

The Foundations of America's Exceptional Role in the World

VICTOR DAVIS HANSON

“Exceptionalism” doesn’t necessarily mean “preeminence.” It’s derived from a Latin word *excipere*—“to take from” or “to select” or “to differentiate.” The English concept is the same as in Latin: to take out something from the majority or take it away from the implied normal group. In theory an “exceptional” trait could be bad or good. But in the context of the United States, we mean that America is positively weird. It’s fortunately odd. It’s thankfully different. In other words, America is not like most nations but preferable to them.

There are numerous transcendent building blocks of civilization that, throughout history, predict whether a particular society will prove dynamic or ossified. One is demography. Does a society’s popu-

The above text is an edited transcript of an orally delivered lecture.

lation grow, or is it static or even shrinking? Let's look at comparisons with the Western or Westernized industrial world today. Until very recently we grew at a little over 1 percent annual growth rate. In recent years, the United States has seen slower population growth apart from immigration, but still, compared to our fellow Western or Westernized industrialized nations (for example, Germany at 0.5 percent, Japan at -0.01 percent, or Italy at 0.0 percent), we are a young nation. Robust demography in some sense is based on confidence in a society's future, or perhaps assumes some sense of transcendence; in classical terms, the elderly plant an olive tree that will not produce fruit in their lifetime on the assumption that subsequent generations will enjoy the orchard's harvests. Generational confidence and continuity—as well as a robust younger population—hinge on fertility.

The United States is a more religious country than most of its Western counterparts. Americans still believe in transcendence, or something divine beyond our corporeal existence, and that fact can manifest itself in greater fertility as well and in confidence that family raising is part of the human experience and the perpetuation of the species. Again, the pragmatic Greeks reminded generations that parents change their babies' diapers so that one day their children can change theirs. Obviously, the recent assumption of that role of caring for the elderly by socialist and welfare states helps obviate the need for child-rearing and, indirectly—along with agnosticism, greater affluence, and urbanization—discourages fertility.

Racial and ethnic diversity, if accompanied by assimilation, integration, and intermarriage, rather than tribalism, can fuel national strength and widen appeals to immigrants. Currently, it is popular to talk and brag about our diversity. Yet it is a bit more complicated than that. Throughout history, diversity, in fact, has been a great bane of civilizations. It has been a disadvantage, often resulting in sectarianism and tribal violence. In contrast, almost mono-racial Japan and China are powerful countries that prize uniformity, sameness, and order. They're

not all that diverse. Diversity through the ages was a challenge to be overcome, not an innate advantage to be automatically enjoyed. Yet the United States is the only major country that is a truly stable multiracial and democratic society—a melting pot different from both tribal and violent Iraq, Rwanda, and the former states of Yugoslavia—and also different from their more stable mono-racial antitheses that conflate race with citizenship and are virtually unable to absorb diverse immigrants. Assimilating diverse groups into a national body politic divorces race from nationalism and in theory should make diverse immigration a positive meritocratic experience.

Another reflection of civilizational dynamism is the stuff of life: food and fuel, specifically agriculture and fossil-fuel production. Take the latter. Remember that just thirty years ago experts warned that the United States had reached the era of “peak oil” and that by the early twenty-first century there would be less oil left in the ground than had already been exploited, leaving the United States vulnerable to foreign pressures to ensure the importation of 70 percent of our needed oil and natural gas. Yet the United States proved to be the only major nation that could flip “peak oil” on its head and become self-sufficient in fossil fuels—not just because it sits on naturally endowed soil, but also because it is one of the exceptional nations in the West that ensures private property and mineral rights and the ability to verify such claims and titles, and to easily transfer ownership of them. In addition, America also exceptionally encourages private-sector innovation in a way that unfortunately Europe does not. The ability to produce fuels and electrical energy cheaply and plentifully translates into a more efficient transportation system and industrial base—and thus greater competitiveness among Western exporters.

A few years ago, in the *Wall Street Journal*, an article warned that twenty-first-century America might well become a net food importer—as population increased and domestic agriculture reached peak production. Yet we’re not a net food importer today. The United States is still

exporting food worldwide, from beef to rice to perishable produce to dried fruit. Somehow the private farming sector in the United States has been able to squeeze out additional production per acre, which had seemed previously to be finite—largely because of a traditional belief in farming as a private enterprise as well as a symbiosis between agriculture and advanced technology and applied research in private and public universities.

Higher education—along with population growth, ethnic and racial stability, and efficient fuel and food production—is yet another index of civilizational strength. I mentioned on an earlier occasion that the (London) *Times Higher Education's* World University Rankings—a foreign, not domestic, arbiter of university excellence—in its annual comparisons of the universities in the world ranks American campuses the highest among its top five hundred educational institutions. Indeed, California alone usually places four to five universities (California Institute of Technology, Stanford University, University of California–Berkeley, University of California–Los Angeles, and sometimes University of Southern California) among the top twenty—more so than almost all other countries except the United States as a whole—largely as a result of excellence in such areas as business, medicine, computer science, and engineering. In sum, the United States is not just exceptional in terms of its higher education system, it is preeminent—a fact, of course, that offers America enormous additional economic and military advantages.

In terms of relative economic power, even today in America's so-called decline, its 320 million people produce almost twice as many goods and services per annum as does China's 1.3 billion, the next largest economy other than the combined nations of the European Union. In crude and inexact terms, essentially one American is producing almost twice as many goods and services as do four Chinese today. This advantage is not just because of years of a technological head start, but rather is also due to the rule of law, consensual government, and a tradition of

free labor and capital working more or less in concert under transparent free enterprise.

In terms of military dynamism, the American military is a reflection of these advantages in fuel, food, demography, diversity, constitutional stability, and economic growth. America's military preeminence in turn naturally translates into greater political reach and influence in the world. An exceptional country like the United States can spend more on defense than the next dozen countries in aggregate and yet still keep its military expenditures below 4 percent per annum because of its innately robust economy and political cohesion.

When the United States didn't field a preeminent military, as was true in 1914 and 1939, it nonetheless had the ability to do so—and in relatively short order. Take the example of World War I when Americans initially sat out the conflict. We did not want any part of Europe's entangling alliances and wars, perhaps heeding the warnings of the Founders. Yet quite suddenly in April 1917, Woodrow Wilson took an unarmed United States to war. The American military of the time was little more than a frontier constabulary force that had fossilized in the West since the nineteenth century. Yet between April 1917 and November 1918, a mere twenty months, the US military created a new expeditionary force of two million soldiers and was able to transport them to the shores of France without losing a soldier in transit to enemy operations. The very idea that the Imperial German Army—the greatest field army in the history of military conflict up to 1914—could have transported two million German soldiers and landed them on the East Coast of the United States is absolutely absurd. Only the United States had the logistical and lift capacity to project such force, largely because of its exceptional economic power, technology, and political stability.

The United States also entered World War I with no munitions industries to speak of. Yet in twenty months Americans were producing more artillery shells than were France and Britain, who had been refining their arms industry for four years. This exact sort of transformation

again happened in 1939. Americans had initially sworn they would stay out of yet another European conflict. Indeed, the United States had an army smaller than Portugal's in 1939 and was ranked somewhere near twentieth worldwide in relative budgetary percentages of military expenditures. Although the United States came late into the war against all three Axis powers, in a mere four years the military had grown to over 12 million soldiers. America only had a population of around 130 million people in 1940; in comparison, the Soviet Union had 170 million. Its Red Army was the largest military in the history of warfare at 12.5 million in uniform. Yet as a country of 40 million fewer people, the United States fielded forces roughly the same size as the Soviet military, even though it was relatively disarmed in 1940.

In 1938–39 the United States was spending about 1 percent of its budget on defense. Fast forward: the annual GDP of the United States by 1945 was roughly the same as the combined productive output of its enemies Japan and Germany, as well as those of its allies Britain and Russia. Of some 600,000 airframes that were produced in World War II, the United States built 400,000. America produced 90 percent of the aviation fuel in World War II. I could go on, but you see the point: when these unique attributes—food, fuel, education, demography, relative social harmony, free-market economics—were combined under a politically stable system, then the logical result was a dynamic military and an exceptional military-industrial base.

During the Cold War the existential challenge was how to stop five hundred divisions of the Soviet Union from overrunning Western Europe and from expanding into the Korean Peninsula, Japan, and southeast Asia. By the time of the Korean War (June 1950), despite the dismantling of the American World War II military, US forces were able to stop communist armies from absorbing Korea south of the 38th parallel. Rarely in history has one country stepped forward to sponsor an economic, political, and cultural global framework that would allow even its former enemies, such as Germany and Japan, to excel under

rules of trade and commerce that it had sanctioned and enforced with a superior military that had sought no conquest or territory.

The United States has not annexed anyone's territory through conquest since doing so in the Philippines in 1898. I'm named after a Victor Hanson who was killed while serving with the Sixth Marine Division on Okinawa on Sugar Loaf Hill on May 19, 1945. I was reading his letters not long ago, and he wrote about not wishing to be deployed so far from home but was nonetheless proud to join the marines in the expulsion of the Japanese from their Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere in the Pacific. Yet after the United States took Okinawa from the Japanese, it eventually gave the island back to them. Few other countries in history can forget the wounds of war to show such magnanimity. When Russia invaded many of the Sakhalin Islands (taken against minimal opposition), it kept them and is still undergoing a dispute with Japan. In sum, at great cost, the United States helped Western democracies win two world wars and implode the Soviet communist empire during the Cold War, lost a great deal of blood and treasure, and yet did not turn its military successes into territorial or imperial acquisitions.

This is not to say that there were not tragic miscalculations and setbacks, from Vietnam to Iraq. But if we are currently remorseful about the controversial Iraq War, it nevertheless fits the general pattern of US interventions. The United States removed a genocidal dictator. It did not annex Iraq's oil wealth but instead fostered a democratic government, which by 2011 was viable and fairly stable—at least until the United States abruptly pulled out. But to offer a comparison to the 2011 Iraq withdrawal: imagine if Dwight Eisenhower, up for reelection in 1956, for the price of a campaign talking point, had announced that he was pulling all troops out of South Korea on the premise that his administration had not started the US engagement there; that violence was relatively absent by 1956; and that the expense of occupation and peacekeeping was too costly. Had we done something in 1956 analogous to our 2011 pullout from Iraq, there would be no South Korea today, no

Samsung, no Kia, no South Korean democracy—but simply a macabre North Korean government occupying the entire Korean Peninsula.

In sum, the postwar system was a product of exceptional American economic, political, and military dynamism that cannot be explained by either the size of American territory or population. The effort was neither imperial nor neocolonial, and yet it was often critiqued as something akin to the hegemony of the Soviet Union or of the prior British or Ottoman empires. Perhaps this is a symptom in the West of how leisure and affluence often offer citizens the luxury of imagining that because they were not perfect in their behavior then they were not a force for good or that the sins of humankind—sexism, racism, class exploitation—are theirs alone. Often Americans are either unaware of, or reluctant to ponder, their exceptionalism, and the result is that other nations and cultures often sense such hesitancy, see it as a confession of national guilt and weakness to be exploited rather than of magnanimity to be appreciated, and then rechannel such criticism on the global stage. To be reductionist, if Americans do not appear to appreciate their unique culture, then why should they expect that others would?

Are America's advantages constant? Has American preeminence reached a sense of the end of history in which democratic market capitalism and Western notions of personal freedom guarantee perpetual preeminence?

Hardly. America's present adherence to unique values is not set in stone or predestined to remain constant. In that context, let us reexamine these civilizational building blocks that can lead to exceptional power overseas. Look again at American education. While still preeminent, American academia is starting to resemble the medieval university. If we were at the University of Padua, in 1500, and if we were to suggest—even though the Renaissance era had made enormous strides in technology and science—that the earth, in fact, revolved around the sun, rather than vice versa, we would find ourselves branded as heretics and face near lethal consequences.

In the same fashion, I would imagine if a young assistant professor of science at Stanford University were up for tenure and he wrote a paper suggesting that there was some evidence that the earth had not heated up in the prior seventeen years, or that if it had, such slight warming was neither man-caused nor posed an existential threat, or that even massive outlays in government expense would not do much to arrest slight warming, then he would be likely seen as heretical and not given tenure. In contrast, imagine a young scholar in the 1960s suggesting *H. pylori* rather than stress alone causes stomach ulcers: Would he be ostracized in the present fashion for questioning so-called settled science? I think there are areas in the university today that are starting to become very medieval. And if such self-imposed censorship and harassment of free inquiry continue, eventually it will creep into our business schools, the very teaching of science, and perhaps result in something like post-modern engineering. Any time one stifles free speech and open inquiry for whatever perceived noble reason, it will have an effect of thwarting humanism and undermining values of the Enlightenment, as it has in the past.

With regard to demography, I'm also a little worried; our fertility rates, while not at European levels, have dropped. As an aside, during the 2016 election cycle I had been reading the WikiLeaks trove and had noted especially what Hillary Clinton and her team said of Bernie Sanders's supporters: that they were just a bunch of guys who lived in their parents' basements and were suffering from prolonged adolescence. I must confess that in this case I almost agree with her team about such a profile of many millennials. Our replacement rate has gone from near 2 percent in recent years down to near 1 percent. The culprit may be economic stagnation or the pressure of popular culture or our changing sociology or politics; nonetheless, we have a new cohort of youth that is not confident in the old American paradigm of marrying early, raising children, purchasing a house, and settling into full-time employment. Our current social, political, economic, and cultural uncertainty also

contributes to childlessness. In historical terms, there are significant repercussions resulting from stagnant demography: erosion in military readiness, decreased economic vitality, and the growth of an unsustainable social-welfare state.

Diversity has always been a challenge to societies rather than an innate advantage. Here, too, I'm very worried because not only are we dividing into blue states and red states ideologically—two coastal corridors of elites versus a sea of conservative red in between—but we are also a hyphenated population. We strive to find victim status and the careerist advantages of what that entails through emphasizing and sometimes exaggerating claims of aggrieved minority status. The idea of *e pluribus unum* is considered passé, along with that of the melting pot, as difference rather than assimilation is seen to offer an edge in employment and admissions. In the past, tribal sectarianism developed a life of its own and could eventually unwind a previously stable society. If that fragmentation should accelerate, then it is difficult to appeal to a common body politic, which in turn likewise erodes military readiness, political stability, and the basic security and safety of the average citizen. We are currently in a war between the formidable powers of intermarriage, integration, and assimilation and those of tribalism and separatism; it is not clear which force will prove the more powerful.

If we look at the status of fossil fuels, all our expertise and sophisticated petrology do not do much good if a society decides that it is not going to use a safe technology and take advantage of our traditions of definable property rights and of the can-do culture of American entrepreneurialism and optimism. In other words, if we can't complete the Keystone Pipeline System, or if, in the manner of Germany, we decide to spend massively to subsidize currently expensive wind and solar sources of power and neglect clean-burning natural gas for largely ideological rather than fact-based reasons of economic rationality, then there's no intrinsic reason why a resource-rich America would not go the way of

Europe and become once again a net importer of expensive energy—with all that entails for economic competitiveness.

The same complacency can affect our current advantages that accrue from a dynamic agriculture. I was driving recently across central California. The wind was up to about forty miles per hour at two o'clock in the afternoon on the "West Side" where irrigation deliveries have almost been ended largely due to political obstructionism and environmental lawsuits, leaving vast tracts of ground fallow. The dust reminded me of photos of the 1930s Dust Bowl. The reason for such chaos was that about a million acres had been taken out of production for want of contracted irrigation water. When elites either do not know of, or do not appreciate, the tragedy and the hardship inherent in agriculture—the age-old challenges of producing food—then they are prone to do inexplicable things, such as cutting off irrigation water to the most productive land on the planet on the theory that the three-inch smelt of the San Francisco Bay delta requires more oxygenated water in its habitat and such additional freshwater must come at the expense of diverting canal deliveries from formerly irrigated farmland. If that mind-set were to continue, there would be widespread repercussions. Societies decline not just due to a dearth of food and fuel but also due to a paralysis in their ability to develop such assets on hand.

If that complacency were to spread, it would be reminiscent of 1960, when I was a little boy and my parents said we're going to go out to the West Side of the San Joaquin Valley to shoot varmints. But we were first warned to wear handkerchiefs because the pre-agricultural wasteland out there was dry and dusty, and the spores of a potentially fatal Valley Fever were in the fall air. The alternative to cultivation is not paradise; the wild is not always innocuous. Our agricultural pre-eminence is dependent upon realizing the thin line between civilization and hunger. Agriculture is predicated on living one more day. One more day—that's all farming is: producing enough food ensures that we are

not hunter-gatherers engaged in twenty-four-hour quests for food—as was the case for most of the history of man until 7,000 years ago. If we Americans reach a period when we think we deserve exemption from nature's laws and we can sustain 320 million people and take a million acres out of production here, a million acres there—because of theories about a bait fish being a barometer of the entire ecosystem—then all the agricultural expertise and years of technological advancement by these brilliant farmers would be rendered null and void, and we would return to the preindustrial plight of man, which is not pretty.

The look at the challenges facing our previously preeminent areas of education, food, fuel, diversity, and demography also suggests that they will eventually affect the US military. We all read different statistical tables and figures, but if we were to look at the spending percentages of the present-day military and then compute the share devoted to salaries, retirement, and health care, then we would find that the United States is spending anywhere from 25 percent to 30 percent of our total military budget in a way that the Chinese and the Russians are not. Such imbalances require a readjustment of military evaluation, given that our enemies free up more relative capital for weapons and training. That China or Russia may be much closer to our own level of technological acquisitions or investments in high-tech weaponry than we think is revealed by the relative size of their military budgets.

I have not spoken at length of our wonderful constitutional system of federalism, which ensures both unity and flexibility of governance at the state and local levels. But here again, we are facing unprecedented challenges to the very cohesion of the federal system. Take so-called sanctuary cities. If through executive orders or local legislation some three-hundred entities declare themselves sanctuary jurisdictions where federal immigration law does not apply, in theory we are returning to the nullification crises of the Jacksonian era or indeed to the disaster of 1860–61, which led to secession. In theory, if sanctuary cities prevail,

there's nothing, for example, to stop a conservative city like Cody, Wyoming, from declaring that gun registration would not apply within its city limits.

I don't always appreciate the federal Endangered Species Act. But under the nullification theory of sanctuary cities, suppose, in the environs of Provo, Utah, local magistrates declare that Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) statutes do not apply. We could then see EPA sanctuary cities spread. Nullification of federal law, for whatever reason, unwinds a republic—and these constitutional fissures will likewise have ramifications in our military and foreign policy.

The present postwar and global order championed by the United States is not a preordained fact. It is again an oddity based on American exceptionalism. And American overseas leadership ultimately is based on the strange idea that a country today of only 320 million people could have such inordinate military power and diplomatic influence, due largely to its educational excellence, its energy resources, its dynamic agriculture, its political stability, and its demographic confidence.

If at home our vitality were to be eroded—that is, if we were to scale back our current approach to agriculture and energy, reformulate the university, recalibrate the constitutional glue that holds us together, become consumers rather than producers, cease being confident in the future and thus in raising families, then the United States would become simply unable to exercise global leadership, and we would out-source influence abroad to different regional hegemonies—Iran, Russia, China, radical Islam—and ultimately we and our democratic allies would be less safe here at home.

Russia seems intent on carving out a hegemony in the area that was once the former Soviet Union and perhaps even extending its spheres of influence to the area of the former Warsaw Pact. China sees the South China Sea as a *mare nostrum*. Iran envisions a Shiite caliphate for the Persian Gulf. ISIS slaughters for a radical Sunni empire in the Middle

East. North Korea is an unpredictable nuclear nihilist. The problem with all these regional agendas is that historically there's no evidence that any of these entities have ever acted out of disinterested influence, at least to the degree that the United States has been disinterested in its world leadership. Without traditions of consensual government, free-market capitalism, or human rights, their versions of hegemony are quite different from the influence the United States has exercised in Europe and Asia.

I'd like to conclude with a thought. I've mentioned material conditions that promote military preeminence and an exceptional role abroad. But spirit and collective confidence matter as well. Ascendance is in part psychological. Decline is not fated. Instead, withdrawal and recession are usually choices.

For example, when I review the Greek city-state (and I spent most of my life writing about the history of the *polis*), I see that its decline is somewhat mysterious. In 480 BC, the 1,500 or so Greek city-states were faced with an existential threat. They were relatively poor. Democracy at Athens was only twenty-six years old. A quarter-million Persians under King Xerxes were marching southward through Thessaly, accompanied by a huge fleet descending along the northern Greek coast to destroy the city-states. Yet impoverished and vastly outnumbered Hellenic troops stopped them for three days at Thermopylae; then, again, they defeated the Persian fleet a few weeks later at Salamis. And they finally defeated and essentially destroyed the Persian army at Plataea a year later.

Fast forward 150 years. In 338 BC, the city-states again faced threats approaching from the north. But unlike their ancestors, the Greek city-states now were far larger and more powerful. Their armies and navies were much more impressive than were those of their great-grandparents, and indeed their economies were richer and more balanced than was the monarchy of Philip II of Macedon, who threatened to absorb them.

The Foundations of America's Exceptional Role in the World

We think now that Alexander and Phillip were always unstoppable military geniuses. Yet in 338 BC, when compared to the past militaries of the Persians, they were hardly great captains at the head of invincible armies. Philip II never put in the field more than thirty thousand men. Yet in 338 BC he defeated the Greek city-states at the Battle of Chaeronea, and within ten years the *polis* had ceased to exist as a free state.

A similar paradox occurred at Rome. Hannibal and his Carthaginian forces during the Second Punic War posed an existential threat to Italy. In a series of battles between 219 and 216 BC, a very poor, agrarian Italian republic lost perhaps a hundred thousand men—a quarter of the adult male population of the Roman Republic. And yet the Romans defeated Hannibal, and by 202 had landed in Africa to drive him out of his home at Carthage.

Again, fast forward, seven hundred years. Rome was not a mere one-quarter of the Italian Peninsula, as it had been in the third century BC, but encompassed seventy million people by the fifth century AD and perhaps one million square miles of territory. And yet its legions could not stop a series of existential threats from the north from what in the past would have been written off as the raids of backward tribes and thugs—Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Vandals, and Huns. By any historical measure, these northern tribes posed far less relative danger to a vast Roman Empire than did Hannibal to a poor agrarian Roman Republic.

What am I getting at through these historical references? Material strength is often predicated on collective spirit and confidence.

Why is the United States seemingly withdrawing from its world responsibilities? Why did the Greeks fight much less effectively when they were much richer? Why did the Romans have much less confidence when they were wealthier and more influential?

In part, different generational mentalities determine a civilization's confidence or lack of the same, which in turn calibrates its military strength and cultural power. Economic vitality can explain only so

much. If one arises in the morning and believes that his country is no better than the alternative, or if one follows a mind-set that one must be perfect to be considered good, then history seems to suggest collective stasis, ossification, self-doubt, and paralysis have set in. Indeed, history is cruel to civilizations that spend rather than invest, that become diffident about their culture—and that see little distinction between themselves and the vastly different alternatives abroad.