



American Exceptionalism

By James Q. Wilson

What Alexis de Tocqueville noticed about America's uniqueness over 170 years ago is even more valid today than it was back then: a daunting reminder of the caution with which the United States must proceed in its admirable efforts to plant democracies in rocky soil.

When President George W. Bush said that America hopes to spread democracy to all the world, he was echoing a sentiment many people support. Though Americans do not put “extending democracy” near the top of their list of foreign policy objectives (preventing terrorism is their chief goal), few would deny that if popular rule is extended it would improve lives around the world.

Democracy, of course, means rule by the people. But the devil is in the details. By one count, the number of democracies quintupled in the second half of the twentieth century, but there are freedom-loving and freedom-disdaining democracies. Fareed Zakaria calls the latter “illiberal democracies.” Among them are Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Ukraine, and Venezuela.

The number of democratic regimes has grown rapidly in the last several decades, but what has grown is not like American democracy. Though most democracies have certain things in common—popular elections, the rule of law, and rights for minorities—we should never suppose that what we hope will appear in the Middle East and elsewhere will look like American government any more than Britain, France, Germany, India, Japan, or Turkey look like us. Recall that American democracy contains some strikingly undemocratic features, such as the Electoral College, two

senators for each state regardless of state populations, and an independent judiciary.

America differs from other democratic nations in many ways, some material and some mental. It has a more rapidly growing economy than most of Europe and a deeper sense of patriotism than almost any other country with popular rule. A recent survey of 91,000 people in fifty nations, conducted by the Pew Research Center and reported on by Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes, outlines our political culture and shows how different it is from that in most other democracies. Americans identify more strongly with their own country than do people in many affluent democracies. While 71 percent of Americans say they are “very proud” to be in America, only 38 percent of the French and 21 percent of the Germans and the Japanese say they are proud to live in their countries. Americans are also much more committed to individualism than are people elsewhere. Only one-third of Americans—but two-thirds of Germans and Italians—think that success in life is determined by forces outside their own control. This message is one that Americans wish to transmit to their children: 60 percent of Americans say that children should be taught the value of hard work, but only one-third of the British and Italians and one-fifth of the Germans agree. Over half of all Americans think that economic competition is good because it stimulates people to work hard and develop new ideas; only one-third of French and Spanish people agree. Americans would like

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their views to spread throughout the world: over three-fourths said this was a good idea, compared to only one-fourth of the people in France, Germany, and Italy, and one-third in Great Britain.

In 1835 Alexis de Tocqueville discussed American exceptionalism in *Democracy in America*, and he is still correct. There was then and there continues to be now in this country a remarkable commitment to liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, and laissez-faire values. He gave three explanations for this state of affairs: we came to occupy a vast, largely empty, and isolated continent; we have benefited from a legal system that involves federalism and an independent judiciary; and we have embraced certain “habits of the heart” that were profoundly shaped by our religious tradition. Of these, Tocqueville rightly said that our customs were more important than our laws, and our laws more important than our geography. What is remarkable today is that a vast nation of around 300 million people still share views once held by a few million crowded along the eastern seaboard.

Slow to Change, for Better or Worse

Our Constitutional system is, I think, even more important than it was to Tocqueville’s mind. He wrote about federalism, local township government, and an independent judiciary, but neglected the system of separated powers and the checks and balances each branch imposes on the other two. Federalism, he correctly understood, keeps government close to the people, but the separate branches of the national government, each of which shares power with the others, impede the rate of change in ways that make it both difficult to adopt new policies and hard to change old ones.

America was slow to adopt welfare programs, social security, unemployment insurance, and government-supported health care, while Europe adopted these policies rapidly. We have kept our tax rate lower than it is in most of Europe. The central difference is not that Europeans are either smarter or dumber than we, but that a parliamentary system permits temporary popular majorities to make bold changes rather quickly, while a presidential system with a powerful, independent, and internally divided Congress requires that big changes undergo lengthy debates and substantive accommodations. On occasion, America acts like a parliamentary system, as it did under Franklin Roosevelt during the Great Depression and under Lyndon Johnson when they commanded extraordinary majorities in both houses of Congress.

The system a country uses to elect its rulers also makes a difference. In a recent study, political scientists Torben Iversen and David Soskice have shown that, among seventeen large democracies, those that elect their legislators using proportional representation (PR) are three times more likely than those electing them by majority vote to have leftist governments that redistribute income from rich to poor.

Australia, Canada, Japan, Great Britain, and the United States have majoritarian systems, while Austria, Germany, Italy, and Sweden have PR systems. Under a PR system, several parties will compete, while in majoritarian systems, only two parties usually contest elections. If there are several parties, middle-class voters will support programs that tax the rich and benefit themselves, knowing that they can change their voting habits if a government wishes to tax them more. But if there are only two major parties, middle-class voters will worry that voting for leftist parties will mean more taxes for them, so they will be inclined to support right-wing parties.

As we struggle to rescue Medicare and Social Security from their inevitable bankruptcy, we are learning that correcting old programs is as difficult as inventing them in the first place. How well our Constitutional system will handle these problems remains to be seen, but some changes will surely occur: the government cannot abandon programs that are as popular as these. Already national commissions have reported on both, though so far with little effect.

Our Constitutional system is, of course, no guarantee against making mistakes. When President John Adams was in office, Congress passed the Alien and Sedition Acts; after we entered the First World War, we experienced an overblown “red” scare; it took a century after the Civil War before Congress was willing to pass laws ending racial discrimination; and of late, the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act, written by Senators John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Russell Feingold (D-Wisc.), constitutes a massive attack on the First Amendment rights of various interest groups.

But parliamentary systems do no better. England gave us homegrown fascism in the person of Oswald Mosley; France expressed its anti-Semitism in the Dreyfus Affair; and today, much of Europe is in the grip of deep tensions between Muslims whom it will not assimilate and native Europeans who want Muslim labor but not Muslim rights. America, by contrast, has managed to absorb every immigrant group in ways that enrich the country and convert most new arrivals into patriots. We have

several million Muslims living here, but I suspect that the proportion that embraces the radical fascism of Muslim extremists is smaller here than abroad.

The Will of the People

Federalism keeps government close to the people, especially with respect to issues that mean a lot to them. Police, schools, criminal justice, and land-use planning are deeply local matters. As a result, we have more variation in the policies of these agencies than one would find in a centralized democracy. As school quality becomes a problem, some states allow the creation of charter schools, and a few places use voucher programs. Land-use planning can be either greatly restrictive or open to new developments, depending on the policies of cities and counties.

Federalism, of course, has costs as well as benefits. Southern states practiced racial discrimination after most northern ones had passed laws against it. Locally elected school boards can often be captured by the electoral power of teachers' unions, thus creating a dubious bargaining arrangement: school boards that are supposed to negotiate with teachers over salaries and working conditions often are the captive of the very teachers with whom they must do business.

But the benefits are just as clear. When welfare reform began at the national level, it built on new ideas being tried in several states. When limits on aggressive medical malpractice suits began, they came first in states and are only now being considered in Washington. These changes confirm the argument by Justice Louis Brandeis that federalism is valuable because it creates "laboratories of democracy." He was explaining why much good comes from political alternatives. Not only can government choose what to do, people can choose among states where it is done. People who want medical marijuana, tough environmental laws, lenient criminal justice penalties, and alternative lifestyles can live in one place; people who prefer the opposites of these can live elsewhere.

By keeping certain policies close to the people, government here cannot long ignore popular demands. Consider crime. When our crime rates began to rise in the early 1960s, Barry Goldwater, the Republican

presidential candidate in 1964, campaigned about "crime in the streets." Many of his opponents berated him, claiming, wrongly, that his concern was a mask for hostility to racial minorities. But Lyndon Johnson, who defeated Goldwater, knew better. Since people were worried about crime, he created a national commission on crime and the administration of justice that issued a multivolume report.

But far more important than a national commission is the fact that every district attorney, mayor, and governor, and many judges are elected by the people. When crime became a public concern, these officials had to respond.

By the early 1980s, that response had led to a higher proportion of convicted criminals going to prison where they served longer sentences. In Europe, by contrast, crime rates also rose, but this fact was confronted by political elites who were insulated from public concern.

The difference can be seen in the contrast between the United States and England. In the 1970s, England had lower robbery and burglary rates than did California, probably because the former sent a higher proportion of robbers to prison than did the latter. But by the mid-1980s, the criminal justice policies of the United States and England had switched places. The United States, driven by popular pressure, increased the proportion of convicted offenders sent to prison, while England reduced that proportion. Crime rates fell in the United States and rose in Eng-

land. By the early 1990s, England had a robbery rate higher than the U.S.'s and a burglary rate that was twice as high. We cannot be certain that differing punishment policies explain the changes in crime rates, but no other plausible explanation is available.

During many of these changes, Ronald Reagan was president of the United States and Margaret Thatcher the prime minister of England. I doubt they disagreed about crime or how to deal with it. What is important is not that they were in office, but that in this country scores of elected prosecutors endorsed popular new policies, while in England scores of appointed prosecutors did not.

When public officials are appointed, they acquire a certain detachment from public opinion, thereby enabling them to act on the basis of their personal beliefs. Those beliefs, in my experience, consist of some

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combination of self-interest and a therapeutic ideology. The self-interest of British civil servants has been memorably recorded in *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*, two BBC television series that I believe are not only hilarious, but also accurate. It would be almost impossible to make such a program about U.S. civil servants, not because they care less for their own advantage, but because they are checked by competing elected officials in legislative committees who are highly sensitive to what the public wants.

These differences are dramatized by differing U.S. and English policies toward the death penalty. In both countries a majority of the people support it, but only in the United States does it exist. And it exists in most states, but not all. In England, parliamentary leaders do not propose the idea for enactment even though people want it.

When confronted with the choices offered by federalism, the right decision is not always made. In some states, the public can back unconstitutional or morally dubious arguments. The courts will ordinarily prevent the former from taking effect, but nothing will prevent the latter. But human choice makes a difference: if a state makes a series of popular but questionable choices, people can move to a different state. Moreover, the states must compete with one another for business. A firm wishing to build a factory or an office building will examine not only land costs, but also tax rates and political attitudes, picking the state that offers the best combination of factors. This competition imposes a powerful brake on ill-considered schemes.

Spiritual Entrepreneurship

Tocqueville ascribed our political culture in large part to our religious heritage. Our settlers who escaped religious persecution at home brought with them a form of Christian worship that was both “democratic and republican.” To be sure, some Americans in 1835 and many more today “profess Christian dogma . . . because they are afraid of not looking like they believe them.” But for most people, religion is a reality, not a dodge. Tocqueville understood that, contrary to the prediction of European philosophers, freedom and enlightenment would not extinguish religious zeal. On the contrary: here freedom largely explains our persistent religiosity.

That is because a nation that never had an established church and did not grant money or privileges to existing churches left religion in the hands of spiritual entrepreneurs. These people were sometimes domestic

missionaries or local citizens eager to create and govern a religious organization. Protestant churches had to compete in a spiritual marketplace, with many new churches emerging every year, people changing their affiliations frequently, and a few mega-churches emerging under the guidance of the most successful ministers. The system of natural liberty that Adam Smith said would benefit the economy has also aided religion.

As a result, nearly half of all Americans attend churches or synagogues weekly, compared to 4 percent of the English, 5 percent of the French, and comparably low levels in most of western Europe. Some may suspect that our religiosity is sustained by recent immigrants—especially those from Latin America—but that is only part of the story. Churches grew in membership between 1776 and 1850, long before Irish and Italian immigrants arrived in any number. When German immigrants arrived toward the end of the nineteenth century, they behaved like Germans still in their homeland: most were nonobservant Lutherans. But by the time they had become third generation Americans, they acquired the church commitments of most Americans and went to church frequently. In addition, the Mormon Church has grown rapidly without, at least in the United States, emphasizing immigrant recruitment.

In most of Europe, by contrast, religion was allied with politics so that over the centuries, European secularists, as one scholar has noted, “hounded Christians as political enemies rather than as religious adversaries.” As a result, European churches that are still under government influence in much of Europe long after these nations had become secular generate political failure. As Tocqueville put it, “religion increases its power over some and loses the hope of reigning over all.”

Religion in America has helped train citizens on self-government by giving them independent congregations to manage, even in places that when first settled had no civil government. The struggle between religious faiths has at times been acute, as with Protestant attacks on the Roman Catholic Church in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But this rivalry was suppressed by the courts, weakened by the slow realization that Catholics here were Americans first and Catholics second, and by the election of a Catholic president in 1960. As with the economy, so with religion: markets generate mutual understanding far better than monopolies.

Religion has powerfully affected American politics: its leaders were at the forefront of efforts to abolish slavery, and they still struggle over war, abortion, and gay

rights. Among white voters in the 2004 presidential election, religious differences explained a larger fraction of their votes than did their age, sex, income, or education. At the extremes, religion can lead to violence, as evidenced by some radical fundamentalists who bomb abortion clinics, or radical secularists who sustained the Weather Underground in the 1960s. But for most people, religion has a moderate impact despite the fervent rhetoric directed at it by several contributors to the *New York Times*.

Religion in America explains a host of worthwhile traits. As Arthur Brooks shows in the new book *Who Gives?*, people who are religious are more likely to live in two-parent families, achieve upward economic mobility, resist the lures of drugs and crime, and overcome health problems. They are also more likely to give to charity, including secular ones, than are nonreligious people, and they are more likely to donate blood, give food or money to homeless people, and return excessive change mistakenly given to them by a cashier.

Religion, of course, cannot be the sole guide to a useful democracy. People who believe that their faith justifies their desire to dominate other people or to destroy the infidels are on a crash course toward social destruction. Iran is an example. And a country in which a secular autocrat has imposed draconian rule as a way of curbing the excesses of religion has created an alternative no better than the one he suppressed. Iraq under Saddam Hussein is an example.

Religion requires constitutional boundaries to limit the radical demands of a few. But constitutional government without religion may not, as the examples cited earlier in this article suggest, give to people any sense of common destiny or any faith in the transcendent value of their principles.

Rough-and-Tumble Politics

No matter how many mistakes they make in understanding the Bill of Rights and no matter how many times they may support policies hostile to liberty, Americans share at a deep level a commitment to freedom. Ask almost any member of the armed forces why they are fighting in Afghanistan or Iraq, and the most common

answer is that they are “defending freedom.” Ask almost any citizen what it is they like most about this country, and they will say its freedom.

Now, fighting in the Middle East involves many issues having little to do with freedom in the United States; many American domestic policies actually reduce freedom. Despite that, our verbal commitment to this goal is real. And this view means that Americans tend to define the issues that divide them as a contest of rights more than as a matter of choice.

We see this in the flood of lawsuits by which Americans tend to manage their differences. Some people think that this is because we have too many lawyers, while others have suggested that to solve the problem we close our law schools for five years. And it is true that we have, in proportion to our population, three times as many lawyers as does Great Britain and twenty-five times as many as Japan.

But we are not more litigious because we have more lawyers: we have more lawyers because we are so litigious. Not even the framers of the Constitution anticipated this. As Alexander Hamilton said in *Federalist* 78, “the judiciary . . . has no influence over either the sword or the purse, no direction of either the strength or the wealth of the society, and can take no active resolution whatever.” As a result, “the judiciary is beyond comparison the weakest of the three departments of power.” Things turned out a bit differently than Hamilton supposed. The courts have become immensely powerful for two reasons: the existence of an independent judiciary and the beliefs Americans have about the foundation of their government.

Courts that are independent of the legislative and executive branches will inevitably become the referees that determine when a law or order violates the Constitution. Granted, there must be some organization that will defend that claim. Early on, the Supreme Court, under the leadership of John Marshall, became that entity, and since then no one has doubted it. As the federal government grew in size and authority, more and more issues arose that implicated the Constitution, and so more and more often the Supreme Court decided how that document should be read. Since 1789, the Supreme Court has declared more than 160 laws to be unconstitutional.

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But far more important than judicial review in explaining America's commitment to rights has been the legacy of the Revolutionary War and the sentiments expressed in the Declaration of Independence. That document said that "all men are created equal" and are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights" that include "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." To secure these rights, governments are created that derive their "just powers from the consent of the governed."

This language has had a lasting influence over how Americans think about government, even though the Supreme Court has rarely made any reference to the Declaration and lawyers are not trained to think that this document has any legal value. To judges and attorneys, the Declaration has no more authority, and probably less, than does the preamble to the Constitution. But to Americans, the language of the Declaration is remembered far more clearly than that of the Constitution. Even though in 1776 neither women nor slaves could vote, we recall the claim that we were created equal. Though the government may imprison or execute criminals and send soldiers off to die, we have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (though not to happiness itself).

This language fits well with the fact that in America we had no experience with a hereditary aristocracy or with a king who could rule by divine right. As settlers moved out West, beyond the few million residents along the Atlantic coast, Americans took with them a desire for each person to be esteemed and have a fair share in government, and a shared view of equality with its accompanying hostility to displays of superiority. They also embraced a desire for liberty, but not license; that is, the freedom to act in accord with decent principles, many of them religiously defined. As towns were organized, these principles shaped their governance, not because Thomas Jefferson had written them, but because Americans shared these views before they tried to design any local political arrangements.

This tradition has equipped Americans with a commitment to natural law: that is, to a belief that laws cannot be justified simply as the commands of a ruler but only as an expression of some higher standard that endows people with claims against both other people and the government itself if either oversteps what we believe to be the right standards of conduct. This commitment helps us understand an otherwise puzzling fact: Americans typically have a low opinion of our governing institutions, especially Congress, but an exceptionally

high opinion of the Constitutional system of which they are a part.

These views impose constraints on what government might do. In Europe, the slow replacement of kings with elected parliaments did not alter the general assumption that the people owed the government something—namely, a respect for authority. In America, as Seymour Martin Lipset has argued, people who had that view (the Loyalists) emigrated to Canada, while those who thought the government owed respect to the people remained and fought as revolutionaries. The differences in outlook persist to this day. Canada has a larger welfare state than the United States in part because Canadians (notably those in the east) want welfare and Americans (notably those in the middle and far west) do not.

The consequence of these views is that Americans today practice adversarial politics, not deferential ones, and turn frequently to the courts to settle their differences in a struggle over rights. Every government agency here operates under close public scrutiny by the press, interest groups, and on occasion an aroused public. We see the result in environmental policies. In England and Sweden, these policies tend to be made by a collaborative and often unpublicized accord among business firms, labor unions, environmental groups, and government agencies. Here, by contrast, they are made in a hotly contested public struggle that pits firms, unions, groups, and agencies against one another.

Spreading Democracy

There are many different kinds of democracy that can be spread, and Americans should never suppose that what may take hold in another country will closely resemble what has grown up here. A few types of democracy may be illiberal ones, while many will be elitist ones, but most will enhance the freedom of their people, change governments peacefully after an election is held, and refrain from the use of force to conquer other nations.

Some Americans are skeptical that democracy can be exported, especially to the Middle East. These countries lack what we had: a successful war against a colonial power, wise statesmen who drafted the Constitution, and a political culture that will sustain democratic authority and protect human freedom. But most nations that have become democracies lack some or all of these traits: there was no revolutionary war, few wise statesmen, and no democratic political culture in France, Germany, Italy, or Japan. England, the nation that became democratic a few

decades after the United States was created, had many helpful precursors: a weaker feudal legacy, many independent farmers who owned their own land, and an early experience with an independent judiciary. England's former colonies—not only America, but Australia, Canada, India, and New Zealand—became the leading democracies of the world.

But other countries have become democratic despite internal terrorism (France), domestic autocracy (Germany), a weak political culture (Japan), a lack of territorial integrity (Italy), and a Muslim population (Turkey and increasingly Indonesia). The facts that not all democracies (in fact, almost none) will look like ours and that radicalism and despotism will make democratic progress painfully slow in many countries are not arguments against encouraging the spread of democracy; they are only arguments against hoping that our system can be exported intact, and that we will see democracy in the most resistant nations in our (or our children's) lifetimes. Though American democracy got off to a good start in 1789, we had to fight a bloody civil war before much more progress could be made.

But we have left a legacy that many people wish to emulate. When people in Lebanon, Jordan, Morocco, and Indonesia are asked whether Western-style democracy can work in their countries, the overwhelming majority say yes.

The greatest barrier to American influence on the world today is probably not our system of government or even our unequalled military power, but our popular culture. We export, to great individual but no collective applause, blue jeans, Big Macs, rock and hip-hop music, Web-based pornography, and motion pictures that often celebrate violence and a shallow adolescent culture. As Martha Bayles and others have pointed out, this is not what we exported right after World War II, when, with government aid, we sent abroad artists, jazz musicians, and gifted writers to show what America could produce.

Our earlier efforts at public diplomacy were a success; our most recent efforts at consumerism confirm in the minds of many leaders that we are a corrupt, violent, and mindless people.

There is a great irony in all this. Our foreign critics dislike the fact that freedom produces consumerism, yet they ignore the fact that their followers buy into our retail output with great enthusiasm. In fact, despite our differences with other countries about capitalism, patriotism, and democracy, Americans generally share the same moral values as Europeans. As many Americans

as foreigners are upset by the vulgarity of American motion pictures and video games. Anti-Americanism has deep roots, some linked to our foreign policies, some to our military power, and some merely to our vast impact on world affairs.

But much of it is dressed up to appear as a moral critique of the United States. Some of that is nonsense: movies starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, records featuring Frank Zappa, and fast food restaurants penetrate to the farthest reaches of the globe and are eagerly consumed by people who may wonder how a nation they are supposed to dislike produces so many things they love. Still, democracy and free enterprise encourage consumerism,

and consumerism will lead to things that many people, notably in Muslim nations, will regard as immoral.

For our own good, I think America ought to lean against this picture of our country and encourage a renewed public diplomacy that emphasizes the deepest features of our culture: a love of freedom, a respect for great talent, and a willingness to forego any imperial ambitions even when we have the power to impose them. We did this after World War II by means of trips and broadcasts that drew on our best features. Today we rely on the export of the basest forms of our popular culture. We cannot keep the latter at home, but we can do more to export the former.

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