

GÖRAN ROSENBERG: THE FUTURE OF THE AMERICAN IDEA

The American Idea is an evasive notion with no agreed definition, and no agreed interpretation, and about which there is continuous strife and debate. In the American society, the American Idea is both a unifying and a divisive element. Unifying in its unchallenged position as the foundation of the American republic, divisive in its capacity to foster diverging social and political visions. When the American monthly *The Atlantic* in its issue of November 2007 invited a number of writers to ponder *The Future of the American Idea*, it did so by recognizing its inherent elusiveness:

“What American faction, what American, doesn’t embrace both the revolutionary message of the Declaration of Independence and the restraining message of the Constitution? Our endless quarrels are over what these messages mean, over how the ideal should be made real. It is the endlessness of the quarrels—the elusiveness of the American idea, the tantalizing possibility of its full realization—that has sustained this magazine.”

And, I would add, that has sustained America as a society.

One of the contributions to this issue of *The Atlantic*, by historian Alan Brinkley, is titled “Messiah Complex” and highlights that part of the American Idea, the idea of a messianic American mission in the world, which I find to be the most powerful and persistent, as well as both the most unifying and most divisive aspect of that idea, and certainly the most interesting. Or as Brinkley writes:

“The United States is far from the only nation to believe it represents an idea. But America’s self-image is more deeply bound up with a sense of having a special place in history than most other nations’ are.”

In any case, it is the future impact on American policy of this aspect of the American Idea that I wish to say something about. And the first thing that must be said about it is that it is an idea about America and not about the world. The American Idea is largely an idea about an ideal society named America, populated by the luckiest of people, the Americans, who are

convinced that only in America can Man fully attain his unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The American Idea is the idea of an exceptional society, in an exceptional place, created under exceptional circumstances (if not by Divine intervention) with an exceptional role to play in the world.

The impact of this idea on America's view of the world and on America's actions in the world, has been persistent and at times decisive, manifesting itself in two seemingly contradictory, but equally unilateral, one-sided, modes of action; *messianic isolationism*, saving the American Idea for the sake of the World, and *messianic activism*, saving the World for the sake of the American Idea. Both modes of action emanate from the perception of the World as a threat to the American Idea and are both portrayed to the World as being essentially defensive in character and essentially about defending an exceptional repository of human liberty on Earth. Messianic isolationism has been the mode of unilateral action in times of a perceived American weakness vis-à-vis the world, while messianic activism has been the mode of unilateral action in times of a perceived strength.

Messianic isolationism was rooted in the belief that America, as an exceptional society, could only survive and flourish at a safe distance from the old world. The "laboratory of liberty" must not be contaminated by the European germs of corruption and slavery. "The last best hope of Man on Earth" must not be wasted. "The shining city upon a hill" must prevail in a world of darkness. Messianic isolationism explicitly manifested itself in the famous farewell address of George Washington in 1796 where he stated that America should have as little political connection to foreign nations as possible, and specifically no connections to Europe, through which America might be implicated "in the ordinary vicissitudes" of her politics. Messianic isolationism also remained at the heart of the policies of Thomas Jefferson, who named America the Empire of Liberty, by which he meant an Empire based solely on the attraction of its principles and not on the force of its armies. And by which he certainly meant that America should never get involved with the corrupting affairs of other nations. Sometimes to the exasperation of those Europeans who had hoped that the messianic claims of the American Idea would translate into universal responsibilities for spreading and defending it. Or as the maverick woman of France, Madame de Staël, wrote in a letter from Stockholm to Thomas Jefferson in New York in 1812:

“You will tell me that America has nothing to do with the European continent, but has it nothing to do with the human race? Can you be indifferent to the cause of free nations, you, the most republican of all?”

Jefferson was probably not indifferent, he had after all been actively present at the ringside of the French Revolution, secretly assisting in the penning of its Declaration of the Rights of Man, but he was convinced of the need for America to keep herself apart from the looming reactionary backlash in European affairs. Supporting the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, separating the Americas and Europe into two distinct spheres of interest, Jefferson wrote:

“While the last [Europe] is laboring to become the domicile of despotism, our endeavor should surely be, to make our hemisphere that of freedom.”

Jefferson was lucky enough to considerably expand the territory of The United States without firing a shot (the Louisiana purchase), and thus to see his convictions confirmed, but perhaps even luckier in not having to see his Empire of Liberty develop into a military superpower dispatching its troops across the globe, deeply implicating itself in the “vicissitudes” of the world.

This enormous transformation of America, from a confederation of scattered, divided and weak colonies, to the richest and strongest nation on earth, paved the way for that other mode of unilateral action, messianic activism, the impulse to remake the world to save America. However this shift from one mode of unilateral action to another in no way marked the end of isolationist sentiments and rhetoric in America. Even when engaging in acts of seemingly blatant unilateral interventionism (from the Spanish-American War of 1898 to the Iraq War of 2003) America has always endeavored to be seen as the reluctant warrior, acting only in defense of its universal principles, albeit not always very convincingly, and perhaps least convincingly during the reign of George W Bush. Tensions and discrepancies between rhetoric and action, as between schools of idealism and realism, have thus been a persistent feature of American foreign policy. Realists have largely argued that America cannot put its political ideals before its national interests while idealists have largely argued that the pursuit of its political ideals is the national interest of the United States.

American exceptionalism at large, and with it the inclination to messianic modes of action, has in no small measure been sustained by America’s geographic remoteness and economic independence from the world, and subsequently by the conviction that the world needs

America more than America needs the world. America's apparent break with unilateralism in the 20th Century, and specifically so after WWII with the active sponsoring of a global international order based on multilateral institutions and international law, was in fact not an abdication from exceptionalism but a confirmation of it. The postwar international order was essentially understood as an *American* order, based on the victory of *American* ideas and principles, rooted in the sacred *American* constitution. Or as Jed Rubenfeld, professor of constitutional law at Yale, has written:

“International law would be, basically, American law made applicable to other nations, and the business of the new internationalism would be to transmit Americans principles to the rest of the world.”¹

When after WWII the United States failed to ratify major human rights conventions (the anti-genocide convention of 1949 was ratified in February 1986, 37 seven years later), not to mention its latter-day refusals to ratify major international treaties² and to accept the legal jurisdiction of international institutions like the International Court of Justice, the major obstacle was always a deep-rooted popular aversion to the subjugation of the exceptional institutions of America to the political whims of the world. International law could in principle never be allowed to replace or supercede American law. The constitutional requirement of a two-thirds majority in the Senate for the ratification of international treaties has hardly been an obsolete remnant of a unilateralist past but the legitimate expression of deep-seated political sentiments in America. In Jed Rubenfeld's words:

“Whether out of hubris or principle, or both, The United States has not understood its support for international law and institutions to imply a surrender of its own commitment to self-government.”

It can thus be argued that the idea of American exceptionalism, and the unilateralist impulse to go with it, has remained an important element of American foreign policy also during the postwar period, and most evidently so during the reigns of Ronald Reagan and

¹ The Wilson Quarterly, Autumn 2003.

² Among the treaties not yet ratified by the United States are The Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, CTBT, the extension of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Ottawa Convention for the banning of landmines, the Kyoto Protocol and the Convention on Biological Diversity.

George W Bush. It can then further be argued that the future of the American Idea largely is the future of exceptionalism and unilateralism as elements in American policies and actions. If so, a few questions arise: Can America be a non-exceptional society? Can it become a nation among nations? Can the American Idea be adapted to a political era in which America no longer can sustain the ideological belief in its exceptional mission to the world.

These are crucial questions, since the belief in the exceptional nature of the American society, and by consequence the belief in the political reality of the American Dream, have been strong elements in the formation of the American identity. Unlike most other nations, held together by the idea of a common past, the American nation has largely been held together by the idea of a common future, based on a common mission and a common ideal. There is reason to believe that the present uncertainty about America's position in the world, its now all-apparent interdependence of other nations, the weakening of its global political and moral authority, the crisis of its economic model, will make it harder to sustain the notion of exceptionalism as a basis for American policies.

The Obama-administration has so far signaled a radical departure from the unilateralism of the past, perhaps most clearly formulated in the speech by president Obama in Cairo on June 4th 2009, where he reached out to the Muslim world seeking "a new beginning [...] based on mutual interest and mutual respect", affirming America's decision to retreat from Iraq (although still forced to implicate herself in "the vicissitudes" of Afghanistan), emphasizing America's inability to act alone in the world: "Giving our interdependence, any world order that elevates one nation or group or people over another will inevitably fall." Obama here explicitly makes a virtue of restraining America's use of power, quoting Thomas Jefferson: "I hope that our wisdom will grow with our power, and teach us that the less we use our power the greater it will be."

One can almost hear the voice of John Quincy Adams, the sixth president of United States, and perhaps the most eloquent advocate of messianic isolationism as a guiding principle for America's relations to the world:

"Wherever the standard of freedom and Independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. She

will commend the general cause by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example.”³

In a similar vein, Obama’s apparent break with unilateralism seems to go hand in hand with a strong appeal to American exceptionalism, however this time for an era in which America must again revert to the mission of being an example to the world and thus to “commend the general cause by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example”. Throughout his campaign and during the first phase of his presidency, appearing against the stark backdrop of a deepening financial and economic crisis, Obama has time and again appealed the exceptional nature and promises of the American Society, arguing for the rejuvenation of the American Dream, capitalizing on the exceptional nature of his own ascendance to the presidency.

Still, there is no doubt that the presidency of Obama represents an attempt to modify or even tame American exceptionalism, to make it more compatible with America’s actual interdependence of the world, with the global and multilateral scope of the challenges to its security and prosperity, with America’s weakening ability to act unilaterally. Asked about his view of American exceptionalism at a press conference in Strasbourg on April 4th 2009, or more precisely asked whether he subscribed to the school of American exceptionalism that sees America as uniquely qualified to lead the world, Obama answered in a way that considerably detracted from his predecessor:

“I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.”

This was not exactly the kind of exceptionalism that the founders of the American Idea once had in mind. And from only hearing this you would believe that Obama had renounced one of the holiest tenets of the American Idea, the messianic mission of America and the Americans. Although he actually continued by saying that “we”, the Americans, “have a core set of values that are enshrined in our Constitution, in our body of law, in our democratic practices, in our belief in free speech and equality, that, though imperfect, are exceptional.”

³ John Quincy Adams when serving as U.S. Secretary of State (under the presidency of James Monroe of the Monroe-doctrine), in a speech to the U.S. House of Representatives on July 4, 1821, in celebration of American Independence Day.

So where does Obama stand on America's exceptionalism? I believe that he stands for a genuine attempt to rewrite or reformulate the American Idea, and specifically to weaken that kind of exceptionalism that through history has given rise to unilateral thinking and action in American foreign policy, whether in the form of messianic isolationism or messianic activism. At the same press conference Obama actually spelled out what I believe to be an attempt to square American exceptionalism with the need for America to relate to the world as a nation among nations.

“Now, the fact that I am very proud of my country and I think that we've got a whole lot to offer the world, does not lessen my interest in recognizing the value and wonderful qualities of other countries, or recognizing that we're not always going to be right, or that other people may have good ideas, or that in order for us to work collectively, *all parties have to compromise and that includes us.*” (italics added)

If this rhetoric will eventually translate into actual policies and actions, if it will make America more prone to submit itself to the compromises of binding international laws and treaties, then this might indeed signal a radical shift in America's view of itself and the world. Furthermore, if this explicitly multilateral approach to the world will prove feasible and successful, in the sense that it by most Americans will be perceived as good for America, the exceptionalist aspects of the American Idea might very well be weakened, and America may in fact become a nation among nations, albeit a very powerful one, and still “the indispensable nation” (Madeleine Albright) in guaranteeing the global order in which we are presently living. This could mean that the Americans will be finding themselves in search of a new idea about what it is that makes their society exceptional, since I believe that this is what ultimately binds the American nation together. The “normalization” of America as a nation, waking up to the increasing impact of global interdependence, making the American Dream increasingly contingent on the “vicissitudes” of the world, might then very well open up new rifts among the Americans between competing ideas about America and thus give rise to competing national identities and allegiances. Whether this will lead to “the disuniting of America”, to quote the title of a much discussed book by Arthur M Schlesinger jr, is of course too early to tell, but the replacement of the American idea with the idea of “identity politics” was certainly one of Schlesinger's horror scenarios.

If however the multilateral approach to the world will correspond to successive diminishing of America's stature, and a shrinking of its economic opportunities at home (the ultimate failure of the American Dream), and bring forth an increased sense of insecurity among Americans about the nature of the American society, then there is a possibility that the exceptionalist foundations of the American Idea will again give rise to nationalist expressions of messianic isolationism.

Isolationism, messianic or not, is of course not a rational option in the era of radical global interdependence, but the future is not always rational and the isolationist impulse in America remains strong. Thomas Jefferson, Obama's recent guide to the future use of American power, was after all the most successful ideological isolationist in American history.

At the end of the day, what makes the American society exceptional in comparison to most other societies, is the fact that it is historically constituted by an idea, and that this idea largely is an idea about the exceptional future of America and the Americans. No one then knows if America can be successfully constituted by something else, that is, whether America can become a nation among nations.

This makes the future of the American Idea a concern not only to the Americans.

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