

The Harbour League



EXCEPTIONALISM VS. UNIVERSALISM

by Herbert I. London

October 29, 2008

One might easily make the case that American institutions are unique. From our Constitution to the protection of individual rights and private property, the United States has served as a case study for national development. Yet the argument for American distinctiveness has not always been made clear.

From the mouths of adversaries occasionally appear pearls of wisdom. Writing for the Herald Tribune (9/25/08) Roger Cohen contends that Sarah Palin is on to something "in her batty way" when she describes America as exceptional.

This idea has been around since the Founding and was kindled by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy In America*. In my judgment Sarah Palin was right to discuss it because this election could turn out to be a plebiscite on this very issue. Cohen may call her "batty;" I call her description accurate and intelligent.

Barack Obama is the quintessential one-worlder, who despite his proclaimed love for the United States, is far more interested in connection to the globe than in distinctive American qualities. Hence his self description in Berlin as "a citizen of the world" and his repeated denunciation of the United States in his memoir *Dreams of My Father*.

Of course, Mr. Cohen claims Obama is tomorrow and McCain-Palin yesterday. But what Mr. Cohen may not realize is the dichotomy he describes was an essential feature of American life from the nineteenth century to the present. Like it or not, American institutions are unique and the values and ideology that

led to their creation set the United States apart from other people. For example, the United States is one of the few countries still to have Freedom of Speech.

Clearly Mr. Obama's hard core left wing background militates against the appreciation of this idea. For him, technology has created porous geographic boundaries and a world connected as never before. It is instructive that when asked if new immigrants to America should speak English, he argued Americans should learn Spanish. This is an example of universalism.

Overlooked in the Obama worldview is that his rights and privileges emerge from his American citizenship. He doesn't receive rights from the United Nations or the International Court of Justice. It is an oxymoron for him to describe himself as "a citizen of the world." But this is consistent with his one-world logic that assumes the United States is no different from other nations.

How can he when his worldview is based on a repudiation of the nation state? His outlook is predicated on a tolerance for all cultures - - but a fundamental critique of ours. This is the so-called non-judgmental stance.

This, in a sense, this is a European view that nationalism must be broken, replaced by a grand design. That design, of course, is the European Union. But the conditions that hold it together remain obscure. To what would a European owe his allegiance? And for what would he sacrifice?

If one were to use Europe as a model for the United States, a glimpse into the Obama plan can be seen. The new America is a globalized America, one that closes the door on deep seated national sentiment.

Without a belief in the values that underlie the United States and make it unique - - a belief one finds among exceptionalists - - there are only national benefits, e.g. Social Security, Medicare, progressive education. Why should America sacrifice for programs that are subject to the swings of public opinion?

People do not sacrifice blood and treasure for services. Unfortunately the difference between exceptionalism and universalism is not well understood and, astonishingly Mr. McCain has not exploited the difference, even though Sarah Palin has tried. Many assume that an "exceptional America" merely patronizes the rest of the globe instead of being a shining model of what others can achieve.

My guess is that most Americans still embrace the notion of American exceptionalism, even with imperfections in the American system. But if Americans lose faith, if they arrive at the conclusion history is not on our side, universalism might seem a viable alternative world view.

Economic reversals have accentuated this issue, but that too will pass. What will not pass are the Cassandras who want to bring into focus a new American nation, one linked to global entities yet no more desirable or unique than its national counterparts.

***Herbert London** is president of Hudson Institute and professor emeritus of New York University. He sits on the Harbour League's board of Trustees. He is the author of **Decade of Denial** (Lanham, Maryland:*

Lexington Books, 2001) and ***America's Secular Challenge: The Rise of a New National Religion*** (Encounter Books, 2008). London maintains a website, www.herblondon.org.