

The Harbour League



IS AMERICA EXCEPTIONAL OR JUST HO-HUM?

by Herbert I. London

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Godfrey Hodgson, a British journalist and associate fellow at the University at Oxford, has a new book, "The Myth of American Exceptionalism," that is an attempt to undermine the deeply held belief that the United States is a morally and politically superior nation.

In his treatise, he accuses Daniel Boorstin, Frederick Jackson Turner, Perry Miller among others as perpetrators of a self-congratulatory myth that has shaped the popular imagination of Americans throughout history. From Mr. Hodgson's perspective, the apostles of exceptionalism see the United States as a nation of "unrivaled virtue, a chosen hand with a special destiny and a duty to spread liberty, democracy and the rule of law, 'a calling from beyond the stars to stand for freedom' in the words of President George Bush."

Mr. Hodgson sees himself as a debunker. He notes, "Not all ideas about America exceptionalism are untrue, but important pieces are untrue, and it is very unhealthy for a society to believe things about itself that are not true."

As I see it, Mr. Hodgson has created a red herring and then beats it until it is disfigured. The United States is an imperfect nation. Its government has made mistakes, overplayed its hand at times, even corrupted its principles at various moments in the past, yet a case - a valid case - can still be made for American exceptionalism.

After all, only one nation on the globe has assimilated millions of immigrants who sought refuge on American shores. The Europeans are generally incapable of integrating new immigrants into their nations as enclaves across the Continent suggest.

The United States is the only true racial laboratory on the globe, notwithstanding its history of Jim Crow. Could a Barack Obama be elected anywhere in Europe? Could a Jamaican be the next prime minister of Great Britain or an Algerian president of France?

When the demonstrators at Tiananmen Square built a monument to their aspirations was it the Eiffel Tower they tried to duplicate or perhaps a tribute to the Prophet Muhammad? No, they constructed a statue of liberty because the American symbol embodies the spirit and vision they hoped to achieve.

No major nation on the globe has distributed wealth across the board as effectively as the United States. Even the poorest elements of the American population enjoy privileges and material things that are the envy of most Africans and many Asians.

While Mr. Hodgson glibly asserts "the thuggishness" of American foreign policy, he consciously overlooks the sacrifices the United States made in two world wars to save Europe from dictatorship and, despite his criticism of the Bush foreign policy he calls imperialistic, an argument can be made that the United States today is attempting to create a stable democracy in the midst of backward tyrannies.

Notwithstanding the obvious fact that Europeans have at long last come to love freedom, they still seem to be incapable of defending it. They depend on the United States to provide the backbone for NATO and whenever there are wars or battles somewhere on the globe, Europeans ask what will the Americans do.

If the Hodgson thesis has any meaning, it is as an exemplar of a new genre of historiography called "American Declinism." Rather than admire American accomplishments, the revisionists like Mr. Hodgson emphasize the flaws. Rather than see national greatness, Mr. Hodgson sees only arrogance. Rather than fulfill "The Promise of American Life," to borrow a title from Herbert Croly, the declinists see delusions.

Should the Hodgson thesis gain traction, it will be yet another nail in the national coffin by those convinced that history must pass into an era of transnational loyalties. Somehow, I don't see how that vision can inspire Americans. I may be wrong, but either we come to appreciate American exceptionalism or we end up with American mediocrity.

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.