



HISTORY DEPT.

How Trump Is Making Us Rethink American Exceptionalism

January 07, 2018

| Illustration by Daniel Downey, Jr.



This article is the second in a series on how President Donald Trump changed history—reviving historical debates that have simmered on low heat for years, and altering how historians think about them. See the first in the series [here](#).

Americans have always thought their country was exceptional. They thought it even as early as 1630, when John

Winthrop delivered a now-famous sermon in which he called the Puritan community a “city on a hill”—long before there even *was* an American country.

In more recent years, the idea of American exceptionalism has become tainted by politics—a rhetorical cudgel that politicians, particularly conservatives, wield to bludgeon their opponents. During President Barack Obama’s tenure, Republican leaders expressed concern that, in Newt Gingrich’s words, there was “a determined group of radicals in the United States who outright oppose American Exceptionalism.” Mitt Romney claimed that Obama didn’t “have the same feeling about American exceptionalism that we do.” Former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani went a step further. “I do not believe that the president loves America,” he declared. Unlike his predecessors, Obama didn’t seem to appreciate “what an exceptional country we are.” Obama ultimately felt compelled to correct the record. On July 4, 2012, he paid tribute to a group of newly naturalized citizens, celebrating their diversity and service to country as “one of the reasons that America is exceptional.”

It’s unusual that the Republican Party’s most recent standard-bearer, President Donald Trump, has disavowed the very idea of “American exceptionalism.” “I don’t think it’s a very nice term,” he said. “I think you’re insulting the world.” But that doesn’t mean that Trump has chucked this dearly held principle. When most conservative politicians invoke the term “exceptionalism” they use it as shorthand for raw national chauvinism—the assertion that the United States is not just different, but *better*. Trump has replaced it, at least temporarily, with an angrier tag line that conveys the same sense of national power and entitlement—America First, itself a term ripped from history and freighted with dark meaning. When America is first, it owes little to everyone else. It’s a more Trumpian way of saying what other politicians often mean.

When they use the term “exceptional” to connote pure superiority, though, politicians generally betray a facile grasp of history. In its original formation, American exceptionalism was a much more complicated theory. It conveyed the idea that the United States was immune from social, political and economic forces that governed other countries—specifically, that it was invulnerable to communism and fascism, and to violent political convulsions of the sort that jolted Europe throughout the long 19th and 20th centuries. It also implied that Americans bore a providential obligation to be exemplars of virtue in a sinful world.

Exceptionalism was for many decades a hotly contested topic among historians and social scientists. Could arbitrary borders really render an entire country exempt from broader social, economic and political forces, particularly in an age when these borders became