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Response to Lefever

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Response

Emily S. Rosenberg

Ernest Lefever, in a sweeping panorama, presents the post – Cold War period as one more phase in an age-old struggle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. I will first recapitulate his argument to highlight and critique its structure and language and, then, propose some alternative perspectives on post–Cold War global issues.

I. Lefever and the Ideology of “American Exceptionalism”

The two biggest threats to world peace, Dr. Lefever claims, are crusading ideologies and “tribalism” in both the Third World and in nonwhite America. (Laziness among these “tribal” people also figures as a major problem.) Because he believes that original sin means that “evil men” will always exploit ideologies and “tribalism” to build their own tyrannical power, the U.S. must stand vigilant, ready to do righteous battle. It must also be vigilant against allowing internationalist bodies such as the UN to promote illusions of cooperative paths to peace. In his view, the UN is largely irrelevant to the maintenance of stability in the world. In the end, he concludes, peace in the world system boils down to character: conservative American thinkers, presumably, have it; renegades and “mischief-makers” such as “Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Bertrand Russell, and Jean-Paul Sartre” do not.

This portrait of a lone and benevolent U.S. battling clever tyrants, tribalists, and civilization-wreckers has all the subtlety of a Saturday morning cartoon show. From Buffalo Bill’s *Wild West* show to Superman to Luke Skywalker, this caricature of foreign affairs has too long infused our podiums and popular attitudes. Although Dr. Lefever declares that “nineteenth-century imperialism is a spent force,” it appears that the kind of rhetoric that gave it justification — rhetoric pitting the forces of progress and the Christian work ethic against the forces of the backward, the lazy, and the freedom-hating — continues to live in his colorful phrases.

Ernest Lefever has given us all of the time-worn clichés of the attitude that American historians call “exceptionalism.” American exceptionalism is a long-studied constellation of beliefs with deep roots in American popular culture and attitudes, stretching back to the colonial period. It places America above, or outside of, history and ideology.¹ Common to the exceptionalist view of American history is a Manichaeian analysis of good and evil. America is synonymous with inevitable progress, with efficiency and energy, with civilization, and with divine guidance. The opposing side — and foes have changed in every era, although their cultural constructions have remained remarkably stable—is drawn as the embodiment of evil and/or of backward degeneracy, laziness, and tribalism. Other people are motivated by “ideologies.” (In typically exceptionalist terms, Dr. Lefever incorrectly defines the term “ideology” as a distorted belief system rather than simply as any belief system. Exceptionalism, of course, is also an ideology, and frequently a crusading one as well.) Americans, by contrast, are unsullied by “ideology” but simply express universal truths. Standing outside of history, America is the virtuous condition to which all others aspire. (Dr. Lefever, on this point, follows the usual exceptionalist practice of citing high immigration figures as proof of this superior condition even though immigration historians have long agreed that the vast majority of immigrants came intending not to stay but to return home when the conditions that drove them to the U.S. improved.)

Dr. Lefever, thus, has chosen the standard villains to play opposite America’s exceptional righteousness and the standard plot line that confirms America’s special superiority. In his formulation of American exceptionalism, we may be sure that the cavalry — and probably even the Calvary — will be summoned at the end.

Scores of scholars over the years — conservative as well as liberal — have done their best to dissect and debunk such formulations of exceptionalism. In fact, a review of a recent book about the tradition of American exceptionalism points out that very few historians still write from the standpoint of exceptionalist beliefs.² Why? Because exceptionalist attitudes, in the name of pride and patriotism, promote intolerance and subjugation. In the nineteenth century, when exceptionalism waxed in its fullest

form, it infused the policies of Manifest Destiny, of the race wars on the frontier that nearly extinguished an entire people, and of the turn-of-the-century imperialism that forcibly annexed the Philippines and Puerto Rico and made protectorates out of Panama, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Liberia, and Haiti.³

Of course, the alternative to casting the United States as ever-infused with divine purpose and uplift should not be simply to reverse the casting and present United States policy as perpetually villainous. Ironically, exceptionalist rhetoric has often dialectically evoked that kind of self-hating reversal. The more appropriate alternative would be to see the United States as one among many nations, each with different qualities, but none as the inevitable measure of either human progress or depravity. This alternative perspective would place the United States within history, not as the culmination of it.

II. Security Issues in the Post–Cold War World

Dr. Lefever's answer to "How new is the new world order?" is, in effect, not new at all. I propose a more future-oriented answer, rooted not in the stale, ethnocentric discourses of nineteenth-century exceptionalism but in the understandings of a world whose cultures and structures are being swept by change. For guidance in thinking about the post–Cold War international order, I would like to advance some alternative propositions to those suggested by Dr. Lefever.

- The effort to universalize one's own values by demonizing the ideas or cultures of others is a profound cause of global discord. People acting out of a presumed divine calling and conviction of superior virtue — from the Spanish Inquisition to Hitler's Aryan fantasies; from the American frontier to the massacres of Armenians, Kurds, and Bosnians — are seldom a force for peace, unless it is the peace that comes through the final silencing of opponents.
- Today's financial and communications revolutions, together with the accelerating flows of refugees and immigrants, are mixing cultures together to create a profound transformation in global affairs. This great and unprecedented intercultural

mixing, by enhancing awareness of cultural “difference,” will promote greater pride in one’s own particular heritage. Dr. Lefever appallingly calls this development “tribalism,” apparently without recognizing that his own assertion of pride in tradition is part of the same historic process that he disparages in others. These new transcultural forces and ethnic identifications that crosscut national boundaries will challenge the old nation-state system in ways that will require some reworking of traditional balance-of-power theories and traditional conceptions of nationhood.

- As political entities correspond less and less neatly to economic and cultural divisions, ideas about national or international security take on new meanings. Threats may not always come from other nation-states but from the interwoven problems of environmental peril, the pressures of population on development, and international actors operating outside of any nation-state system. The prescription to stand tough against devilish foes on the model of Hitler or Stalin provides us with little guidance, for example, as to how to police the proliferation of enriched uranium; promote the literacy and reproductive choices for women that will ameliorate population pressures; move against the new international crime syndicates that specialize in kidnapping, extortion, and drugs; solve the dilemmas of the rising numbers of refugees worldwide; or ameliorate the presence of toxic chemicals in our oceans and soils. These are the things that most gravely threaten the security of people—Americans and non-Americans—who will live in the next century. Nineteenth-century-style shibboleths of nation-state exceptionalism and tough-guy frontier attitudes make for dramatic plots, but they do not even address, much less solve, today’s national security issues.

Dr. Lefever’s prescriptions take us back to the future rather than forward. For many Americans, these old faiths in America’s exceptional virtue, dressed up and labeled “values,” can provide solace, familiarity, and self-congratulation—all things for which people yearn in this unstable world—but I would urge this forum to push toward transcending the formulas of American exceptionalism, not repeating them.

Notes

1. A recent analysis may be found in Ian Tyrrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," *American Historical Review* 96 (1991): 1031–55.
2. Robert Middlekauff, "The Sources of American Exceptionalism," *Reviews in American History* 22 (1994): 387.
3. The long tradition of historical writings that critique the exceptionalist assumptions of Manifest Destiny include Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansion in American History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1935); Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Knopf, 1963); Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-hating and Empire-building* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980); Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).