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Moral Hypocrisy and U.S. Exceptionalism

By Ajamu Baraka

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In his recent op-ed in the New York Times, Vladimir Putin raised hackles among the talking-heads across the U.S. when he questioned the wisdom of President Obama's evocation of the narcissistic idea of "American exceptionalism." After all, the exceptionalism of the U.S. has never been a subject for reasoned discussion or debate in the media or elsewhere. Everyone knows that the U.S. is the greatest nation in the world and, therefore, has special privileges and responsibilities! Those privileges and responsibilities include not bothering with international law or processes when the government decides that the "world" (meaning itself and a few European nations and a couple of their client states) will take responsibility to enforce global order according to its own interpretations, values and needs.

The fact that many in the U.S. believe that those interpretations, values and needs are neutral, impartial representations of the global community at large is on full display every night on cable news channels, where state propagandists posing as journalists and the coterie of paid ex-military and U.S. intelligence consultants make impassioned arguments in favor of the U.S. waging war on Syria as a "punishment" for its alleged use of chemical weapons.

But for many of us, the story of American exceptionalism is an alien story, a children's fairy tale spun from the fertile imagination of revisionist historians, a tale wherein indigenous people were sidekicks to lone rangers, the African slave trade was an unfortunate aberration that was corrected by Lincoln, children did not work in factories, women were not slaves to men, socialists and communists were not harassed and jailed, U.S. citizens of Japanese descent were

not placed in concentration camps and Dr. King would have approved of Barack Obama's warmongering.

It is that story which informs the thinking of President Obama when he declares that "for nearly seven decades, the United States has been the anchor of global security" i.e. the provider of an indispensable safety net without which transcontinental chaos would have ensued. In his version of exceptionalism, there was no CIA overthrow of the democratically elected government in Iran in 1953; the brutal war in Vietnam was a war to free the Vietnamese people from communism; there is an explanation for why the U.S. gave its support to the Apartheid government in South Africa; the coup in Chile was an internal event that did not involve the CIA, and the millions of people who died in Iraq were worth the price to get rid of Saddam Hussein.

Aurora Levins Morales quotes feminist psychologist Judith Herman as she describes the way in which perpetrators seek to control the disclosures and discourses of abuse:

"In order to escape accountability for his crimes, the perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting. Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator's first line of defense. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure no-one listens... After every atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it on herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on."

For African Americans experiencing depression-level economic conditions, our sons being murdered by agents of the state at a rate of one every 28 hours, our children locked away for life without the possibility of parole and more than a million of our sons and daughters entombed in the dungeons of this nation's prisons, we did not need Vladimir Putin to remind us of the fiction of "America's" commitment to values and social practices that make it "exceptional" in the community of nations. That reminder was also not necessary for our indigenous brothers and sisters who still struggle for sovereignty, dignity and self-determination in the aftermath of their American holocaust and America's God-given manifest destiny.

Van Jones, the one-time black progressive who has since sold his integrity to the Democratic Party and CNN, recently joined Newt Gingrich during their new show to castigate Putin for having the audacity to suggest that the U.S. was not exceptional. Attempting his best effort at sincerity, Van offered that no other country in the world could have made the progress toward closing the gap between its stated values and social practices as the United States. Of course Van knows better – he has not forgotten our history of oppression, nor is he unaware of the contemporary crisis facing black working class and poor people. He has simply decided to deny the existence of those realities.

However, for the rest of us who have been invaded, enslaved, murdered, subjected to systematic racist dehumanization and colonized, we have not forgotten or denied those realities despite the best efforts by the perpetrators of our ongoing oppression to compel us to forget and just move on.

In fact we have done the hard work of reconstructing our own stories and clearing our eyes in order to see the world unencumbered by distorted myths and narratives that marginalize our experiences.

As a result, we don't harbor any illusions about America and its real intentions when it professes humanitarian concerns. We know and understand that the ideological foundation of U.S. exceptionalism and the equally odious notion of "humanitarian intervention" is just another manifestation of white supremacy.

From our experiences and analyses, we can see that the assumptions of Euro-American racial and cultural superiority are so normalized, and social practices and structures so deeply inculcated in the collective consciousness of Americans of all races, nationalities, gender and class, that the cultural and institutional processes and expressions of white supremacy have been rendered largely invisible.

That is why so many Americans, despite their reservations related to Syria, still ultimately support the idea that the U.S. government has the right to contravene international law in order to uphold international law, to kill at will, to decide what nation has the right to sovereignty and to determine that the value of lives of human beings in Syria are worth more than the lives of the more than 2,000 murdered by the Egyptian military, or the 1,400 Palestinians murdered by the government of Israel a couple of years ago.

But as obvious as these moral contradictions are to most of the peoples of the world, it took the questioning of U.S. exceptionalism by the President of Russia to cause people in the U.S. to finally give some thought to an idea that they had taken for granted as self-evident.

What many people around the world understand is that exploding the dangerous myth of American exceptionalism is absolutely critical if the global community ever hopes to collectively solve the existential challenges that we face on the planet today. We can only hope that after a decade of war and a capitalist economic crisis, people in the U.S. will come to understand this and recognize that their interests and those of their elite are not the same, and that the U.S. must participate in the community of nations and peoples as equals.

The popular opposition to Obama's proposal to wage war on Syria is encouraging because the world can no longer afford for the people of the U.S. to continue to allow the country's elites to impose their will over the rest of humanity. If people in the U.S. have moved closer to that realization as a result of this latest Syrian misadventure, that would be truly exceptional.