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# Does American exceptionalism make us dumb?

By Jay Parini

Updated 2:51 PM ET, Tue February 24, 2015



Johnson: Giuliani's Obama comments 'regrettable' 01:06

## Story highlights

Jay Parini: Giuliani, Oklahoma AP history issue have put focus on American exceptionalism

Parini says U.S. holds high, noble ideals and struggles to improve on flaws

To whitewash our history dishonors our values, he says

better.

It's an old idea that Obama took on in the second year of his presidency, when he said: "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and

*Editor's Note: Jay Parini, a poet and novelist, teaches at Middlebury College in Vermont. He has just published "Jesus: The Human Face of God," a biography of Jesus. The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of the author.*

**(CNN)**—Talk of American exceptionalism has become headline news, with loud sputtering from Rudy Giuliani, who suggested that President Barack Obama doesn't love America in the same way that the rest of us do. Giuliani wants to dwell on our exceptionalism -- the idea that we're different from other countries, and much



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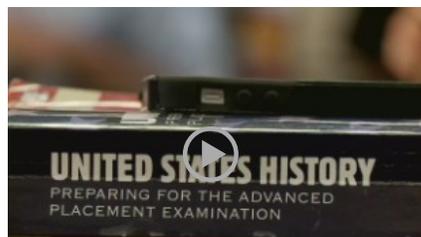


Jay Parini

the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism."

That comment annoyed those who wished him to say: "America is the best country in the world, bar none!"

Somehow the drumbeat for exceptionalism continues. This month, Oklahoma politician Dan Fisher introduced a bill that tried to ban Advanced Placement history classes in his state because the guidelines for teachers didn't talk explicitly about American exceptionalism. The bill passed the House Education Committee in his state by a 11-4 vote but [has since been pulled back](#) for a rewrite, the Tulsa World reported last week.



**Lawmakers push to get rid of AP history course** 01:40

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Still, it's [part of a battle that has heated up around the country](#). Indeed, six states have introduced bills to change the framework of AP history courses to emphasize the idea of exceptionalism and downplay aspects of American history that don't seem, well, exceptional.

Scholars have studied the concept thoroughly, and one of the best books on this topic is by Seymour Martin Lipset: "American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword" (Norton, 1996). Lipset identifies five features central to the American value system: liberty, egalitarianism, populism, individualism and laissez-faire. He suggests that we look at most trends in American history through the prism of these concepts, and to an extent this is a useful exercise.

The United States is truly remarkable, a nation founded on a set of Enlightenment ideals so beautifully expressed by the Declaration of Independence and codified in the U.S. Constitution. We should feel good about our ideals, even when we don't quite manage to live up to them.

We are a nation of immigrants, a quilt of many colors, and we've managed over more than two centuries to create a way of life that allows for a reasonable degree of upward mobility, that prizes individual liberty, promotes freedom of religion and genuinely values equal rights for all citizens.



**Coulter: Why can't we question liberals' patriotism?** 02:59

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At certain times in history -- World War II is a fine example -- we have joined forces with those on the side of freedom, willingly sacrificing our young men and women in a war that secured the defeat of fascism.

Yet our history is, like every national story, a complicated one, and American students deserve a balanced view. Should we really ignore the fact that Native Americans died in massive numbers (mostly from diseases carried to these shores by the earliest European invaders)? In the 19th century, the West was "won" at considerable expense to those who actually lived on the land.

Students need to know about the Trail of Tears, Wounded Knee and other sad episodes in American history. This is part of our story.

We need to talk openly about slavery. In doing so, it's useful to look at the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database and see that more than 12 million Africans were kidnapped and shipped to the

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New World between the 16th and 19th centuries. The vast bulk of slaves, in fact, went to the Caribbean and South America. The Harvard scholar, Henry Louis Gates Jr., [has written honestly](#) about this.

Of course slavery, wherever it occurred, was a brutal system, and it set in motion a great deal of bad karma, not helped by the sad period after Reconstruction ended in 1877, when an impoverished South put into effect Jim Crow laws that effectively subjugated blacks for many decades, creating a segregated society that -- to a degree -- continues to plague us. (I recommend Eric Foner's history of this era, "Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution.")

But the United States has worked hard to recognize and right its wrongs, passing major legislation on civil rights over the years, and we continue to work at this problem. It's a long and winding road, as the Beatles might have put it.

As for America's military adventures, there are lots of wrinkles. The American Revolution is an inspiring moment, well worth dwelling on with students. But the Mexican-American War was a disgrace, "one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation," as President U.S. Grant [said in his memoirs](#). It was this war that (in part) caused Henry David Thoreau to refuse to pay his taxes.



**Giuliani's remarks: How have media responded?** 07:03

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World War II may have been an American triumph of will and courage, but the Korean War is confusing, and students should consider its odd dimensions. Vietnam and Iraq are also complicated, and yet it's important for students to know that our interventions in both countries led to a great deal of death and destruction. [At the very least](#), 133,000 Iraqi civilians died as a result of our "war of choice" in Iraq.

This number should never be forgotten, as it set in motion a wave of violence that continues to this day, and it helps to explain anti-American feeling in that region.

The war in Afghanistan is ongoing, and it may take decades to know what happened there and why and whether or not it was worth the effort. But it surely doesn't help anyone to push these questions under the rug.

Obama [loves the United States](#), and he upholds its values proudly. He speaks about its history in clear, rational terms, without pumping up the good side or trying to erase the darker sides.

We should never forget that Americans continue to advocate for individual liberty, equality and self-governance. We often step in when it's necessary to help countries in need. But our history needs no whitewashing. To attempt this does us a terrible disservice.

American politicians who dwell on American exceptionalism only dishonor us by suggesting we play dumb to our past.

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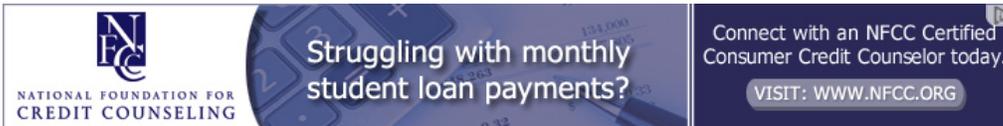
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GulfofTonkin Mar 14, 2015

Letter to Editor

I take great pride in being one person of thousands that has forced CNN and the BBC to close public comments , but limited to only articles of the editor's choice .This is a great victory in the information war for us !! ...The Best part is you don't have a clue on how to turn the tide in your favour.

Gentlemen your war machine is coming to end ... We the people have had enough !!

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**Marmee Cruz** Mar 13, 2015

Most nations think they are exceptional. Has to be that way in order to promote their interest.

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I don't know if it's exceptionalism, but something sure is making us dumb. Religion, maybe?

[Flag](#) [Share](#)[2 Like](#)**Rhodelrish** Mar 6, 2015

"Exceptionalism" must be EARNED over time. It's not something that we can just claim is ours. We must be honest with ourselves. We also must do a much more careful job in deciding who to send to Washington.

[Flag](#) [Share](#)[2 Like](#)**Bob DuChaine** Mar 2, 2015

Two sides of American exceptionalism were shown in 1945 when we created the most powerful weapon ever introduced by humanity and then used it to annihilate a hundred thousand or so innocent women and children.

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We must be dumb. After all, we elected Barack Obama ... twice!

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@Junior36 You didn't need to be a genius to figure out that McCain and Romney were poison.

[Flag](#) [Share](#)[4 Like](#)**Marmee Cruz** Mar 13, 2015

@Junior36 You'd rather we'd had McCain/Palin? Great!

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Our good fortune and our achievements tempt us to think of ourselves as somehow "exceptional", but if we are honest about ourselves, we will admit that we have a few "exceptional" failures to our credit, too. Lincoln, as usual, got it exactly right when he referred to Americans as "God's almost chosen people".

We might be better off remembering that human nature was not re-invented in 1492, or 1776. It remains what it has always been, and Americans partake fully in the universal human heritage (of wisdom and folly, virtue and vice, humility and self-aggrandizement).

Rather than falling in love with ourselves, we might do well to get to work on solving the problems that prevent our country from being truly exceptional: the growing inequality of wealth among Americans; the crushing cost of higher education; our inordinate consumption of energy; our reflexive preference for military responses to international problems over diplomatic responses; the residual racism of American society.

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**RickeyV** Mar 1, 2015

Since the author never used the phrase "We the People", there is no reason to believe that he understands American exceptionalism. The dumbest thing to watch is someone trying to deny American exceptionalism without being able to explain it correctly.

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**mgriego00799** Mar 2, 2015

[@RickeyV](#) Which author are you referring to? American exceptionalism needs no explaining. It's a simple concept. We are better because our ideals make it so. But that's not how reality works. You have to act to be exceptional, not just have it bestowed simply because you were born north or south of an arbitrary line on a map. This idea of exceptionalism is borrowed from the Protestant ideals most held by baptists that they are automatically saved because of their belief. It's a warm, fuzzy religious ideal, nothing more.

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**Bob DuChaine** Mar 2, 2015

[@mgriego00799](#) [@RickeyV](#) American exceptionalism is a way for the worst of us to claim credit for what the best of us have done. The right-wing wish to manipulate history to erase the bad and promote only the good is the basis of George Orwell's "1984," in which "Newspeak" is used to airbrush history so that anything unpleasant about ourselves is erased and replaced with positive images.

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**Sadtoseehere** Mar 8, 2015

[@RickeyV](#) Ridiculous. We are mostly legends in our own minds. Even our republic, as a form of government, is not, in and of itself, "exceptional". Our exceptional and growing diversity, makes your "we the people" criteria pure nonsense.

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**amygdalan** Mar 1, 2015

If one compares the USA with all countries today and for all recorded history and does not recognize the exceptional nature of the USA., then one must surely be DUMB.

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**Bob DuChaine** Mar 2, 2015

[@amygdalan](#) The Hellenistic period, the Roman Empire and the British Empire all saw themselves as the "civilizing influence" that elevated humanity, not without reason. The really dumb people are the ones who can only see one side of the ledger.

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**Rhodelrish** Mar 6, 2015

[@amygdalan](#) Can't agree, Amy. We have many, many issues to address in this country and abroad, and it's folly to claim that we're exceptional unless we work to prove it on a continual basis.

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**RogueDiplomat** Mar 1, 2015

We have become "exceptional" among modern industrial and post-industrial democracies in terms of income inequality; lack of universal health care; exorbitantly priced private university education that has put so many young people into obscene debt; declining educational

performance in math and science as our public schools continue fail; a disappearing working-class and middle-class with the destruction of unions, companies moving overseas and putting profits over people; low public investment in infrastructure, and on it goes. The America of our fathers and grandfathers, humbled by the Great Depression and democratized by WWII when bankers shared foxholes with share-croppers, is gone. We as a country must take a long sober look at what we've become and how best to move forward and not fixate on or over-romanticize our founding myths.

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**Anthony Zarat** Mar 1, 2015

[@RogueDiplomat](#) We are also "exceptional" among these same post-industrial democracies in that our economy shows occasional signs of life, while their economies are completely deceased. In a socialist graveyard, the comatose American economy appears healthy by comparison.

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**SeJ** 6 days ago

[@Anthony Zarat](#) [@RogueDiplomat](#)

China's economy seems to be doing pretty well. Are they "exceptional", too?

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**kenman10** Mar 1, 2015

[@RogueDiplomat](#) Your points are valid, but do not reflect on the American experiment but on the CURRENT state of American politics and especially the anti-traditional, socialist and divisive politics of the President and his supporters in the current Democrat Party.

You mention our "founding myths" and it makes me wonder if you too are ashamed of the proposition that we were founded on godly principles and that we have been blessed in many ways, though we have certainly made mistakes when we forgot the source of any exceptionalism that we might have displayed?

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**oldslacker** Mar 1, 2015

'Of course slavery, wherever it occurred, was a brutal system, and it set in motion a great deal of bad karma, not helped by the sad period after Reconstruction ended in 1877, when an impoverished South put into effect Jim Crow laws that effectively subjugated blacks for many decades, creating a segregated society that -- to a degree -- continues to plague us.'

Oh and um, in the interest of what we should be teaching about America, don't forget to make a special point of letting kids know which political party was responsible for the Jim Crow Laws, this brutality and therefore created "a segregated society that ...continues to plague us".

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**mgriego00799** Mar 2, 2015

[@oldslacker](#) And then be sure to continue with the fact that most of those old southern democrats switched parties to the republican party. Of course the fact that it was the democratic party of the south that supported Jim Crow laws. But the notion that nothing has changed since then is inaccurate. Teach history as it is, I don't care which party looks good or bad. It is what it is.

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**mac101** Feb 28, 2015

What is exceptional about America is our ideals. What is not always exceptional about America is our implementation, or more specifically, the lack of implementation, of those same ideals. If we can continue to keep as our our goal the attainment of the ideals, rather than a goal of minimizing our lack of implementation, we will do fine.

To put it more succinctly - we should continue to strive for perfection while clearly

acknowledging we don't always achieve it.

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**skytag** Feb 28, 2015

American exceptionalism has become an albatross around America's neck. Too many Americans are more concerned about "believing" America is the best at everything than ensuring we actually \*are\* the best. Challenge their belief by criticizing anything and they attack you immediately, insulting you, questioning your patriotism, and suggesting you move to another country.

This is no way to stay at the top in any regard; just the opposite, in fact, because it makes us complacent.

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**kenman10** Mar 1, 2015

@skytag Too many Americans suggest that recognizing the exceptionalism of the American experiment means that every American believes that we are the "best at everything". Nonsense. If they think that being perfect is the requirement for being exceptional, they are making perfect the enemy of the good, and making a silly assertion.

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