

# American Exceptionalism

by Bill Herbst

*Version 1.6 (posted on 18 May 2021)*  
© 2021 by the author, all rights reserved

*We are the champions, my friends  
And we'll keep on fighting till the end  
We are the champions  
We are the champions  
No time for losers  
'Cause we are the champions of the world.*

— Queen

A question I ask myself frequently about Americans is: *Can you lose your mind if you were always crazy?* I don't have a yes-or-no answer, but that hardly matters. From my perspective, a significant percentage of Americans has always been crazy. To some extent and for a very long time, the inmates have run the asylum, but now that tragicomic state of affairs is getting obvious.

The idea that there are winners and losers in civilization has a fairly pragmatic grounding in reality and can be assessed in many ways using different values. That part isn't crazy. But holding winners and losers as a basic worldview and being OK with it (as long as one is among the winners) is insane, both psychotic and sociopathic. And that's where too many Americans have lived and continue to live, considering themselves "the champions," and having "no time for losers."

Republicans have embraced this worldview ever since the ascendancy of their patron saint, Ronald Reagan. The political party that once embraced conservative values of individual responsibility and limited government has devolved into a bunch of rabid cheerleaders screaming "*We're Number One! We're Number One!*" around wealth, privilege, and feigned superiority, both within America and globally. A little less than half the country apparently agrees with that.

*American Exceptionalism* is the assumption or belief that America is special and exempt from many of the troubles faced by other cultures, nations, and peoples, even though that flies in the face of history. Sooner or later, all empires falter, crumble, and die. The belief that America is excepted from that historical fate has many fervent adherents among us. I might not call it a cult, but it's close.

Different believers in American Exceptionalism offer widely divergent rationales for why and how we are so unique and special. Many of the explanations harken back to a kind of fundamentalist Christian religiosity, holding essentially that America has been chosen by God and is destined to enjoy its elevated stature. Other, more pragmatic justifications don't depend as much on quasi-spiritual assumptions, instead asserting that America has the good fortune to occupy a

unique niche in human history and location, with our combination of protection by two oceans, bountiful natural resources, and a well-thought-out system of governance. Still others hold that the reason has to do with something innately superior and strong in the American character. This is offered from both ends of the cultural and ethnic spectra: sometimes from our purity as a people, which harkens back to our northern European heritage (i.e., white supremacy), or, in precisely the opposite direction, from our heterogeneity as a country of immigrants (i.e., the “melting pot” narrative). Purebreds or mongrels — both are seen by some Americans as integral elements of our Exceptionalism.

In my opinion, all of that is crazy as hell.

Whatever the justification, the most odious of the snake oil salesmen stand on their soapboxes in the town square and loudly proclaim their complete faith in and devotion to America as “special.” What interests me, though, is not so much these passionately committed adherents, since as “true believers” they are disqualified in my eyes from serious consideration, but instead a subtler and more widespread if less intense expression of American Exceptionalism.

Over the past two decades, but much more frequently in recent years and even more provocatively over the past five months, a significant number of people — all of whom are Americans from birth, by the way — have expressed to me some version of shock and disbelief about what’s happening in this country. These comments, offered in conversation or through emails and texts, are typically laced with adjectives such as “bizarre” or “weird,” indicating the speaker’s perception that life in America is no longer as he or she expected it to be. Abnormality is not the issue here, however. It’s the not-so-subtle and jolting sense among these friends and clients that such fearful developments and rampant craziness could ever come to pass in America.

Especially interesting to me is the fact that many these comments are expressed by people whom I regard (like myself) as longstanding critics of American culture and our “way of life.” In other words, I’m not talking about people who love the American Empire, rampant consumerism, and Death Culture. None of the people to whom I refer are Republicans, Trump supporters, or QAnon believers. No, these are well-educated and politically liberal/progressive Americans who are well aware that America has gone a long way down the road to ruin.

And yet, they’re still taken aback by the many indications that our country is coming apart at the seams — the bogus culture wars, the violence that is and has always been inherent to our society, corporate hegemony and the almost unbelievable wealth inequality it’s produced, a media landscape that is both fractured and untrustworthy, a medical health system in shambles, education as a racket, and a political culture so corrupt and crazy that nothing can get fixed.

These aren’t people I would characterize as selfish or greedy, and yet their comments indicate to me that they still must believe in a country, a culture, and a way of life that has clearly gone off the rails into depravity and madness, but which always leaned hard in that direction.

What this tells me is that belief in American Exceptionalism is much more widespread than I realized. It's almost as if many (most?) critics of life in America have not taken their own perceptions to heart, as if their seeing how much has been and is crazy about America isn't quite real to them.

I have numerous reactions, but one that's noteworthy is the subtle realization (more a question than a firm conclusion) that perhaps it's no wonder that things haven't changed for the better. Even many of the hard-core activists may not really believe that revolution is necessary. Or perhaps they just don't think it can or will ever happen. Either way, somewhere inside themselves they still accept the assumption of our Exceptionalism and the tenets of the American Dream, despite its continuing decay into a cruel caricature of the cherished hopes held for so long by people around the world — dreams of freedom from fear, a decent life, and maybe even a bit more joy and fulfillment.

All this is fodder for a continuing theme in my thinking and writing, namely, that we are all complicit — to one degree or another — in the perpetuation of Death Culture. In short, damn near everyone is crazy. Sure, some Americans are more obviously insane than others, but some madness has infected everyone.

Certainly, some of the people who comprise the elites — those who lust for power and cling to it at any cost, no matter how despicable — are assholes. For instance, almost all the Republicans in Congress have lost their friggin' minds. But while Republicans are the most egregiously and obviously insane, the mental health of many Democrats seems questionable, as well as too many of the people who run our major institutions or see business or finance as the golden road to personal wealth. Although such people wear expensive Armani suits and present themselves as upstanding members of society, they're actually sociopaths, and sometimes psychopaths. But this commentary isn't about them.

It's about us. By "us," I mean the many millions of people who decided, often long ago and early on in our lives, that the good life was not about multi-million dollar annual incomes, owning four homes, or eating out every night in fancy restaurants. No, for us, a good life is measured differently, more modestly and with greater humility. We're not in it for all we can get.

That's not to suggest that we're ascetic — most of us haven't retreated to the monastery or taken vows of poverty. In fact, even though we're not buying yachts, many of us are still among the wealthiest people on this planet, comparatively speaking, with lifestyles far more opulent than 99% of humans who have ever lived. We are typically First-Worlders who grew up in countries and cultures that extol and enjoy the "benefits" bestowed on modern civilization by the Industrial and Technological Revolutions. Few of us have renounced that completely. We just participate in it on a smaller scale than the billionaires do.

And although we know, by and large, that too many of the people in power who make the vast majority of decisions that shape the culture are corrupt and/or crazy, we don't stop them. The reasons why we don't are too varied

and numerous to list, but the end result is that we allow the wolves to guard the hen house. Death Culture is the result.

I don't really know how other people feel about this. Maybe I'm alone in thinking that we're all complicit. Whether or not I am, though, I find that thought not harsh or cynical, just very sad and disturbing.

All of my adult life I've lived surrounded by and in the company of people who are devoted to a belief in invisible worlds. In my twenties, I thought these people were all metaphysical New Agers. As time went by, though, I discovered many others who present themselves as "straight" and normal, but who are secretly devotees of occultism. They seek me out because I'm an astrologer, and because I'm conversant in most of the various metaphysical narratives. Heck, I can talk past lives, energy healing, and astral travel with the best of them, but I do so as poetry and metaphor rather than literal reality. It's not that I consider these realms to be mere illusions or fakery, but the bottom line for me is that I don't see them making much of a difference toward reducing unnecessary suffering in the world we all share.

I try not to be a jerk about this. We are all so craven, silly, and often damaged, that the interest in finer levels of reality beyond (or within) the ordinary seems to me a fairly natural wish in looking for something better than what our crude, ego-based selves want. I just don't see that as a solution to much of anything.

For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic won't be brought under control by magical thinking, whether as fundamentalist Christian faith or a boutique diet to jack up one's immune system. Did the virus originate in a lab or naturally? Should we be funding "gain of function" research? I don't know, but 600,000 dead Americans are my first concern. I have doubts about the wisdom of mass vaccination (mutant strains worry me), but I chose to get the vaccine mainly because I'm old and vulnerable and don't want to die from COVID-19. Also, others may be a bit more protected from harm if I'm not a potential Typhoid Mary spreader.

Or consider policing in America. Given the recent spate of lethal shootings of blacks, the police seem to have gone bonkers. OK, that's not new, but the violence appears to have gotten even worse on the heels of the Chauvin verdict. Permission (and encouragement) to use deadly force is embedded in the system of law enforcement. For non-whites, the police are now more like an occupying army than a civic service dedicated to protection of all the public. I doubt that we have the collective will to even address that, much less change it. Heck, last summer my car was parked on the quiet residential street where I live and was smashed into by a drunk driver trying to elude police in a high-speed chase.

Life as Americans once imagined it is breaking down. Humpty-Dumpty has had a great fall, and all the king's horses and men can't put him together again. In fact, those very horses and men are a big part of why he fell in the first place.

American Exceptionalism is a lie, and The American Dream has been corrupted beyond recognition.