

Is America Still the “Hope of Earth”?

Origins and Underpinnings of
American Exceptionalism

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Advocates of American exceptionalism say the United States is special, a nation for the world to admire, a country worthy of emulation, a place chosen for destiny. Their claim resembles the assumption made by the young child at a Jewish seder who asks, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” But is it really correct to say that America is exceptional?

Without doubt, the United States differs from other countries in the same way the air, stars, and smells vary from one night to another. Barack Obama put it this way: “I believe in American exceptionalism . . . just as I suspect the Brits believe in British exceptionalism . . . and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.”¹ All countries can find something

to brag about. Vladimir Putin thinks it is pernicious to say anything beyond that. He warns, "It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to think of themselves as exceptional." He is quick to agree that "there are big countries, and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions, and those still finding their way to democracy." But, he says, "we must not forget that God created us equal."²

Abraham Lincoln thought otherwise. Like the innocent child at a seder, he had no reservations about American exceptionalism. The Declaration of Independence, he said, "gave liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time."³ If the American democracy collapsed, the negative impacts for democracy would be global. If the Union split into two nations, European monarchs would rejoice at the division. When searching for meaning in the midst of the tragedy of the Civil War, he invariably returned to his belief that the United States "shall nobly save or meanly lose the last best hope of earth."⁴ The president was not certain whether the great American experiment would survive. For him it remained a question whether "a new nation conceived in liberty . . . can long endure."⁵

Tocqueville's Theory

Lincoln's thinking about American exceptionalism was likely shaped by Alexis de Tocqueville.⁶ The French aristocrat, writing in the post-Napoleonic period, expected democracies to transform themselves into dictatorships. People continuously ask their governments to make improvements, he said. To meet expectations, leaders centralize power so they can implement reform on a national scale. Local institutions crumble, and the people's capacity for self-government erodes. Centralization breeds tyranny.⁷

Tocqueville sailed to the United States during the 1830s to see whether his new nation refuted this theory. He traveled broadly and

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inquired widely into every facet of American life, then blended his observations together into a powerful explanation of the country’s exceptional capacity for sustaining democracy. Here is what he concluded:

The situation of the Americans is entirely exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be put in the same situation. Their entirely Puritan origin, their uniquely commercial habits, even the country that they inhabit . . . had to concentrate the American mind in a singular way in the concern for purely material things. The passions, needs, education, circumstances, everything seems in fact to combine to bend the inhabitant of the United States toward the earth. Religion alone makes him, from time to time, turn a fleeting and distracted gaze toward heaven. So let us stop seeing all democratic nations with the face of the American people, and let us try finally to consider them with their own features.⁸

The strong state and local governments of the “country they inhabit” encouraged a practical focus on solving problems at the community level. “Their exclusively commercial habits” closed their minds to grand political schemes to reform and transform society. “Their strictly Puritanical origin” focused their attention on self-reliance, hard work, and enough learning to allow them to read the Bible. “Passions” and “wants” drew the citizen of the United States “earthward,” toward simple, home-grown solutions rather than pie-in-the-sky schemes for societal salvation being peddled in Europe.

What is exceptional about the United States, then, is its capacity to preserve liberty within a democracy. When the colonies separated from Great Britain, Congress issued a Declaration of Independence that asserted the “unalienable right” to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Legitimate governments “secure these rights” and “derive

their just powers from the consent of the governed.” The citizen, not the collectivity, was placed at the center of the political system. Liberty was given priority over social guarantees. Opportunity was available to all if only they would do the hard work and develop the entrepreneurial skill to acquire it. Howard University scholar Ralph Bunche put it well:

Every man in the street, white, black, red or yellow, knows that this is “the land of the free,” the “land of opportunity,” the “cradle of liberty,” the “home of democracy,” that the American flag symbolizes the “equality of all men” and guarantees to us all “the protection of life, liberty and property,” freedom of speech, freedom of religion and racial tolerance.⁹

But what sustains this creed? How did the United States escape liberty-depriving centralization? Why did the country defy Tocqueville’s law? Will it continue to do so throughout the twenty-first century?

Explaining the Exception

Picking up Tocqueville’s baton, scholars have identified seven factors that have contributed to the exceptional success of American democracy: (1) absence of feudal institutions; (2) early, widespread political participation; (3) federalism and divided government; (4) rapid economic growth; (5) the frontier; (6) widespread education; and (7) continuous immigration.

Absence of feudal institutions

First and foremost, the United States was a new nation that had no feudal heritage.¹⁰ When American patriots dethroned George III, the

colonial aristocracy was run out of town on a rail. Nor did the United States have a national church. No Westminster Abbey has ever stood next to the nation’s capital. The religious groups dominant in a number of colonies—Anglicans in Virginia, Puritans in New England, Quakers in Pennsylvania—lost their special status within a decade or two after the Revolution. None of them had a chance of becoming the religion of the new nation. American clergy could not pander for subsidies from the government. They had to persuade their parishioners to give generously.

Early, widespread political participation

Without noblemen and clergy fighting to protect their privileges, colonial barriers to widespread citizen participation disappeared quickly, a second factor that contributed to this exceptional experiment in democracy. By 1820 white male suffrage was universal in nearly all states. Shortly thereafter, Andrew Jackson rallied frontiersmen, swept the Virginia dynasty from power, and instituted a “spoils system” that allocated government jobs to party loyalists. In ensuing years political machines mobilized the electorate so effectively that the turnout rate in presidential elections among eligible voters ran higher in 1844 and 1848 than it has in the twenty-first century (figure 1).

Machine politicians, though ready to take advantage of the opportunities available to them, never challenged the political order. Because they were well entrenched, socialist political parties and radical trade unions, such as the Industrial Workers of the World (“Wobblies”), could make few inroads. The politically engaged focused on the spoils of office rather than on Marxist schemes to nationalize the means of production. Socialist Eugene Debs managed to capture 6 percent of the presidential vote in 1912, but that turned out to be the party’s high-water mark in the United States.¹¹ As Tocqueville expected, the American working class remained pragmatic, their eyes focused “earthward.”

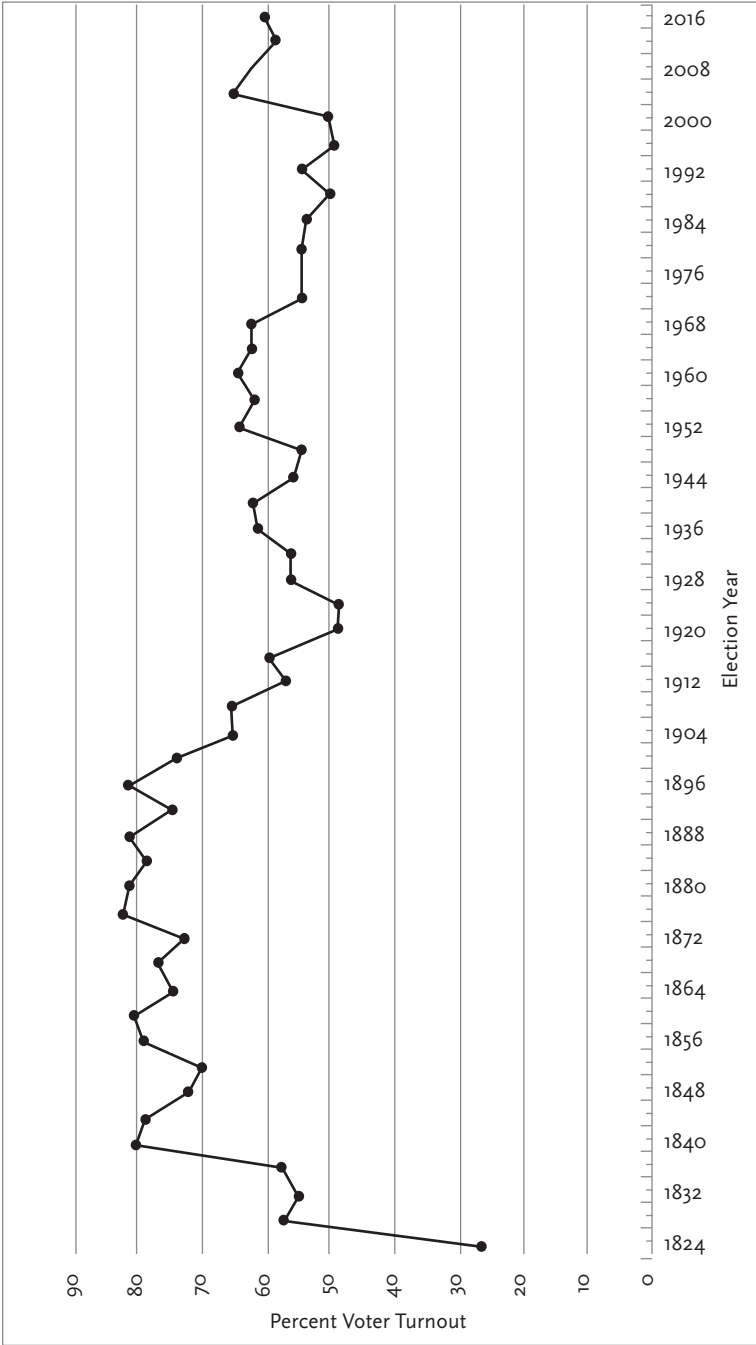


Figure 1. A Higher Percentage of White Males Voted in 1844 Than in 2008.

Federalism and divided government

Politics remained local because the Constitution divided power between the state and national governments. In Tocqueville’s day, the federal role was limited to setting tariffs, selling land, and running a post office. All other services—police, fire, sanitation, schools, and so forth—were provided by state and local governments. Even today, over a third of all domestic governmental expenditure is paid for out of taxes raised by state and local governments. The federal government pays for national defense, Social Security, Medicare, and other welfare services, but most of the rest remains a state and local responsibility. As much as we have centralized power in the United States, the lower tiers remain vital components of our governmental system.

The sharing of power between Congress and the executive, and the further division of power between House and Senate, slows down the rate of policy change and moderates the policies that are designed. At a time when many European countries were creating their welfare states by providing old-age pensions, long-term unemployment benefits, health care for all, and a tuition-free college education, divided power within the United States stalled the process of change and forced the adoption of more limited interventions. Not until the Great Depression of the 1930s did the New Deal begin to create the alphabet soup of agencies that formed the welfare state, and the programs then established did not come to full fruition until Medicare and Medicaid were signed into law by the Lyndon Johnson administration and the Affordable Care Act was enacted during the Barack Obama administration. In higher education, the Europeans offered students free tuition, while the United States set up loan programs. Europeans like to report that they have free medicine, free education, and ample benefits for the unemployed. But the taxpayer pays heavily for these “free gifts.” As compared to the 26 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) paid in taxes in the United States, well over 30 percent of GDP in Germany and the United

Kingdom and over 40 percent of GDP in France, Italy, Denmark, and Sweden is being collected by the government.

These international differences are quite consistent with the state of public opinion on the two sides of the Atlantic. Americans expect individuals to work hard and solve economic problems on their own or with the help of their families. Europeans are more ready to turn to the government for a solution. A World Values survey found that “less than 30% of Americans believe that the poor are trapped in poverty while 60% of Europeans have this belief.”¹² Nearly 70 percent of Americans tell pollsters that they think they have the free choice and control over their lives to get ahead. Only about 50 percent of German and British citizens feel the same way, and the percentages are around 35 percent in France and Italy.¹³ Should we rely on the government to reduce income inequality? A majority of Americans don’t think so. Only 30 percent of Americans say yes, as compared to about 80 percent of the Spanish and approximately 60 percent of the Germans and the British.¹⁴

In 2016 respondents in several countries were asked if “lack of effort on his or her own part” is the most important reason for a person being poor. Forty-six percent of Americans said that was the case, but only 37 percent of UK respondents offered the same response. In France, that percentage fell to 23 percent, and in Italy it was just 14 percent. Americans said the tax rate on the top 1 percent of taxpayers should be 25 percent, while the British would put it at 37 percent, the French at 44 percent, and the Italians at 38 percent.¹⁵ Especially interesting is the finding that “in Europe, the happiness of the poor is strongly negatively affected by inequality,” while the happiness of the poor in the United States seems to be “totally unaffected by inequality.”¹⁶

Rapid economic growth

The “earthward” focus of the American public has been reinforced by a large, integrated, fast-growing, high-wage economy, the fourth factor

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that contributes to American exceptionalism. Even during the colonial period, labor was scarce and wages ran higher than in England.¹⁷ As soon as independence was secured, the new nation put into place the fundamentals that would ensure sustained economic progress. The country kept common-law property protections inherited from Britain. The US land survey ordered by Congress at Thomas Jefferson’s instigation divided the country into rectangles with the exactitude needed to define precisely the property to be secured. The Constitution eliminated tariff barriers among the states. With property rights safe and the ability to sell products on a continental scale, entrepreneurs had strong incentives to innovate and expand. The US economy grew so rapidly that it surpassed Britain’s by 1890 and dominated the world economy throughout the twentieth century.

The frontier

This economic growth generated westward expansion, which had its own impact on American political culture. The frontier hypothesis presented by Henry Turner Jackson before his fellow historians at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago explains the connection with American exceptionalism in these terms:

This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. . . .

The frontier is productive of individualism. . . . It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control. The tax-gatherer is viewed as a representative of oppression.¹⁸

Lincoln understood the importance of the frontier to the American experiment. He knew railroads opened the door to economic prosperity,

so he, as a lawyer, ably defended them against provincial interests that tried to stop them from laying down their tracks and building their bridges. As president, he facilitated the expansion of the transcontinental railroad so that it was only four years after his assassination when the Golden Spike driven into the plains of Utah united East with West. Lincoln also signed the Homestead Act, which gave 160 acres of land to anyone who would plow the fields. Notably, the law gave away federal property only to those willing to sweat and toil to make it productive.

Widespread education

The frontier explanation for American exceptionalism is well known. The sixth factor, local control of the nation's schools, is less well understood, though Tocqueville mentions schools briefly: "I do not think that in the most enlightened rural district of France, there is an intellectual movement, either so rapid, or on such scale, as in this wilderness."¹⁹ He attributed this not to strong governmental action but to the associations "Americans make . . . [to] found hospitals, prisons, and schools."²⁰

The beginnings of schools in America owe much to the influence of Puritans, who believed that children must be able to read if they are to learn the biblical truths that mark the road to salvation. They built seminaries at Harvard and Yale to train ministers who could spread the gospel into the country's interior. But it was not long before schooling was valued for secular purposes as well. Small towns learned that if they did not build schools their communities would not attract newcomers.²¹ By 1870, 78 percent of school-age children were in school, as compared to just 61 percent in England.²² Control was at the local level. In 1925 there were 130,000 school districts, many of them with just one school. "These relatively small, fiscally independent school districts," economist Claudia Goldin has pointed out, "competed with one another to attract

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residents.” The towns and cities of America were educating children in ways consistent with local community values while Europeans were debating in national parliaments and assemblies whether schools should be sectarian or secular.

Continuous immigration

Last but not least, America was open to newcomers. Most immigrants took great risks by first crossing an ocean and then traversing a wide continent until they could find the opportunities they sought. Recently, a friend told me a family story that undoubtedly has millions of repetitions, each with its own special twist. Her great-grandmother crossed the Atlantic with her five children in 1850 without her husband, who could not leave until he paid the twenty dollars to settle a last-minute claim filed on the eve of their departure. Since the family had used all its assets to pay for the passage, the mother went ahead on her own, losing her baby en route. Her husband arrived some weeks later, and a prosperous Iowa settlement was eventually established. What kind of people would take such risks? My colleagues and I summarized the research literature on this topic as follows:

The people who immigrated already were . . . unusually individualistic. They were more motivated to break free from the tradition of their communities. They were more ambitious, more willing to run risks in the hope of bettering themselves.

Given this independent spirit, immigration and the diversity it produced never were a threat to American values. On the contrary, successive waves of immigrants rejuvenated those values. . . . There is no reason to believe that today’s immigrants are any different. They, too, have left homes and families. . . . Such people display a kind of individual initiative that can rightly be considered “American,” regardless of their nationality.²³

When these risk-takers arrived in the United States, American institutions were well suited to absorbing them into the larger society. As economist Jacob Vigdor puts it,

[American] institutions—the predominance of the English language, support of basic capitalist economic principles, and the American system of Federal government—[are] quite resilient. . . . Evidence does not support the notion that [the latest] wave of migration poses a true threat to the institutions that withstood those earlier waves. Basic indicators of assimilation, from naturalization to English ability, are if anything stronger now than they were a century ago.²⁴

In short, immigration, if legal, reinforces the culture of American exceptionalism because the institutions that sustain that culture facilitate the assimilation of the newcomer.

Slavery and Exceptionalism

Slavery is the exception to the American ideals encapsulated within the concept of exceptionalism, as Tocqueville himself admitted. The Frenchman's discussion is at once painful, agonizing, enlightening, confusing, and disappointing. One can only cringe when he characterizes "Negroes" as subhuman, but one is relieved to discover he does not attribute this condition to any innate qualities but rather to the violence, persecution, and inhumanity the slaves suffered. He contrasts the energy of the farmers of the North with the lassitude of the Southern plantation. He says the slave system hurt white masters nearly as much as it harmed those they enslaved. He says freed blacks in the North were treated worse than Southern slaves. He emphasizes slavery's destructive impact on family life. Much of what he said still carries weight, but

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unfortunately, Tocqueville cannot find a solution that fits within the American creed.

Lincoln does better by suggesting that the price of slavery was being paid by a civil war consuming “all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil” and “every drop of blood drawn with the lash” was being “paid by another drawn with the sword.” But even this expectation was proven wrong. Racial progress came very slowly in the century following the day swords drew their last drops of blood. Blacks remained tied to the land as sharecroppers; their children were forced to attend low-quality, segregated elementary schools; their access to public facilities was available only on a segregated basis; and their vote was denied in Democratic primaries. African-Americans found new opportunities in the North during World War I and after the passage of the Naturalization Act of 1920. But as Gunnar Myrdal described in *The American Dilemma*, a classic study of race relations on the eve of World War II, US racial practices remained in sharp contradiction to its creedal commitment to liberty and equality of opportunity.²⁵

The civil rights movement ameliorated Myrdal’s dilemma. A growing black middle class entered the professions, the public sector, and the news and entertainment industries. Ralph Bunche was recognized for his scholarly achievements with an appointment as a United Nations undersecretary; Jackie Robinson emerged as a baseball hero; Marian Anderson sang at Constitutional Hall; psychologist Kenneth Clark informed the *Brown* decision; Leontyne Price brought down the Metropolitan Opera house; Edward Brooke was chosen by Massachusetts voters to be their senator; Gwen Ifill anchored public television’s six o’clock news show; and, eventually, Barack Obama was elected president of the United States. But despite these and tens of thousands of other individual accomplishments, slavery’s legacy has not been erased. In 2015 nearly a quarter of African-American families were living in poverty (as compared to less than 10 percent of white families).²⁶ The percentage

of children living with an unmarried mother increased from 20 percent to 50 percent between 1960 and 2013 (as compared to an increase from 7 percent to 19 percent among whites over the same time period).²⁷ The percentage of white twenty-five- to twenty-nine-year-olds attaining bachelor's degrees climbed from 29 percent to 43 percent over the twenty-year period following 1995. The increase for blacks was much less—from 15 percent to 21 percent.²⁸

The civil rights revolution reduced prejudice and discrimination for many in the upper echelon of society, but the expansion of the welfare state and the introduction of a wide array of affirmative action policies did not translate into anything close to social or economic equality for a broad spectrum of the black population. Instead of resolving Myrdal's dilemma, they may have had a perverse effect. As black journalist Jason Riley observes, "The intentions behind welfare programs may be noble. But in practice they have slowed the self-development that proved necessary for other groups to advance."²⁹

The End of American Exceptionalism?

Slavery's legacy is not the only concern troubling Americans in the twenty-first century's second decade. A number of the pillars of American exceptionalism seem to be crumbling. The frontier is long gone. Worker wages have stagnated as productivity growth has slowed from 3 percent to 1 percent. The country's schools, which were once the world's leaders, are now producing students who cannot keep pace with their peers abroad.³⁰ Integrating immigrants into the mainstream of American society becomes more complicated when over 25 percent of the country's 40 million foreign-born residents are unauthorized.³¹ Those who control the culture-defining institutions of the society—universities, museums, public entertainment, and national news outlets, the new nobility, it might be said—are defining a strict set of beliefs with respect to climate change, affirmative action, and the legitimacy

of inequalities that they expect the rest of society to accept. When religions are established, the people’s liberties are placed at risk.

Citizen participation is high, but its impact has been warped by the vast expansion of political primaries as the method for selecting presidents, governors, senators, and members of the House of Representatives in the aftermath of the violence surrounding the Democratic convention of 1968. Many of these primary contests are low-visibility elections that attract as little as 5 percent to 10 percent of the eligible electorate. Candidates must take positions designed to please the most engaged and extreme partisans. Room for moderation and compromise across party lines has been sharply reduced.

Meanwhile, the US welfare state has expanded so rapidly that it is beginning to resemble those of many European countries. The number of adults receiving disability benefits has doubled from four million in 1995 to just shy of nine million in 2016. Nearly 14 percent of all households were receiving food stamps in 2013, a doubling of the percentage since 2001. Medicaid enrollment also doubled in the twenty-first century, increasing from 34.5 million in 2000 to 54.5 million in 2010 and, with the enactment of the Affordable Care Act in that year, escalating to 70.5 million in 2016.³² The steep growth in these entitlement programs, combined with the rapid growth in Social Security and Medicare costs driven by an aging population, is placing extreme pressure on the national fiscal. The federal debt as a percentage of GDP has more than doubled over the course of the twenty-first century—from about 36 percent in 2000 to roughly 78 percent in 2017, with future growth projected to around 90 percent by 2027.³³

Most seriously, political power has become increasingly centralized. The executive branch is discovering new tools by which it can take action without securing the cooperation of the legislature. The desire to halt climate change by containing carbon dioxide emissions has unleashed a set of regulatory controls over major parts of the economy. Power continues to shift away from state and local levels of government to the national

government. Most if not all of these developments are driven by committed, public-spirited reformers, the very thing that Tocqueville feared.

Was Tocqueville correct when he said democracies could not endure? When he identified America as exceptional, did he just get the timeline wrong? Americans have enjoyed their freedoms for their first 225 years, but how much longer will the practical, individualistic, “earthward” elements in American political culture endure? Has America been exceptional only in that the urge to reform, to centralize power, to undermine individual autonomy has taken longer to reach full fruition? Or does the idea of a free society still endure? These questions are currently under strenuous debate. The outcome is unclear. No one can say with any certainty whether the changes taking place during the first years of the twenty-first century will be reversed or accelerated during the remaining ones. Our best hope is, as Benjamin Franklin said, that America is still “a republic if we can keep it.”

Notes

1. Jonah Goldberg, “Liberals Believe in Holding America Back,” *National Review*, November 10, 2010. Obama made the observation in 2008. In 2016 he seemed to alter that position when he said at the Democratic National Convention, “These values my grandparents taught me—they haven’t gone anywhere. They’re as strong as ever; still cherished by people of every party, every race, and every faith. They live on in each of us. . . . What makes us American, what makes us patriots, is what’s in here [at this convention hall]. That’s what matters. That’s why we can take the food and music and holidays and styles of other countries, and blend it into something uniquely our own.” Ron Fournier, “Obama’s New American Exceptionalism,” *Atlantic*, July 28, 2016. Still, he said the United States was unique, not that it was exceptional.

2. Vladimir V. Putin, “A Plea for Caution from Russia,” *New York Times*, September 11, 2013.

3. Abraham Lincoln, quoted in Eric Bjornlund, *Beyond Free and Fair: Monitoring Elections and Building Democracy* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press), 20.

4. Abraham Lincoln, *Second Annual Message*, December 1, 1862.

5. Abraham Lincoln, *Gettysburg Address*, November 19, 1863.

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6. Proof that Lincoln read Tocqueville is lacking, but these ideas were very much a part of the thinking of Henry Clay, Lincoln’s political lodestar.
7. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer, vol. 2 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012).
8. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, part 1, 768–69.
9. Ralph Bunche, quoted in Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, vol. 1, 6th ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 4.
10. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955; repr., New York: Harvest, 1991).
11. Reinhard Bendix argues that the working class was mobilized for radical political action in Europe because it was simultaneously deprived of a legitimate status in both the political and economic spheres of the society. Reinhard Bendix, *Nation-Building and Citizenship: Studies of Our Changing Social Order* (Berkeley, University of California Press, Ltd., 1964). Also see Seymour M. Lipset and Gary W. Marks, *It Didn’t Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).
12. Alberto Alesina, Rafael Di Tella, and Robert MacCulloch, “Inequality and Happiness: Are Europeans and Americans Different?” *Journal of Public Economics* 88 (2004): 2011.
13. Morris Fiorina, Paul E. Peterson, Bertram Johnson, and William G. Mayer, *The New American Democracy*, 7th ed. (New York: Pearson, 2011), 111.
14. Fiorina et al., *New American Democracy*, 111.
15. Alberto Alesina, Stefanie Stantcheva, and Edoardo Teso, “Intergenerational Mobility and Preferences for Redistribution,” *National Bureau of Economic Research*, Working Paper 23027, January 2017, tables 5, 9.
16. Alesina, Di Tella, and MacCulloch, “Inequality and Happiness,” 2011.
17. “The wages of labour . . . are much higher in North America than in any part of England. But though North America is not so rich as England, it is much more thriving, and advancing with much greater rapidity to the further acquisition of riches.” Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Cannon ed. (1776; repr., London: Methuen, 1930), 71–72, quoted in Milton Friedman and Anna J. Schwartz, *Monetary Trends in the United States and the United Kingdom: Their Relation to Income, Prices, and Interest Rates, 1865–1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 139.
18. Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” paper read at the meeting of the American Historical Association, Chicago, July 12, 1893.
19. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1959), 283.
20. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer, vol. 2, part 2 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012), 896.

21. Claudia Goldin, "The Human Capital Century: Has U.S. Leadership Come to an End?" *Education Next* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2003).
22. Max Roser and Mohamad Nagdy, "Primary Education," 2016, <https://ourworldindata.org/primary-education-and-schools> (accessed April 12, 2017).
23. Fiorina et al., *New American Democracy*, 119.
24. Jacob Vigdor, "The Civic and Cultural Assimilation of Immigrants to the United States," in *The Economics of Immigration: Market-Based Approaches, Social Science, and Public Policy*, ed. Benjamin Powell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 89-90.
25. Gunnar Myrdal, *The American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Society* (New York: Harper, 1944), ch. 1, pp. 3-4.
26. Henry Kaiser Foundation, "Poverty Rate by Race/Ethnicity, 2015," <http://kff.org/other/state-indicator/poverty-rate-by-raceethnicity/?currentTimeframe> (accessed April 12, 2017).
27. Christopher Jencks and Sara McLanahan, "Was Moynihan Right? What Happens to Children of Unmarried Mothers," *Education Next* 15, no. 2 (Spring 2015), figure 1.
28. Mikhail Zinshteyn, "College Graduation Rates Rise, but Racial Gaps Persist and Men Still Out-earn Women," *Hechinger Report*, May 26, 2016.
29. Jason L. Riley, *Please Stop Helping Us: How Liberals Make It Harder for Blacks to Succeed* (New York: Encounter Books, 2014), 3.
30. Among American children with at least one parent who went to college, the percentage proficient in mathematics is 43 percent, as compared to 73 percent in Korea and 71 percent in Poland. Eric A. Hanushek, Paul E. Peterson, and Ludger Woessmann, *Endangering Prosperity: A Global View of the American School* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2013), 40.
31. Jens Maue Krogstad, Jeffrey S. Passel, and D'Vera Cohn, "Five Facts about Illegal Immigration in the U.S.," *Fact Tank—Our Lives in Numbers*, November 2, 2016; Fred Dews, "What Percentage of U.S. Population Is Foreign Born?" *Brookings Now*, October 3, 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brookings-now/2013/10/03/what-percentage-of-u-s-population-is-foreign-born> (accessed March 22, 2017).
32. *Statista*, "Total Medicaid Enrollment from 1966 to 2016," <https://www.statista.com/statistics/245347/total-medicaid-enrollment-since-1966> (accessed March 22, 2017).
33. Congressional Budget Office, "The Budget and Economic Outlook: 2017-2027," <https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/115th-congress-2017-2018/reports/52370-budeconoutlook.pdf> (accessed March 22, 2017). For total public debt, see Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis and U.S. Office of Management and Budget, Economic Research: Federal Debt: Total Public Debt as Percent of Gross Domestic Product [GFDEGDQ188S], <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/GFDEGDQ188S> (accessed March 22, 2017).

And when Americans protested that their democracy proved otherwise, cynical European aristocrats reminded them that the American democracy's prosperity rested on the backs of millions of slaves. When Lincoln looked around him in that bleak winter of 1862-63, the United States really did seem to be the "last best hope" of democracy on earth. But it was a hope whose light might go out forever if the Civil War could not be won and the slaves could not be freed. It did not, of course, turn out that way. If the Civil War was democracy's final exam - testing, as Lincoln said in t For Americans to claim now that their democracy is "the last best hope of earth" sounds inexcusably boastful, as though Americans owned a template that all nations ought to follow. If anything, in the century and a half since Lincoln's day, American society has often been criticized for lagging behind the other versions of democracy on offer in the world. We have greater extremes of wealth and poverty than any other industrialized democracy.Â All of which is true. True, but irrelevant when we speak of democracy. Lincoln believed profoundly in the importance of hope, but hope for Lincoln was the hope that sprang from the opportunity for self-improvement, not from security from risk. "Pure slavery has no hope," Lincoln wrote in 1859. Yet America prevailed. Why? â€œNo man is perfect,â€ write the authors. â€œAnd neither is any nation. Yet, despite our weakness, we are still, as Abraham Lincoln said, the best nation ever given to man. Despite our faults, this nation is still the last, best hope of earth.â€ In short, God still cares what happens here. This reassuring message is a bright light in a world that longs for such hope.