

# International Monetary Fund

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From the Selected Works of Warren Coats

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## American Exceptionalism ala the Cheneys and Charles Murray

Warren Coats



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# American Exceptionalism

## Reviews by Warren Coats<sup>1</sup>

American Exceptionalism has been defined in various ways by social observers from Alexis de Tocqueville in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to Seymour Martin Lipset, Daniel Boorstin, Richard Hofstadter, and beyond. At its core are an individualism, self-reliance, work ethic (the Protestant Ethic) and republicanism (i.e. absence of feudal traditions) that were reflected in the American Constitution.

The European, liberal, intellectual traditions of the Enlightenment (John Locke, David Hume, Adam Smith, etc.) profoundly informed the thinking of America's founding fathers, but with important practical differences. The most significant in my view are that unlike the Magna Carta, which wrested more autonomy for the people from the King, the free men and women of revolutionary America gave up a limited amount of their autonomy to a new state in order to better protect their property and individual rights. The direction of delegation was the exact opposite of what the world had ever seen before. It is not without profound significance that our Constitution begins with "We the people." Secondly, the vast resources and opportunities of this new world afforded by America's geography and such a liberal regime attracted the best and the brightest from around the world. It attracted people most determined to take advantage of the opportunities open to them in America. This populated America<sup>2</sup> with a self-selected, entrepreneurial, and hard working citizenry to build this new nation, unlike any other that had preceded it, and with a strong interest in preserving the limited role of government that helped make it possible. It was a country of free and virtuous people and as Thomas Jefferson said at the end of his presidency in 1809: "the sole depository of the sacred fire of freedom and self-government."<sup>3</sup> These factors make Americans and their institutions of government exceptional indeed.

After de Tocqueville's extensive exploration of America's uniqueness, others have added interesting characterizations. Seymour Martin Lipset in the middle of the 1990s used the concept of exceptionalism to explain "why the United States is the only industrialized country which does not have a significant socialist movement or Labor party...." As an aside, and as an example of people with quite different political and religious views spontaneously collaborating to defend shared values of

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<sup>2</sup> With apologies to its native inhabitants and those brought here as slaves.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Tucker and Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty* p 7; see John P. Foley, ed. *The Jeffersonian cyclopedia* (1900).

freedom, during the Free Speech Movement of 1964 at the University of California at Berkeley, I met many times with four other university club presidents (the presidents of the Young Peoples Socialist League, Young Republicans, University conservatives—my group, Young Democrats, and another socialist group I can't remember) in Professor Lipset's office late at night in an effort to bring more reason to the FSM, which was being taken over by Marxist radicals. The YPSL president was Prof Lipset's research assistant and thus had a key to his office.

More recently, in 2009, President Obama summarized our exceptionalism closer to my own formulation: "We 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...."

And still more recently, former World Bank President Robert Zoellick characterized it as follows: "In the new era of 1776, individual liberty and initiative would be the spark of America's energy, at home and abroad. The Exceptionalism of America has been that America's essential power is found in the dynamism of its citizens—not in monarchs, aristocratic nobles, priests or clergy, officers with gold braids, or even ranks of government officials. Americans have been explorers, engineers, and entrepreneurs—also merchants, missionaries, mechanics, and mariners."<sup>4</sup>

In the post cold war era we now occupy, neocons have attempted to redefine our Exceptionalism to mean an evangelistic obligation to carry our institutions to the rest of the world. They went quite beyond President Reagan's vision of America as the shining city on the hill—"You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden." Matthew 5:14. In his farewell speech to the Nation in 1988 Reagan said of this city on the hill: "In my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still." For Reagan, America provides an example that the rest of the world would want to follow. For the neocons, we had an obligation to "give" our institutions to the world and to protect others from those who would prevent them from adopting them.

The new book by father-daughter Dick and Liz Cheney, "Exceptional: Why the World Needs a Powerful America,"<sup>5</sup> is not about the qualities of the American people and the structures of its government that make America exceptional, but rather about "the one essential country" and the obligations, particularly military obligations, of its empire. The book begins with the run up to World War II and the critical importance of Roosevelt's convincing the American public to support Great Britain

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Zoellick: "Foreign Policy: The Currency of Power" *Council on Foreign Relations*, Oct 12, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, 2015

with the armaments of war to stave off Germany. As such, it is a well written and readable account of the vital role of America and its rise to the most powerful nation in history (leaving aside the Achaemenid Persian Empire, 550 – 330 BC; the Roman Empire, 202 BC – 1452 AD; the Arab Empire or Caliphate, 642-1258 AD; Mongol Empire, 1206 – 1707 AD; Ottoman Empire, 1396-1878 AD and the British Empire, 1607- 1949, etc.). It is a story of war, the necessity of war, and the glory of war. Their first chapter, which takes us from the beginning of WWII to its the end, crescendos with the glorious words: “We liberated millions and achieved the greatest victory in the history of mankind, for the good of all mankind. America—the exceptional nation—had become freedom’s defender.”

The Cheney's provide an interesting and readable, high-level summary of the Cold War. They include—quoting NYT reporter Scotty Reston—such interesting tidbits as Khrushchev’s assessment of an inexperienced John F Kennedy emboldening the Soviet leader to build the Berlin Wall. With regard to America’s war in Vietnam they note that, “the way the war ended was tragic.... Perhaps the most significant obstacle to our success was that our policy was never aimed at defeating the enemy.” We are also treated to inside stories such as when Cheney, as President Ford’s White House Chief of Staff, advised the President to meet with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who had been stripped of his Soviet citizenship because of the publication of “The Gulag Archipelago”. The meeting was turned down by the White House fearing that it would be an affront to the Soviets.

Following the significant improvement in relations with the Soviet Union of Mikhail Gorbachev during the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush (under whom Dick Cheney served as the Secretary of Defense), the activities of Al Qaeda, who began as American supported fighters during the Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, climaxed with the 9/11 attacks on the U.S. Dick Cheney’s perspective is clearly captured by Bin Laden’s “1996 declaration of war on the United States” in which he refers to President Clinton’s withdrawal of American forces from Somalia following the events depicted in the movie Black Hawk Down:

*Your most disgraceful case was Somalia, where after vigorous propaganda about the power of the USA and its post Cold War leadership of the new world order you moved [American soldiers in.] However when tens of your soldiers were killed in battle... you left the area carrying disappointment, humiliation, defeat, and your dead with you. Clinton appeared in front of the whole world threatening and promising revenge, but these threats were merely a preparation for withdrawal. You were disgraced by Allah and you withdrew; the extent of your impotence and weakness became very clear.*

In reviewing the controversy over whether Operation Desert Storm, which drove the Iraqi army from Kuwait, should have gone on to topple Saddam Hussein, the Cheney's say, correctly but surprisingly in my opinion, “that our mission in 1991 was to liberate Kuwait. We had built an extensive coalition, including with other Arab

states, to do that. The coalition would not have held together had we pushed on to Baghdad.”

The coverage of the war on terror, during which Dick Cheney was Vice President, is more selective and defensive. The reader is treated to such pronouncements as: “The facility at Guantanamo was and remains safe, secure, humane, and necessary.” With regard to torture, the Cheneys say that: “The National Security Council approved the program. And it worked.” While that issue remains controversial, there is a substantial literature to the contrary.<sup>6</sup> Director of National Intelligence (at the time) Admiral Dennis Blair stated: “I like to think I would not have approved those methods in the past, but I do not fault those who made the decisions at that time,... The information gained from these techniques was valuable in some instances, but there is no way of knowing whether the same information could have been obtained through other means.... The bottom line is these techniques have hurt our image around the world, the damage they have done to our interests far outweighed whatever benefit they gave us and they are not essential to our national security.”<sup>7</sup>

If you were hoping that the Cheney’s would clear up or even shed light on the great mystery of what motivated our 2003 invasion of Iraq, which even Jeb Bush now admits was a mistake, you will be disappointed. “The need for military action to defeat Saddam was very different in 2003 than it was in 1991. We did the right thing in 1991 and in 2003.” Some pages later, perhaps concluding that they had not sufficiently justified our 2003 war, they add:

*Leaving Saddam Hussein in power in Iraq after 9/11, in light of the threat he posed, would have been, as former British Prime Minister Tony Blair has noted, an act of political cowardice. This is not to say that Saddam was responsible for 9/11. It is to observe that in the aftermath of 9/11, when thousands of Americans had been slaughtered by terrorists armed with airline tickets and box cutters, we had an obligation to do everything possible to prevent terrorists from gaining access to much worse weapons. Saddam’s Iraq was the most likely place for terrorists to gain access to and knowledge of such weapons.*

In case we had not been convinced, they add further on that: “America’s liberation of Iraq also sent a clear message to others in the region that we would take military action if necessary.” So why did we give up the search for Bin Laden to attack Iraq, something inexplicable to most of us at the time? Because Iraq was a likely place for terrorists to find weapons of mass destruction and to demonstrate our toughness!! Really! It detracted us from fighting al-Qaeda and demonstrated our stupidity

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, my blog of February 26, 2010:

<https://wcoats.wordpress.com/2010/02/26/torture-is-immoral-and-doesn't-work/> and this video of the New American Foundation seminar on March 10, 2010: [http://www.newamerica.net/events/2010/effective\\_interrogation\\_techniques](http://www.newamerica.net/events/2010/effective_interrogation_techniques)

<sup>7</sup> *New York Times*, April 21, 2009

instead. And we now once again face Saddam's military officers leading ISIS, after we fired them in 2003, sending them home to temporary unemployment.

The Cheneys open their Chapter Three: "Dawn of the Age of Terror" with a statement by Vice President Cheney made almost half a year after the American invasion of Iraq: "Just as surely as the Nazis during World War II, and the Soviets during the Cold War, the enemy we face today is bent on our destruction. As in other times, we are in a war we did not start and have no choice but to win." A WAR WE DID NOT START!!!

Part II of the book: "The Era of Obama" is largely an attack President Obama's foreign policies. Much of their attack reflects the fundamental differences between the Cheneys' American exceptionalism "that sees America as uniquely qualified to lead the world" "unmatched in the history of the world in our goodness and our greatness, in our contributions to global freedom, justice, and peace, [where as] Barack Obama sees a nation with at best a 'mixed' record." The Cheney's apparently don't see our record as mixed by the internment of Americans of Japanese ancestry in concentration camps during WWII, the firebombing of Dresden and many other German civilian population centers, the firebombing of Tokyo killing 100,000 to 200,000 civilians, not to mention the only atomic bombs ever dropped on people, killing an estimated 200,000-240,000 civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the virtual leveling of most of North Korea during the Korean "police action", which has more than a little to do with the deep hatred of the U.S. by North Koreans. "Over a period of three years or so, we killed off — what — 20 percent of the population," Air Force Gen. Curtis LeMay, head of the Strategic Air Command during the Korean War, [told the Office of Air Force History in 1984](#). "Although the ferocity of the bombing was criticized as racist and unjustified elsewhere in the world, it was never a big story back home." [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-us-war-crime-north-korea-wont-forget/2015/03/20/fb525694-ce80-11e4-8c54-ffb5ba6f2f69\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-us-war-crime-north-korea-wont-forget/2015/03/20/fb525694-ce80-11e4-8c54-ffb5ba6f2f69_story.html)

Our nuking of Japan, which surely fits the definition of a serious war crime, remains very controversial. Truman did not approve dropping these bombs on civilian targets lightly, the issue being how much it would shorten the war and thus, on net, save lives. The 1946 report requested by Truman, *The United States Strategic Bombing Survey*, stated that: "Based on a detailed investigation of all of the facts,... it is the Survey's opinion that ... Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bomb had not been dropped." But the Cheney's want to be sure that American school children are taught "why America was right to end the war by dropping the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki...." Edward Teller, "the father of the H-bomb", told me in his home in Berkeley in 1965 that he thought it was a mistake.

Even many who generally share Obama's more restrained approach to foreign policy will agree with the Cheney's criticisms of the weaknesses and inconsistencies in President Obama's implementation of his desire to apply more diplomacy, deploy fewer American soldiers, and engage more allied cooperation. They take us through

Obama's treatment of Iraq, Afghanistan, ISIS, Iran, Russia and ultimately China. They score many hits on Obama's passivity even with the application of the diplomacy he prefers, his ignored red lines, and silences when words might have helped. But as they criticize the Obama/Clinton reset with Russia for undercutting our allies and misreading Putin's intentions, they fail to mention President George W Bush's misreading of Putin's soul as he looked into his eyes, or the mess Obama inherited in Iraq and Afghanistan from Bush/Cheney, and they damn the U.S. agreement with Iran as if it is an American agreement rather than a P5+1 agreement with Iran. Their entire discussion of Iran fails to recognize that the U.S. is but one of many players. The Cheneyes believe that Obama's haste to bring the boys home and slash the defense budget is neither simple incompetence nor just poor execution of a more pacifist foreign policy but that it is motivated by his desire to increase spending on a populist domestic agenda.

The final part of the Cheney's book sets out their views on "What Must Be Done" to restore American leadership of the world. "There will be no more important or urgent task for our next commander in chief than repairing the damage done by the Obama-era defense budget cuts," ignoring that the sharper, less rationally focused cuts were enacted by the Republican-led Congress as part of the sequester. Moreover, the next administration should: "Restore authority to the NSA to effectively track and monitor terrorist communications.... Reinstitute the enhanced interrogation program...Recognize that Iran is America's enemy... Reject the agreement [with Iran] entered into by the Obama administration... and immediately re-impose all U.S. sanctions.... America's security demands that we deny, not promote, Iran's dream of regional domination." You get the idea. There is no mention that the agreement with Iran was with the P5+1 nor that re-imposing sanctions by the U.S. without the cooperation of the P5+1 and others would lack effectiveness, nor that a durable peace in the Middle East will require acceptance by Iran and Saudi Arabia of dominance by each in their respective regions.

But it is the Cheney's proposals with regard to China that most fully reveals the shallowness and aggressiveness of their views. They acknowledge that China is "simultaneously a significant strategic threat and a major economic partner [and that] the relationship between the United States and China requires consistent, serious diplomatic engagement at the highest levels." Starting with "Expand our military presence in Asia to counter China's efforts at regional domination" all of their proposals are basically military strategies and reflect the goal of maintaining U.S. dominance in every corner of the globe, noting only that we should "Reassess economic cooperation policies." What happened to the America that believes in and promotes the rule of law as the basis of relations between countries and global free trade? Rather than pushing China into its own set of rules and international institutions (see my ["U.S. leadership and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank"](#) *Cayman Financial Review*, July 2015) by, among other things, refusing to approve governance reforms of the International Monetary Fund that would increase China's vote more in line with its economic size, the interests of the U.S. and the principles it espouses would be better served by embracing China's aspirations to

develop economically and pulling it in and binding it to global rules of fair competition.<sup>8</sup> The Cheneys don't even acknowledge the issue, focusing instead on increasing our naval presence in the China Sea.

The Cheney's Epilogue summarized their view of American exceptionalism: "Since World War II, we have been 'the last, best hope of earth' because we are freedom's defender, not just for ourselves, but also for millions around the world.... We have been essential to the preservation and progress of freedom, and those who lead us in the years ahead must remind us, as Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Reagan did, of the special role we play. Neither they nor we should ever forget that we are, in fact, exceptional." They are aware that the size and strength of our military rests on the size and efficiency of our economy, but seem unaware that diverting more of our resources into the military diminishes the size of our productive economy. And not one word was mentioned about the growing danger to our liberties and system of limited government posed by crony capitalism, driven initially by the military industrial complex.

How refreshing it was, then, to read Charles Murray's tiny, fifty page book "American Exceptionalism: An Experiment in History."<sup>9</sup> Murray refocuses our exceptionalism on the character of those who came here and the institutions they built. "The Founders were unanimously of the opinion that their creation could work in practice only because of the qualities that already existed in the American people.... For one thing, the way to America lay across the North Atlantic. What kind of people were likely to accept the hazards and hardships of that crossing?... The answer is that such people tended to be courageous, honest, incredibly hardworking, and to belong to close-knit families."

How then do we explain Hiroshima and Nagasaki, our fire bombings of cities, our internment of Japanese Americans guilty of no crime other than being Japanese, etc. (for example the popularity, limited though it is, of Donald Trump)? Murray explains that: "American Exceptionalism does not imply American excellence or superiority." He continues that: "As factions cannot be prevented, the only thing that government can do is limit their evil effects. 'If men were angels,' Madison wrote in one of the most famous passages from *The Federalist*, 'no government would be necessary.... In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.'" A deeply held belief guiding the checks and balances and other limits on government power put into the American constitution was that "human beings acting in their private capacity tend to be resourceful and benign. Human beings acting in the political realm tend to be resourceful and dangerous."

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<sup>8</sup> After a five year delay the United States finally approved just before Christmas the amendments to the IMF's Articles of Agreement reforming its governance and members quotas.

<sup>9</sup> AEI Press, Washington DC, 2013.



Though Americans ranked first in the world for “helping a stranger,”<sup>10</sup> like human beings everywhere, they become fiercely self-protective when frightened. This instinct generally served hunter-gatherers well, but is often destructive of the values that make living in civilized societies productive or even possible. In the past, a free press and self-critical public examinations of these periods of shameful violations of our fundamental values have produced corrections to such extremes. I am confident that these forces will do so again.

While fear for physical safety can be broadly felt, the fear of losing one’s job or special privileges is more specific. It is natural for individuals, firms, and professions to want to protect themselves from competition. Most firms would like to be monopolists if they could get away with it. In these cases a strong public interest in better and cheaper goods and services has generally overcome or limited the restrictive aspirations of professional licensing bodies, unions, and of industrial trade and tariff protections. Trump’s call for high border walls and denying visas to all Muslims, aside from their impracticability, appeals to both kinds of fears. Like those freedom seeking immigrants who drafted our constitution with its government of limited powers and built this country for the common good as well as their own, I remain confident that upon greater reflection the majority of Americans will choose policies that also serve the general good, rather than individual special interests.

The Exceptionalism of the Cheneys reflects the unparalleled power dominance that the United States achieved after the end of the cold war, the widespread acceptance of its global leadership as a result of the general perception of the United States’ commitment to the rule of law, and its obligation claimed by neocons to bring democracy to all corners of the globe. The possibility of this role, that is of America’s role as the indispensable nation, derives from Murray’s (and my) concept of American Exceptionalism. It is the character of the people attracted to America (industrious, self reliant, and morally governed in their relations with others) and the institutions (public and private) that they built that MADE AMERICA GREAT (if I may borrow that phrase), and thus made it the economic and military power that it is. In my view, the goal of the Cheneys and other neocons to oversee a democratic world and to guarantee its safety reflects a radical and unconservative view of the evolution of societies that will ultimately undermine the economic sources of America’s current strength.

The proper first priority of the United States should be to preserve what made it great. Domestically this means maintaining (or reestablishing) the delicate balance between the power of the state and the freedom of its citizens to pursue their own

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<sup>10</sup> <http://nonprofitquarterly.org/2014/11/19/2014-world-giving-index-findings-ranks-us-in-9th-place-for-donations/?gclid=CPbA35DT1skCFcwYHwodj1sFrw> and [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/19/world-giving-index-us-ran\\_n\\_1159562.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/19/world-giving-index-us-ran_n_1159562.html),

interests properly understood so as to maximize the potential for human flourishing. Internationally it means diligently protecting its borders from dangers of all kinds while engaging with the rest of the world commercially, culturally, and diplomatically to extend the rule of law under which we can all best flourish. We should remember why our forefathers choose the Bald Eagle for the Great Seal of the United States. It is “sharp-eyed, watchful, rapacious when necessary, but not out looking for a fight.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Suggested by Lenore Ealy