reflection:

As most of you know, I grew up on the banks of the Kennebec River in Maine – in a rambling house 500 yards from the point where the mile-wide river met the Atlantic. My grandfather's house was almost in the middle of what was originally the Popham Colony, one of the earliest English colonial settlements in North America, founded in 1607. The river was clean and the striped sea bass ran strong to and from the sea. Almost daily, I stood beside my Grandfather on the beach, ankle-deep in the surf, as he cast his line out to catch a large fish or two for our evening dinner. He was the strongest, bravest man in the world to me – a Scotsman who immigrated to Nova Scotia with his family during the famines to build boats and who later pressed on to America to secure a future. He was a man who took risks. He was a man who, despite being unable to finish the sixth grade, found a way to build businesses and become the president of banks. And he was the man who could wade into the surf every evening as the tides turned and snag a big fighting fish for our table without fail.

I tended his gear and sorted the bait. On one particular evening, I stood beside him as the great striped bass rose up, breaking water, and wrenched his head to snap the line that had planted its hook deep in his lip. My Grandfather cursed the loss and hastily re-rigged his pole. All this was beyond my skill level, so I stepped back a few paces to avoid his wrath. Knee-deep in the surf, I felt something hit my shins and looked down to see the most beautiful fish I had ever seen, just floating at my feet. I scooped him up in my arms and ran to my grandfather, exclaiming, "Look, look, see what I have caught

with my bare hands!” Despite his preoccupation with his broken line, Grandfather beamed as he realized I had captured in my two young hands the very Striper that had snapped his line. I held that fish like my life depended on him and Grandfather lifted us both into the air like we were Olympians. “You are the most blessed and exceptional boy in the world!” he bellowed. I felt like a prince who had just slain a dragon – I felt I was, indeed, exceptional. And, in a sense, at that particular moment, I was. I had no illusion that my exceptional moment was the result of divine intervention or that it foretold a future of similar moments. It was just a rare bit of dumb luck, and it felt great. My grandfather could have more accurately told me that I was “...the most blessed and luckiest boy in the world” and I would have been just as pleased and felt just as good.

That’s the way is with words. We use our language as our mood encourages, regardless, often, of what a given word really means but urged on by how we think that word expresses how we feel. The word “exceptional” – is, well, no exception. In common speech, it’s a carelessly used adjective, rivaled only by the word “awesome” , that is intended to call attention to someone’s or something’s special, outstanding, or extraordinary characteristics or nature.

Chesley Sullenberger was an exceptional pilot. Mohammed Ali was an exceptional boxing champion. Joe Dimaggio was an exceptional baseball player. Paul Revere was an exceptional patriot.

Moving beyond individuals, New Englanders are thought to be exceptionally thrifty, while Southerners are cited for their exceptional hospitality, and Midwesterners are

noted for their exceptional friendliness. And my fellow Questors, in particular, are well known for their exceptional dedication to learning.

But what do we find if we broaden our perspective and consider not just certain exemplary people and regions, but our entire nation? What are the dimensions of our conversation if we attempt to discuss the exceptional characteristics of our country, not just at this moment in time, but since its earliest days?

Section 2: Origins of the Concept of American Exceptionalism

The origin of the concept of American exceptionalism has its roots in the belief of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony that the mission of these brave, early English Puritan colonists was to establish a colonial “nation” whose government would be both a civil and ecclesiastical model, first for England and, then, for the rest of the world.

These visionary Puritans were compelled to think about crossing the Atlantic because of the wondrous things they had heard and read of the New Land there, and by their frustrations with the politics in both secular and religious life in England.

As early as 1579, poet Stephen Parmenius wrote of America as a special place unlike any other in the world, a land unsullied by the debris of past empires – a virtuous and unique land isolated from the world’s injustices. Christopher Columbus wrote of America as the site of the earthly paradise and poet Michael Drayton penned that America was Earth’s only paradise and that “...sailors can expect their hearts to swell...when they encounter the luscious smell of that delicious land...”

Numerous Puritan ministers were moved by these descriptions and adapted the thoughts expressed in these writings to justify their belief that America was the chosen land for the fulfillment of God's mission.

Who, though, were the Puritans? Before we press on, let's spend a few moments considering the Puritan agenda in early 17th century England. The Puritans were a significant and distinct subset of English Protestants who joined together in the 16th and 17th centuries in reaction against medieval Roman Catholic doctrines and practices. Although both the Church of England had already separated from the Catholic Church of Rome during King Henry the VIII's reign, the Protestants, especially the Puritans, believed that the Church of England was really not being true to Protestant ideologies but, instead, practicing a sort of "Reformed Catholicism" – a compromise between Rome's beliefs and those of the Protestants. Thus, the Puritans became part of a strong activist movement within the Church of England, constantly pushing for reforms that would bring the Church more in line with Protestant thought. The Puritan's version of Protestantism stemmed from the doctrines of John Calvin, especially those that addressed the relation of churches to civil power, and Puritans believed that secular governors are accountable to God to protect and reward virtue and punish wrongdoers. They opposed the supremacy of the Monarch or the Pope in the church, and argued that the only head of the Church in heaven or on earth is Christ.

In the greater religious "landscape", many Puritans advocated for separation from all other Christians, in favor of autonomous gathered churches. These separatist and independent strands of Puritanism became more prominent as the Puritan

leadership became more impatient with the process of advancing reform on the English national church. Despite their growing numbers and strength of conviction, the Puritans were continually blocked from changing the established church from within. As English laws began to more severely restrict religious practices, the Puritans began to entertain thoughts of leaving English soil.

What we think of as the Puritans' "Great Migration" began as early as 1629 as the movement's most ardent leaders became convinced that King Charles – who in 1626 succeeded his father, King James I, was somehow in league with the Catholic Church. Although this was truly not the case, the obvious Catholic sympathies of many of the King's ministers made his every move more suspicious. Making matters worse, his young Queen, Henrietta Maria – a French Catholic -- practiced her religion openly. And King Charles became the first English monarch since the Reformation to engage in diplomatic relations with Rome.

A series of appointments, policies, and events convinced most Puritans that King Charles I was an ardent foe of church reforms. His appointment of Catholic William Laud as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633 further enraged the Puritans, because they were sure that it was a sign that the King was intent on returning the Church of England to Roman Catholicism. In his actions and attitude, Archbishop Laud did nothing to calm the Puritans' fears. Personally and politically, he regarded Puritanism as a greater threat to the Church than Catholicism and he took numerous steps to curb their activities. His perceived persecution of Puritan preachers and pamphleteers worried all Protestants, and convinced the Puritans they were faced with the prospect of countless decades

without reforms and with their proposals being suppressed. Given this prospect, some Puritans began considering founding their own colonies where they could worship in a fully reformed church, far from the prying eyes of King Charles and the bishops.

From a purely commercial perspective, venturing far from England to form colonies was not unusual at the time. Beginning in King Charles' father's day, the founding of colonies had become a fairly normal aspect of English economic life. Most colonies were ventures initiated by joint stock companies, such as the East India Company, the Virginia Company, or the London Company. One of these companies, the Plymouth Company, had proven itself to be successful in trade but had not yet been successful at establishing settlements, and they were very open to hearing prospective plans from new members of the Company. Two of the new investors in the Plymouth Company, Puritans Robert Cushman and Edward Winslow, believed that they could secure a profitable location for a settlement and petitioned the Plymouth Company to grant them a "patent" to settle in New England. They were successful and were given permission for their group to lead the founding of a colony in Massachusetts in 1626.

During the process of organizing this venture, Cushman and Winslow convinced a number of wealthier Puritans to invest in their proposed colony. One of these new Puritan investors was lawyer John Winthrop, who was more politically oriented than either Cushman or Winslow. He brought other partners into the project based on his vision that, beyond being just a successful commercial venture for the Plymouth Company, the colony could provide a way for the largely Puritan group to have a positive influence on the Church of England from afar. Interestingly, because the two

Puritan initiators of the Plymouth Company's colonial project were politically neutral, the Monarchy paid no attention to the increasingly "radical" nature of the group. In the process of seeking the approval of the English Monarchy to embark to New England, Cushman and Winslow both spoke eloquently of its commercial potential. For his part, John Winthrop argued for acceptance of the notion that "God, Himself, had chosen this country to plant his people...to advance the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. He cautioned that "...it would be indeed displeasing to the Lord and dangerous for any [nobleman or clerk] to hinder this work". And one of Winthrop's financial supporters and allies, Peter Bulkely, echoed the sentiment, declaring that the Massachusetts Bay Colonists would become " a special people, an only people – like none other on all the earth."

Approval to colonize was granted and the group set about making the final preparations for the voyage. In a pre-voyage sermon, Bulkeley declared: "...we...people of New England...will shine forth in holiness above all other people...we profess ourselves to be a people in covenant with God..." Cushman and Winslow had already begun to see that a new, clearly religious, dynamic had taken hold of the group and now chose to bow out, citing other pressing obligations. As Winthrop was the wealthiest of the emigrating shareholders, the company decided to make him leader and governor of the fledgling Massachusetts Bay Colony.

On the surface, the Puritan settlers of Winthrop's Bay Colony were on an "errand into the wilderness" that had much in common with other Puritan groups immigrating to New England, especially that led by William Bradford to found the Plymouth Colony. But

beneath the surface, major fundamental philosophical differences distinguished the inhabitants of the Massachusetts Bay Colony from virtually every other colonist in the brave new world. Perhaps the most important of those differences was that Winthrop's group of Puritans were non-separating Congregationalists who only sought temporary refuge from the religious strife they had faced in England, whereas Bradford's followers – and most other Colonists – were separating Congregationalists who intended to permanently leave their Motherland behind and create a new home for themselves in America. Bradford, like Winthrop, believed that God was the inspiration for their migration and that He watched over them carefully as they sought to tame this new wilderness. But Winthrop felt that he and his small, committed flock were latter-day Israelites directed by God's Will to create and occupy what they envisioned as New Canaan.

Winthrop sailed for New England in 1630 along with 700 colonists on board eleven ships known collectively as the Winthrop Fleet. Despite minor pangs of guilt that he and his followers were leaving England at a time when they might be most needed to help counter England's perceived moral decay, Winthrop was fully convinced that the only way for the Church of England to move forward was for him to create a completely reformed church in New England that could stand as a model for all other churches.

During the crossing, he preached a sermon entitled "A Model of Christian Charity", in which he called on his fellow settlers to make their new colony a *City upon a Hill* (a reference to Matthew 5:14-16), meaning that they would be a model to all the nations of Europe as to what a properly reformed Christian commonwealth should look like. This

was particularly poignant in 1630, since the Thirty Years' War was going bad for the Protestants and Catholicism was being restored in lands previously reformed.

Winthrop's Puritan settlers, frustrated by their inability to reform the Church from within, sought to create a perfect society based on religious order and, thus, encourage the purification of the Anglican Church by example. This new society would be a community modeled on Biblical ideals with strict morals and a theocratic government with laws based on Protestant teachings. The intention of the Puritan colony was to create a place of perfect holiness where everyone accepted the same church, the same morality, and the same God.

Winthrop's masterful sermon was a gauntlet laid down to the would-be settlers:

...for we must Consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are 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 way of God and all professors for God's 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 whether we are going.

Their "city on a hill" is elevated, closer to God and visible to everyone in the world. The stakes would indeed be high and would very possibly fail. Failure had already befallen every English colony in North America by 1630. Roanoke had disappeared, and Jamestown was well-known for the horrors its unprepared settlers suffered. Even

Plymouth Plantation, founded by Separatists just 10 years earlier, wasn't thriving.

Winthrop saw this as clear evidence that God had already withdrawn his support from all previous English settlements because those colonists were not the chosen ones, the exceptional few who would create the model society.

Winthrop's sermon offered guidance:

Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck and to provide for our posterity is to follow the Counsel of Micah, to do Justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God.

The "shipwreck" Winthrop refers to is the wrath of God that would fall on people or nations who fail to do God's will. Winthrop is warning the people that they must not fail in their efforts to set up a godly state in the new World. God is with them, and will suffer small failings, but if the Puritans, like the government and Church of England, forsake their mission to create a truly godly society, they will suffer the wrath of God.

Winthrop shared his vision:

"...for this end, we must be knit together in this work as one man, we must entertain each other in brotherly Affection, we must be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluities, for the supply of others necessities,...we must delight in eache other, make others Conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labour, and suffer together, always having before our eyes our Commission and Community in the work, our Community as members of the same body, so shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, the Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us, as his owne people and will commaund a blessing upon us in all our wayes...."

This beautiful passage is reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount in its focus on mercy, kindness, sharing, and other selfless qualities. Winthrop's reasoning is that the Puritans will not succeed by harrying out the sinner or otherwise smiting evil, but by loving each other, caring for each other, and creating a natural community of faith. Religious faith will not be mandated or policed or forced on anyone. Rather, it will be generated naturally by the hope and love and faith of the people themselves.

Winthrop predicted that the Colonists..

... shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness, and truth than formerly we have been acquainted with...we shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when he shall make us a praise and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantations: the lord make it like that of New England.

This projected society would be almost unequalled anywhere in the known world. And they would be a model because their society will be admired for its purity and goodness.

Winthrop closed his sermon with this:

Therefore let us choose life, that we, and our Seed, may live; by obeying his voice, and cleaving to him, for he is our life, and our prosperity:

Let us choose life. Winthrop's closing is very positive, and very idealistic. Choose life that we may live, choose God for God is life. This sermon truly inspired the Puritans

who heard it, in part because it did not confirm their virtue but challenged it. It is an exhortation to do better than they normally would, to try harder, to aim higher.

In his moving sermon, Winthrop urged the colonists to be stricter in their religious conformance than even the Church of England, and to view as their objective the establishment of a model state. Winthrop's sermon is often characterized as introducing the concept of American exceptionalism in that his settlers' "errand into the wilderness" is guided by God's will to leave the perceived corruption of the English monarchy and church behind to create a model society, an exceptional society, that will lead the rest of the world to see the light.

Winthrop's words to his band of soon-to-be settlers of this great land established the tone and set the bar for the way all future Americans would come to define our nation. "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us."

All of the original Massachusetts Bay Colonists were as convinced of the seriousness of their errand as Winthrop. They took the task of creating a model church to heart and looked to their clergymen to affirm that, in the eyes of God, they were indeed on track and making steady progress.

Life in the Colony, however, presented unanticipated challenges – including disease, weather, issues with the indigenous population, internal philosophical arguments, and the faltering commitment of the second and third generation colonists. Disease, bad weather, and crop failures were seen as signs of God's disapproval of the Colony's

progress toward a model society. Failure to commit to the “errand” or to actually take issue with the way the Colony was run was seen as the work of the Devil. Colony leadership dealt with internal dissent through punishment and eviction which only served to galvanize the will of the dissenters, who were primarily challenging the centralization of authority in the Colony and its growing intolerance of other perspectives. Many colonists worried that these challenges threatened the potential success of the mission.

Ultimately, however, progress toward establishing the “city on a hill” as the model city that would, by its example, lead to the reformation of the Church of England was brought to a screeching halt by the beginning of the Reformation Era in England which brought Charles II to the throne -- who outlawed all Puritan beliefs and activities. Winthrop’s Massachusetts Colony, no matter how successful, was immediately rendered invalid altogether.

Section 3: A New Paradigm for America’s Exceptionalism

England’s ultimate rejection of the Puritans – and thus of their model Massachusetts Bay Colony, with its special and exceptional people – may have ended the Colony’s mission to save the English Church, but it did nothing to diminish the Puritan Colonists’ belief that they were still God’s chosen people on a critical, Christian mission.

Although other non-Puritan colonies had long dreamed of independence from England, they were now joined in their quest for freedom by the scorned Massachusetts Bay Colonists who zealously called upon all colonists to unite to take the opportunity to

cleanse the new nation of the corrupt ways of the European courts. One of the colonies' most respected citizens, Benjamin Franklin, began reframing the notion of exceptionalism in more secular terms – less an errand into the wilderness to create a pure model church, and more an initiative to create a unique secular nation that with a model democratic government and the envy of all the nations on earth. In Franklin's view, to be American was to be exceptional.

In his influential 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense*, Franklin's good friend, journalist Thomas Paine, echoed this notion, arguing that the American Revolution provided an opportunity to create a new, better society:

"We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand"

And the newly immigrated colonial poet, Philip Freneau, commenting on Mr. Paine's treatise, *The Rights Of Man*, wrote:

So shall our nation, formed on Virtue's plan,

Remain the guardian of the rights of man,

A vast republic, famed through every clime,

Without a king, to see the end of time.

The concept of exceptionalism which initiated the very particular religious mission of a small group of Puritans, was now being adopted by all the colonists to explain, rationalize, and advance the case for American independence. In this way, and on this point, patriots, poets, and political leaders spoke as one: by divine right, we would be a model nation and, in time, the world's guardian.

Section 4: The Course of Empire - Our Manifest Destiny

Before we could become a proper societal model, and the world's guardian, we had to solidify ourselves as a nation. Our first president, George Washington, had successfully led us to independence, and our second president, John Adams, worked to knit the politics of the colonial clans into one, strong national fabric. But it was Thomas Jefferson, our third president, who understood that we needed to control the land from "sea to shining sea" in order to actualize our dreams. Jefferson, alone, realized that the lands to the west of our colonial footprint were not simply wilderness but were, instead, a complex, uncharted labyrinth of territories claimed by both indigenous peoples and varying European populations.

Jefferson's plans for the nation depended upon western expansion and he commissioned a series of expeditions, most famously that of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, to map the terrain, gather scientific data, assess the Native American populations, and lay the groundwork for creating "an empire for liberty."

While Lewis and Clark prepared for their long trek into the wild, Jefferson was already quietly negotiating with Napoleon to purchase New Orleans and part of Florida.

Sensing that Napoleon was militarily overextended and badly in need of funds to continue his war with Britain, Jefferson pushed for a bigger deal and convinced Napoleon to sell the U.S. the entire Louisiana territory which stretched from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains and more than doubled the size of the United States.

The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 intensified America's migration to the West that was already well underway. The ideas associated with American Exceptionalism were clearly the driving ideological force behind this migration and a new explanation of exceptionalism emerged: Manifest Destiny.

The phrase "Manifest Destiny" was coined to express the logic associated with the territorial expansion of the United States from 1812 to 1860. During this time, the United States expanded to the Pacific Ocean—largely defining the borders of the contiguous United States as they are today. Jefferson's purchase set the stage for the beginning of a new "mission"—what Andrew Jackson in 1843 would famously describe as "extending the area of freedom."

The exact words were first used in print by journalist John O'Sullivan in an 1845 article that urged the annexation of Texas because it was "our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions". (Quoted in Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest design: American Exceptionalism and Empire*(2003) p. 255).

O'Sullivan's continued use of the phrase became extremely influential. On December 27, 1845 in the *New York Morning News*, O'Sullivan argued that the United States had the right to claim "the whole of Oregon": And that claim, he argued, is by the right of our manifest destiny to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us.

O'Sullivan believed that it was God's will that we, not the British, would spread "the great experiment of liberty". Therefore, British claims to the territory should be overruled. O'Sullivan, and a growing number of Americans, believed that Manifest Destiny was a moral ideal -- a "higher law" -- that superseded other considerations.

While the concept of America's Manifest Destiny was broader and more all-encompassing than the original exceptionalist idea identified by John Winthrop, it nonetheless referenced certain ideas from Winthrop's early sermon. Among these, three themes emerge:

- the **virtue** of the American people and their institutions;
- the **mission** to spread these institutions, thereby redeeming and remaking the world in the image of the U.S.; and
- the **destiny** under God to do this work.

The rapidly expanding population of our nation was uniquely poised to embrace a divine rationale for our growth, dominance, and leadership. In the wake of our achieving independence -- and retaining it after the war of 1812 -- dramatic changes in American

economics, politics and intellectual culture were accompanied by an equally dramatic transformation and unprecedented expansion of church membership known as the Second Great Awakening. The religious revitalization of the Awakening spanned the entire country well into the 1840s and it played a significant supporting role in our Westward Expansion.

Our geographic expansion, as ordained by our Manifest Destiny, played out over the next five decades. In 1810, during the Madison presidency, the United States seized the westernmost section of Spanish Florida to ensure control over the mouth of the Mississippi River. Embroiled in war at home, Spain was in no position to contest the seizure.

During the Monroe presidency, General Andrew Jackson's raid into the remaining Spanish-held area of Florida led Spain to sign a treaty in 1819 that ceded what remained of its Florida holdings to the United States in return for recognition of a fixed border between American Louisiana and Spanish Texas.

The next phase of our growth wasn't until 1836, when Americans living in the Mexican state of Texas had rebelled from the central government at Mexico City and established an independent republic. The United States recognized the Lone Star Republic but rebuffed initial overtures of annexation until James Polk's election in 1845 when Congress endorsed national expansion as part of our "manifest destiny," and annexed Texas by joint resolution.

A year later, Polk's administration convinced England to give up its Oregon territory, and then he used the long-simmering border disputes between Texas and Mexico to provoke war with the Mexican government -- which America won -- and that brought the United States all of upper California.

The contiguous borders of the United States were finally solidified by the Gadsden Purchase of 1853 initiated by President Franklin Pierce. Bought from Mexico for \$10 million, the area was regarded as essential for a railroad route between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific coast.

This tremendous growth over a fifty year period, and the resulting establishment of our national footprint not only fulfilled the early dreams of Jefferson and the visionary leaders who followed him, but also ensured that we were ready as a country to develop economically, politically, and socially without much predictable risk of outside challenge.

Section 5: Challenges To Our Concept of Exceptionalism

Internally, however, the process of achieving and maintaining our geographical growth and anticipated national unity posed two major challenges: first, the issue of the role that the indigenous people of our country might play in the land of the free and the brave, and, second, the issue of what role the African slave population might be in this "great experiment of liberty".

From the landing of the colonists' first ships on the Eastern Shores with their King's land grants in hand, colonial leadership recognized that the long sought "city on a hill" was going to be positioned in the midst of a Native American population which, in some way

and to some degree, occupied and controlled lands all around the colonists. Given the relatively fluid nature of the American Indian lifestyle, the initial, small settlements of the Puritans and other Pilgrims were seemingly less impactful on the indigenous population because the American Indians could simply withdraw from the fledgling colonies to whatever degree necessary for the comfort and continuance of their tribal life.

As soon as the colonies strengthened and started to grow, trouble began in earnest. Initially, the coastal Indians had helped the English colonists develop their economy in the new settlements, but as the settlers continued to spread inland it inevitably led to conflict with the local tribes. In the eyes of the American Indians, the actions of the settlers in regard to the Indians contrasted sharply with the Christianity they professed. The Indians “bore with benevolent resignation [a range of] outrages, including injuries, robberies, rapes, and barbarous deeds of death committed by the American Pilgrims.’ (Deborah Madsen. American Exceptionalism. P49).

A Mohican chief attempted to describe the disparity between the tribes’ initial treatment of the settlers and the response of those same settlers, “...They asked for rest and kindness, we gave them both...they were strangers and we took them in, and fed them and helped clothe them. In return, they gave us devastating diseases, vice, and strong liquor, and duped us by laws and legal procedures that we could not understand but were subject to by right of discovery.” (Madsen. P51).

In 1637, the Pequot War erupted when a Massachusetts colonist accused a Pequot Indian of murdering a settler. The English set fire to a Pequot village and as the Indians

fled their huts the Puritans shot and killed them. Hundreds of Pequots were indiscriminately killed, virtually eliminating the tribe.

After the war, all the tribes of indigenous people declined rapidly in numbers and suffered severe losses of land and cultural independence. During the first three-quarters of the seventeenth century, New England's indigenous population fell from 140,000 to 10,000, while the English population grew dramatically.

Those Indians who remained were drastically reduced in numbers. Many either fled to the West or were forced to settle in supervised villages so they no longer posed a threat to the colonists. In an attempt to include surviving Indians in the exceptional future of New England, some of the Puritans launched a concerted campaign to convert the American Indians to Protestantism. John Eliot, New England's leading missionary, convinced about 2,000 to live in "praying towns," where they were expected to adopt white customs and accept the legal authority of colonial courts.

By choice or force, the Eastern tribes headed westward, which only temporarily delayed resolving the issue of their place in the Empire of Liberty. By the time of Thomas Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase, an ultimate resolution was, unfortunately, taking shape.

Jefferson, in so many ways, was one of the most unlikely architects of the Indians' demise because, unlike many of his contemporaries, he considered the American Indian to be by nature equal to the white man. As a man of the Romantic Era, he admired and lauded the American Indians, and saw them as unspoiled; the "noble savage".

"As governor and President, he was to receive visits from Indians...He was to observe this race as a philosopher and to inquire into its languages; as a responsible statesman he was to grapple with the problem of depredations and massacres on the frontier."

Malone, Dumas. (1948). Jefferson The Virginian. Little, Brown And Company, Boston.

The only thing Indians needed, he insisted, was the civilizing influence of agriculture. By abandoning hunting and adopting farming, the Indians would rise from "savagery" to "civilization" and eventually be absorbed into American society.

But, as a man of the Enlightenment, with its analytical detachment, he knew that the Indian way of life could no longer exist in an expanding United States. His thinking was quite clear that the Indians had two choices: full assimilation or removal. As soon as Louisiana was purchased, Jefferson wrote a lengthy letter to William Henry Harrison, military governor of the Northwest Territory, explaining that the nation's policy "is to live in perpetual peace with the Indians, to cultivate their affectionate attachment from them, by everything just and liberal which we can do for them within the bounds of reason."

However, Indian resistance to European-style farming and to land sales seems to have caused Jefferson to doubt the feasibility of assimilating Native people into American life. And in secret messages to his cabinet and Congress, Jefferson outlined a plan for removal of all Native Americans east of the Mississippi to make sure that this land would never fall to the French or the British.

Manifest Destiny evoked so many positive images – then and now -- to white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants: populating the west with hard-working settlers, expanding profitable

agriculture and industry, sharing the attributes of democracy and Christianity, and coming to some sort of peace with the Indians. But for the American Indian people, the “progress” of our Empire of Liberty brought cultural, political, economic, and spiritual genocide.

In Luther Standing Bear’s book, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, the author criticizes the Colonists and all the settlers who came after them as usurpers: “...they did not try to understand...that though we were different, we were living our destiny according to the plan of the Supreme Dictator of mankind. The sacred law of the white man was written in a book...his actions were foretold in that book, in a manner that only European eyes could see...his acts were the result of divine will!” The white man excused his presence here by saying he had been guided by the will of God; and in so saying, absolved himself of all responsibility for his appearance in a land occupied by other men.

Different, but related, issues inform the relationship of Africans to American Exceptionalism. Unlike the Indians that that Colonists “encountered” and attempted to reconcile as they pursued their divine claim to greater and greater portions of the continent, the Africans were brought here by the Colonists as slaves to serve their interests and increase their productivity. The American Indians became victims of racial discrimination over time, while the Africans faced racism from the very start. And while the American Indians, by and large, could see no real advantage to assimilating into the white man’s culture, there was at least the potential to do so – and in doing so, they arguably might have access to share in the exceptionalist experience.

It should be noted that by contrast, Africans in their own homeland were as enlightened, noble, and dutiful as any of the European Colonists, but were routinely ambushed through various strategies and whisked far from home to be sold as slaves. The first Africans to be brought to English North America landed in Virginia in 1619, intended as laborers to replace the white European indentured servant laborers who were becoming more expensive and generally less desirable as employees. In particular, Colonial leaders and farmers began to worry about creating a larger class of poor, landless, white men who might, at some point, rebel against their employers. Although investing in slaves was considerably more expensive, the Colonists could control this workforce through legal ownership. Wealthy Virginia and Maryland planters began to buy slaves in preference to indentured servants during the 1660s and 1670s, and most of the poorer planters followed suit by around 1700.

By the dawn of the American Revolution, twenty percent of the population in the thirteen colonies consisted of African slaves. That said, there were many colonists who, from the outset, were against slavery. The world's first anti-slavery society was founded as early as 1775 by Quakers in Philadelphia, the year the Revolution began. By 1788, at least thirteen of these clubs were known to exist in the American colonies. Northern landowners, due as much to climatic differences as philosophical distinctions, were less reliant on slave labor and, thus, among the first to question the role of slavery in America's exceptionalist scheme, which stressed the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. Some Northern states banned slavery outright, and some provided for the gradual end of slavery. At any rate, the circumstances of the American Revolution made

slavery increasingly unacceptable in the minds of many Northerners. This attitude ignited the philosophical debate that would be waged throughout the next century.

To Southern landowners, slavery was purely and simply the key to how economic exceptionalism worked. Citing the harsh realities of a land-rich, but labor-scarce economy, settlers in the Southern colonies enacted statutes of law to impose perpetual slavery upon slaves and their offspring. By enacting strict slave laws the southern landowners could assure themselves of labor in order to keep farming their lands and producing the crops in demand the world over.

For a period of time, the Southern-led attitude dictated the young nation's position on slavery. But after the War of 1812, as settlers began moving ever westward and a national infrastructure began to develop, the Northern establishment began to realize that, practically speaking, the expansion of slavery into the new territories would threaten their ability to be competitive at market, and, morally speaking, irreconcilable with our exceptionalist beliefs.

As these new regions became settled, it became clear that the establishment of a vast, free nation was going to require a new national decision on the future of slavery. Both Northern and Southern leaders focused significant energy on pursuing their political desires in regard to slavery, and the famous Lincoln-Douglas Debates had at their core the issue of the future of slavery in the West.

Despite all efforts at negotiations and reconciliations, most notably the Compromise of 1850, the Nation was thrown into the great Civil War in large part over the issue of

slavery from 1861 to 1865. While the root causes of the Civil War can be broken down into States' Rights, Slavery, Political and Economic considerations, the issue of slavery had significant influence on the other three.

The stress of the Civil War on our young nation was far worse than any of our other conflicts, including the American Revolution. This deadly and costly conflict put the future of the Union and every aspect of its exceptionalist agenda at risk. As noted, the causes of the war included a range of political and financial factors, many of which were unrelated to the enslavement of the African American people. However, none of these causes so clearly tested our national morality as that of slavery. After four years of horrific warfare, with neighbor fighting neighbor, the Union prevailed and slavery was outlawed everywhere in the nation.

The end of slavery brought far-reaching changes in the lives of all Americans. The abolition of slavery led inevitably to conflict between African Americans seeking to breathe substantive meaning into their freedom by asserting their independence from white control, and whites seeking to retain as much as possible of the old order.

In an effort to repair the damage that slavery levied upon our African American population and to include them as equals in the exceptionalist dream, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands was initiated on March 4, 1865. The goal of the Bureau was to help the more than four million former slaves, most without any resources or education populating both the South and the North. The Bureau distributed clothing, food, and fuel to destitute freedmen and oversaw "all subjects relating to their condition" in the South.

The Bureau also was charged with instituting a judicial system for employment claims that would be fair to both blacks and whites. The Bureau established its own authority, with local agents setting up temporary three-man courts to hear individual disputes between white employees who were dealing for the first time with black employees demanding fair wages.

Another of the Bureau's responsibilities was introducing a system of free labor economy. The Bureau's goal, in this respect, was to return the ex-slaves to plantation labor, which was still essential to the Southern economy, but to do so under conditions that would allow blacks to work their way up and out of the labor class. One way to accomplish this was to distribute lands confiscated or abandoned during the war--some 850,000 acres in 1865--to newly freed slaves. "Forty acres and a mule" became the slogan for this Reconstruction land-grant plan.

And perhaps the most important contribution the Bureau made to Reconstruction efforts involved expanding educational opportunities to emancipated African-Americans. Lacking adequate resources, the Bureau did not establish new schools itself, but instead acted as a catalyst between Northern relief societies and local governments and individuals. By 1869, about 3,000 new schools serving more than 150,000 pupils, as well as dozens of evening and private schools, had been established. Working with the American Missionary Association and the American Freedman's Union Commission, the Bureau also founded and staffed the first black colleges in the South, all of which were initially designed to train black teachers who would teach black students.

The issue of slavery is one of the greatest paradoxes of American history. That a nation “conceived in liberty” could have been built on the backs of thousands of African slaves is certainly one of the most troublesome features of our evolving exceptionalist nation. Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and the combined efforts of the Freedman’s Bureau and other Reconstructionist activities did much to set the country on the right track, but the struggles of our African American citizens continued for decades to come. Even though slavery, specifically, was abolished as a result of the Civil War, the South – and its prevalent attitude about black people – was not really entirely defeated. Many historians and analysts of this period believe that the surrender of the South ultimately took a series of political compromises which, later, the Southern political leadership used to dilute the effects of emancipation. The Civil Rights Act of 1875 was repealed in 1883, and the “separate but equal” Jim Crow laws were enacted in 1896. Legal segregation and sharecropping practices helped support a system of legal bondage that replaced the illegal practice of slavery. That said, dogged persistence on the part of social, political, and religious leaders eventually broke this yoke of continued oppression and racism in the mid- to late- 1960s and moved the country forward on this critical social issue in a manner consistent with our exceptionalist vision and values.

Section 6: American Exceptionalism - Moving Forward

Thus far in our discussion today, I have attempted to locate the initial impetus for, and subsequent thread of, our concept of America as a truly exceptional nation – a unique, divinely-inspired empire of liberty, capable of inspiring the rest of the organized nations of the world to follow our example and champion the cause of liberty and justice for all.

We have considered the impact of John Winthrop's brave Puritan Colony. We have reflected upon our nation's fight for independence – not just once, but twice, in our history. We have taken into account our Westward Expansion that established our territories, and the Great Civil War that united them.

We have also considered a number of our shortfalls, defeats, and failures. Given our Christian beliefs and commitment to equality, the most grievous among them would be our failure to understand how to embrace and respect peoples of cultures unlike our own, most notably those of the Native and African Americans.

Shortcomings such as these, and numerous others in our more recent history – as serious as we recognize them to be – have *detoured* us but they, ultimately, have not *derailed* us on our exceptionalist path. It is an aspect of our national character to face our shortfalls squarely, and earnestly commit to improve upon them until we make things right. In no small measure, this characteristic stems from our religious heritage which stressed that while we might be the “chosen” people, we must never shirk or fail to meet the demands of the errand with which God charged us. The great French philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville, in his 1851 book, *Democracy In America*, wrote that:

“...Upon my arrival in the United States, the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention; and the longer I stayed there, the more did I perceive the great political consequences resulting from this state of things...The Americans combine the notions of Christianity and of liberty so intimately in their minds, that it is impossible to make them conceive the one without the other...”

Congregational minister and educator, Josiah Strong, in his 1885 book, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis*, argued that Christianity, economic progress, and civilization went hand-in-hand.

“Christianity will bind the human race into a brotherhood...and the Christians of the world [will] look to the United States...”

Strong’s perspective is simply a national version of Puritan John Winthrop’s original concept as detailed in his first colonial sermon:

“...for we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us; so that we deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us...and we will be consumed out of [this] good land...”

Despite the eventual secularization of Winthrop’s colonial mission, its deep religious roots became transformed into the backbone of American society and have continually played a major role in the progress of our civilization and economic and material success.

And we have been exceptionally successful. Despite claims by our nation's internal and external critics that we Americans are – and always have been -- exceptionally egocentric, entitled, hypocritical, duplicitous, manipulative, and imperialistic, we have pursued democracy vigorously over the past two and a half centuries and promoted ever-increasing equality in the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. These efforts have been at the heart of our quest for exceptionalism since the early colonies.

Today, four basic characteristics have come to be identified with the modern definition of American Exceptionalism. The first of these is that we have a truly superior geographic situation compared with any country in the world, with an abundance of natural resources, and being at considerable distance from Europe's political and class conflicts. The second is that our country has the most highly developed political and economic systems in the world. Thirdly, American society is unmarred by class conflict or an aristocracy, making the country reasonably virtuous and relatively innocent. And fourth, the United States feels that it is a national priority to use its exceptionalism as a model and thus encourage the transformation of other countries into exceptionalist nations.

It is easy to see the value of that model. Our country has developed a political system that is open to participation by all those residing legally in our society and is guided by a process that is the strongest, healthiest, and most reflective of its citizens' interests in all the world.

On top of that, America is the most diverse society in the world today. And our ability to embrace that level of diversity and enjoy enduring national stability and unity is the envy

of every other nation on earth. The robust nature of our civil society – the arena of groups, organizations, and institutions through which we connect to conduct our most personally meaningful activities – is without competition. American volunteerism and private philanthropic giving is unmatched anywhere in the world. Contributing to the strength of our civic society is our belief in the power of individuals to shape their own lives, and our tolerance of the ‘shape’ that self-fulfillment might take. Our pride in the society we have created is also unmatched anywhere else in the world: a Pew Research Center poll revealed that 71% of Americans were “very proud” to be Americans, while only 42% of the British, 38% of the French, and 21% of the Germans and Japanese respondents were proud to live in their countries.

Section 7: Conclusion

We should be heartened that so many of our citizens are proud of this great land of ours. Generation after generation, we have worked together to build this country into something truly special, truly worthy of the attention of other nations throughout the world. We, as a society, are blessed, and we are lucky – just as I felt I was that rare day when I held that sparkling fish up to my grandfather. But was I exceptional – even then that seemed unlikely. Are we, as a nation, exceptional?

God loves and blesses all the people of all the nations in the world. And everyone ever born, has been lucky – at least once. No one, in that sense, is inherently exceptional. No individuals, no races, no nations.

John Winthrop, in his sermon that cold day off the shores of Massachusetts, reminded his followers that exceptionalism was not a pre-existing condition -- they will not succeed *because* they are pure, they will only succeed if they *become* pure – they will not succeed *because* they are good, but only if they *choose* good over evil.

My message to you today is that exceptionalism is in our hands daily – our hands, not our neighbors' hands, not the government's hands – it is in our hands daily to decide through our thoughts, deeds, and actions to be or not to be exceptional. We have been blessed with an abundance of all the right stuff, materially and spiritually, for our American nation to truly be exceptional. That is a reality, not a myth. But the reality of exceptionalism is that it requires continually working at its attainment, setting the bar higher on a regular basis, and never slacking or cutting corners.

Our national history chronicles a quest for exceptionalism and we, despite some glaring shortcomings, have continually struggled to become just that. As an ever larger, ever more complex nation, we have faced hurdles that seemed insurmountable, largely created by greed, avarice, hatred, laziness, and other impurities of human nature. That those impurities exist and challenge us is neither surprising nor important – that we are resolved to move past them as a society is the most, and perhaps only, important thing.