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An Unorthodox Look at America's "Manifest Destiny"

Part 1

Is American exceptionalism a noble ideal or a justification for dominance?



Any serious follower of global geopolitics must have surely read and heard the terms "Manifest Destiny" or "American Exceptionalism" numerous times. He/she must have been made familiar with -what was later termed by political scientists and historians the "Monroe Doctrine", declared at the 7th State of the Union Address, on the 2nd of December 1823, by the 5th US President James Monroe, and adopted by his successor John Quincy Adams. This doctrine has been revisited and updated almost 80 years later by the 26th U.S. President, Theodore Roosevelt.

When does benign turn malignant?

In the good old days, such doctrine was a seemingly "benign" proclamation/policy forged, officially adopted, and proclaimed by the highest executive echelon of the freshly liberated federal republic, who would expectedly and understandably resist, and after gaining the needed economic and militaristic power, try to expel the "old" flailing colonialist empires of

Great Britain, France, Spain, Portugal or Netherlands, from what America considered its own “backyard”, throughout which they were still trying to maintain footholds. Hard to disagree so far, correct?

You will read hordes of analyses trying to answer the question, when did American “benign” exceptionalism turn malignant? Some historians claim that the malevolence started at that moment when the US decided to drop two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on the 6th and 9th of August 1945. Two B-29s dropped the deciding blow to the Japanese Empire on two separate “special” missions, accompanied by two “Strike observation and photography” B-29-40-Mo aircraft, named “Necessary Evil” on the 6th and “Big Stink” on the 9th of August.

Others would argue that the “exceptional” malice was established on the banks of the river Meuse for 47 days, starting on the 26th of September 1918, during World War I, as the US employed her Expeditionary Forces and her First and Second Army, alongside the French and Siamese forces, to attack German forces across the frontlines of the Meuse–Argonne offensive, which caused the loss of more than 300,000 lives on both sides of the battle.

Some might go on to highlight atrocities done by two American combating sides during the American Civil War between 1861 and 1865. And others might even affirm that the malignancy goes back to America’s inception, directly after “We the People” was penned into the constitution of 1787, as they highlight to you how the founding fathers themselves as they were penning the benign words of “All men were created equal”, they did not consider the African Americans as equals, and even keeping some of them as indentured slaves.

But did any of these valid arguments answer the question from a conceptual approach?

Let alone, that you will find some reasoning and justifications for the previously mentioned “exceptional” actions. Such as “We were fighting the “Good War” against the evil Nazi and fascist powers.” Or “The Meuse offensive was necessary to break the Hindenburg Line”. Or “You cannot abolish slavery immediately”, and the addendum “You saw what happened when a part of the country tried to abolish it”.

Still, neither the actions nor their pretexts delve deep enough into understanding the root of the professed “Exceptionalism”, nor reveal the core of the declared “Manifest Destiny”.

So what is so exceptional about American Exceptionalism?

The Turnerian Frontier Theorem

To answer this question, we need to go deeper into the roots of this claimed “Exceptionalism” and perceived “Manifest Destiny”. And no one answered this question better than Frederick Jackson Turner.

An American historian who earned his PhD from Johns Hopkins University in 1890, who was academically based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for 20 years, followed by a residency at Harvard University. But 3 years after he received his PhD, he published a very insightful essay titled: “*The Significance of the Frontier in American History*”, where he laid his case for the concept of “Frontier Thesis”.

This essay was actually read as a speech on the 12th of July 1893, during the exposition of the Chicago World’s Fair, as America was celebrating the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ arrival in the “Exceptional” New World.

Starting from the stem point of an “expanding people”, traveling westward in search of fertile marshes and plains, rich mineral mines, or on a quest for gold, the American official institution, became a necessity. Furthermore, it became a “peculiar” necessity, for two main reasons:

- The resistance of the English establishment on the banks of the East Coast, to the breakaway of these ever-expanding realms of “liberated” or even “lawless” newfound lands to the west. Moving further and further away from the regulations, norms, and control of the barons and institutions of the East Coast.
- The mere imperativeness of the new institutions to adapt themselves to the changes and individualistic sentiments and needs of those pioneers braving the western lands.

This can be pinpointed as the root form which the “peculiar” and “exceptional” nature of those new ever-adaptive American regulatory, financial, security, and trade institutions. For bad or for good, one might safely add.

The Perennial Rebirth and the Death of Localism

This ever-enlarging American “Frontier”, had to go through “Perennial Rebirth”, every time it faced the challenge of introducing the stable “City Life” to a “Primitive” new area, that needed a special and uniquely designed upgrade of its economic and political conditions. And this continuous need for “rebirth” emanates from the necessity of starting over, every time the “frontier” expands into a new geographical expanse. American Presbyterian minister Lyman Beecher is quoted in Turner’s essay, stating in an 1835 speech: “A nation is being born in a day”.

This must have instilled in spirit and thought, the American conviction of “savagery” meeting “civilization”, or should we say “Americanisation”. As the “frontier” moved from being an Atlantic one, or more correctly a “European” one, to an American frontier, the more it shifted westward.

Cited in Turner's seminal 1893 essay, is a salient quote by Francis Grund, excerpted from his 1837 book titled – Americans in their Moral, Religious, and Social Relations:

“It appears then that the universal disposition of Americans to emigrate to the western wilderness, to enlarge their dominion over inanimate nature, is the actual result of an expansive power which is inherent in them, and which by continually agitating all classes of society is constantly throwing a large portion of the whole population on the extreme confines of the State, in order to gain space for its development. Hardly is a new State or Territory formed before the same principle manifests itself again and gives rise to a further emigration; and so is it destined to go on until a physical barrier must finally obstruct its progress”

Worth stating here, that each leap forward of the “frontier” whether it was the fall line in the 17th century, the western-central portion of the Appalachian Mountain range in the 18th century, or across the banks of the Missouri River in the mid-19th century, or the belt of the Rocky Mountain range by the end of the same century, “each won by a series of Indian wars” as Turner declared, adding the following bracketed note: “(The disposition of Aborigines)”.

To be continued...

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