



American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword

By Seymour Martin Lipset Ph.D.

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Is America unique? One of our major political analysts explores the deeply held but often inarticulated beliefs that shape the American creed.

"American values are quite complex," writes Seymour Martin Lipset, "particularly because of paradoxes within our culture that permit pernicious and beneficial social phenomena to arise simultaneously from the same basic beliefs."

Born out of revolution, the United States has always considered itself an exceptional country of citizens unified by an allegiance to a common set of ideals, individualism, anti-statism, populism, and egalitarianism. This ideology, Professor Lipset observes, defines the limits of political debate in the United States and shapes our society.

American Exceptionalism explains why socialism has never taken hold in the United States, why Americans are resistant to absolute quotas as a way to integrate blacks and other minorities, and why American religion and foreign policy have a moralistic, crusading streak.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In this dense and extravagantly footnoted study, political scientist and Hoover Institute fellow Lipset (*The First New Nation*) marshals a daunting amount of material to defend an old but often maligned idea—that the United States, as a nation "born modern," without feudal baggage, remains (mostly for the better) culturally, politically and economically distinct from the European societies that spawned it. Lipset marches impassively over widely scattered territories here—the roots of American moralism and utopianism, the difficult history of American trade unionism, the unique experiences of blacks and Jews, the origins of so-called political correctness in the universities—and much of what he discovers is interesting. But the airless sociological prose and emphasis on opinion polls and "values" surveys may leave nonspecialist readers feeling somewhat oxygen-deprived. Lipset's book is most readable when he examines—as in his last chapter—possible gaps between American perception and reality.

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From [Booklist](#)

Defining exceptionalism as "qualitatively different," not "great," Lipset here analyzes attitudes characteristic of American society. He has been doing so for 40 years and here collects and connects his recent articles about what distinguishes America from comparable industrial societies in Canada, Europe, and Japan. Lipset argues that the social pathologies many deplore (crime, litigiousness, a nonsocialist medical system) are a consequence of values they presumably approve, such as individualism, populism, and laissez-faire. That's the double-edged sword, which Lipset swings through copious quantities of polling and survey data. Among other things, these show Americans are the most religious people in the West by far; that intellectuals as a class are not, and are more alienated from the market system than the bulk of people who believe it works; and that blacks and whites see racism in black and white. So whereas the William Bennetts inveigh against a crisis in morals, Lipset claims our social ills have a pedigree extending back past the 1960s, back to anti-statist instincts from the Revolutionary/Jeffersonian period—a thesis sociologically inclined readers will be interested in evaluating. *Gilbert Taylor*

Review

"An illuminating new book." (David Gergen - U.S. News & World Report)

"[A] magisterial attempt to distill a lifetime of learning about America into a persuasive brief . . . [by] the dean of American political sociologists." (Carlin Romano - Boston Globe)

"Invariably perceptive and revealing." (The Economist)

Users Review

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