

Halina Parafianowicz

Białystok

Exceptionalism of America: Some Reflections*

*And we Americans are peculiar, chosen people, the Israel
of our times, we bear the ark of the liberties of the world*

(Herman Melville)

I would like to share some reflections on historical aspects of the American exceptionalism, which is one of the most important concepts of national identity and ways of thinking about America's history, its goals and destiny. How different (read: unique, better, superior) is the United States, its nature and experience, from other countries/nations? This crucial and very complex theme, but in many ways mythological and controversial, has extensively shaped the changing identities of America and its images inside and outside of the country.

Actually, since the beginning and in every period of American history we can find a lot of arguments about a very special place and destiny of its people to create a new and better society in the "New World". The Puritans carried, to a mysterious land far away from Europe, a "primal myth" and they saw America as a new "Promised Land" and themselves as a "chosen people". America became for them a "Zion" or "New Jerusalem". Soon John Winthrop's words about a "city upon a hill" and depiction of a "New Land" as Arcadia, Elysium, gardens of Eden etc. built the utopian and idyllic vision of the American "new beginnings"¹. The Puritan roots of exceptionalism are recently contested and criticised, because – to be precise – they were not Americans yet. But their contribution to the American heritage is unquestionable.

The notion that America and Americans are special and exceptional, because of the uniqueness of historical experience has many useful and strong historical explanations. But how much of it is true and not exaggerated or even corrupted?

* This article is a revised version of a paper delivered on June 24, 2011 during the 8th Professor Andrzej Bartnicki Forum for the Advanced Studies of the United States held at the Białystok University.

¹ J. P. Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity from 1492 to 1800*, Chapel Hill 1993, p. 1–3; G. Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*, New Haven – London 2009, pp. 1–29; N. Taylor Saito, *Meeting the Enemy. American Exceptionalism and International Law*, New York 2010, pp. 54–66.

Americans, according to Deborah Madsen: *are charged with saving the world from itself and, at the same time, America and Americans must sustain a high level of spiritual, political and moral commitment to this exceptional destiny – America must be as ‘a city upon a hill’ exposed to the eyes of the world. This concept has generated a self-consciousness and degree of introspection that is unique of American culture – and is perhaps exemplified by Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s meditation ‘What is an American?’, written during the revolutionary period, when issues of national identity were most urgent*².

The concept of American exceptionalism was used to search for the peculiar and unique in American identity, character and history, and to describe the “more perfect society”, the “best political system”, and its high values, superiority etc. According to its supporters and believers, American unique political philosophy and its democracy provided the best model also for other nations. The commitment to America as an exceptional country and nation was strongly reflected in serious works on national history, including biographies of the US presidents and various public leaders. The promotion of democratic ideals and institutions has been, and still is, the immanent part of the political ideas and declarations, also in the US foreign policy. Certainly, such rhetoric gave also a lot of counter-arguments to many skeptics and critics of the idea of the US exceptionalism. There are plenty of serious and legitimate critical studies that counter such mythology on a variety of grounds: racial, moral, political etc.³ Their authors focus mostly on the negative aspects and the dark side of the US exceptionalism.

America and its historical experience impressed itself in many ways on European visitors by its otherness and uniqueness. The young country as a “land of liberty”, “a guardian of freedom” and “happy republic” was considered as such by Americans since the “founding fathers”, the independence and its Constitution. Soon such an image of a democratic, free and exceptional country was disseminated by many foreign travelers who admired the American system, its ideas, ideals and achievements of the newly established republic. One of them was Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, the Polish writer and the aide-de-camp of Ta-

² D. L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism*, Edinburgh 1998, p. 2.

³ S. M. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism Reaffirmed* in B. E. Shafer, ed., *Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism*, Oxford 1991; S. M. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism. A Double-Edged Sword*, New York 1996; T. Magstadt, *An Empire if You Can Keep It: Power and Principle in American Foreign Policy*, Washington 2004; W. W. Caldwell, *American Narcissism: The Myth of National Superiority*, New York c 2006; A. Bacevich, *The End of Exceptionalism*, New York 2008; G. Hodgson, *The Myth...*; D. E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, Minneapolis–London 2009. Pease sees current wave of American exceptionalism as “a transgenerational state of fantasy, and like a family secret it bears the traces of transgenerational trauma” (p. 38). I should also mention a critical writing of the New Left historians – Howard Zinn (passed a way in January 2010) and Noam Chomsky.

deusz Kościuszko, who published his fascinating recollections and diaries from his American visit in 1797–1807⁴. His writings influenced in many ways the image of the new republic in several decades of the 19th century.

Many European visitors became in a way propagators and defenders of the US exceptionalism. The most famous among them was Alexis de Tocqueville, perceptive and keen observer of America during his visit in 1831–1832. In his fundamental two-volume work *De la Démocratie en Amérique* (Paris 1834, 1840) he focused attention upon the basic essentials of American civilization and its political system. He sympathized with and admired Americans, yet doubted that their institutions could be successfully adopted by other nations. According to his words: *The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one*⁵.

In a sense de Tocqueville also thought about the American experiment with democracy in terms of exceptionalism. As he noted, American institutions are exceptional, quantitatively different from the Western European. His book, translated into several languages, soon became sort of a classical analysis of America and its political system, which strongly affected European perceptions of the US.

The idea of a mission is also an inherent part of the national spirit and American history. The “Manifest Destiny” since the 1840s and John L. O’Sullivan’s article became sort of doctrinal and almost religious credo for Americans, who as individuals and nation, should carry a mission e.g. “the progress and civilization westward”. The declaration became very useful for American politicians, entrepreneurs, journalists and countrymen, in the consequent expansion – “pre-arranged by Heaven” – over the region towards Pacific and even over the North American continent and Hemisphere⁶. The idea implied that the imperialism of the United States was historically inevitable and morally imperative for many Americans.

Certainly, there are many critics of the idea of “Manifest Destiny”, which implied the US expansionism policy and hegemony. As Albert Weinberg put it: *Manifest Destiny, the once honored expansionist slogan, expressed a dogma of supreme self-assurance and ambition – that America’s incorporation of all adjacent (and later, not so adjacent) lands was the virtually inevitable fulfillment of a moral mission delegated to the nation by Providence*⁷. In retrospect “Manifest Destiny” is depicted mostly as an ideology of “convenience rather than conviction”.

⁴ J. Ursyn Niemcewicz’s book was firstly published in French. Many years latter it was translated into Polish (*Podróże po Ameryce, 1797–1807*, Warszawa 1959).

⁵ A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, New York 1948, v. II, p. 36.

⁶ F. Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History. A Reinterpretation*, New York 1970, p. 24.

⁷ A. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History*, New York 1979, quoted in W. W. Caldwell, *American...*, p. 83.

Prominent historian George Bancroft in his classical works *History of the United States (1843–76)* also created an image that American past was guided by “Divine Providence”. What’s more, he elucidated the “Manifest Destiny” and assured that Americans should bring and share its liberties and democracy to the mankind⁸. This romantic vision no longer is accepted. But it became and still is a sort of declared by many American politicians as a role model for other countries and nations, even if they don’t want to follow such experience and examples. It is hard to argue with the opinion of the author that *Americans eager to make the practice of imperialism compatible with the principles of liberal democracy, advocates of expansionist policies instinctively recognized the propaganda value of moral sugarcoating*⁹.

The “providential destiny”, “divinely ordained expansion” and a “special mission” later on was redefined and implemented into the national mythology in a secular sense. The material progress of Americans and the abundance of land and natural resources resulted in the new meaning to the old concept of the “chosen nation”¹⁰.

There was also the real power of American unlimited land, landscape and unique wilderness that shaped the nature of colonists since the beginning of their settlements and gave a new impulse to the national mythology of uniqueness. Colonization of the West influenced heavily on a specific personality pattern of the American self-made man and cowboy, popularized and mythologized by the novels and later on by the Hollywood films, above all westerns¹¹. It was also part of uniqueness of the American experience, used in many ways for the political reasons.

For almost three decades the frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner (1861–1932) played a significant role in the interpretation of US history and in idealization of the West. During the American Historical Association meeting in 1893 in Chicago, 32 years old at the time historian in his paper defined the significance of the frontier in the US history. According to him *The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West*. In other words, moving westward and transforming the wilderness the frontier became more and more American experience influenced by its resources, free opportunity, new ideals etc. After four centuries *the frontier has gone, and*

⁸ H. R. Guggisberg, *American Exceptionalism as National History*, (in:) E. Glaser, H. Wellenreuther, eds., *Bridging the Atlantic. The Question of American Exceptionalism in Perspective*, Cambridge 2002, p. 268.

⁹ T. Magstadt, op. cit., p. 46.

¹⁰ A. A. Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right*, New York 1995, p. 5; W. W. Caldwell, *American...*, p. 41.

¹¹ There is abundant literature of the subject. Let me just mention an interesting and important book – R. G. Ahearn, *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America*, Lawrence 1986.

with its going has closed the first period of American history¹². He pronounced and repeated that “America no longer had a frontier”, so it means the society established there was distinctly American.

Turner believed that the new landscape and condition of the frontier, open spaces and extensive resources had an impact on the American unique soul building and superior spirit of democratic individualism. According to him this gigantic transformation had led to “new American” and “new democratic man”¹³. He, his enthusiastic students and followers ignored the violence and racism as the part of the frontier’s experience, and they romanticized the frontiersman – a brave and restless pioneer, self-made man reshaping the virgin land on the West.

In an address delivered at the University of Washington on June 17, 1914 Turner declared again: *Not the constitution, but free land and the abundance of natural resources open to a fit people, made the democratic type of society in America for three centuries while it occupied its empire*¹⁴. For decades the frontier thesis and idealised mental image of the West became, despite some criticism, very popular in writing about the US history and was also extensively used by politicians for their own purposes. So Turner’s frontier thesis and his later theory on geographical regions had a tremendous impact on the American historiography¹⁵. Today it is considered rather problematic and discriminatory, and above all for American Indians, Hispanic Americans and Chicanos. The frontier thesis was criticized by scholars from so-called Imperial School (Herbert Levi Osgood, George Louis Beer), and later by historians from the School of the New Western History (Henry Nash Smith, Patricia Nelson Limerick) and the New Left historians (Howard Zinn)¹⁶. They rejected not only the frontier thesis but also Turner’s lack of interest in Indians’ role and Hispanic borderlands etc. In a sense they argued with the negative aspects of exceptionalism, e.g. its discrimination, racism, social inequality, poverty, negligence, imperialistic foreign policy etc. In more recent years negative exceptionalism has also appeared in many studies and writings¹⁷.

One of the consequent critics of the frontier thesis, Duch-American historian, stated that Turner was rather a visionary than an analyst of the American past. Yet, he pointed that: *Turner has not been forgotten. His hypothesis, his majestic*

¹² F. J. Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, (in:) F. J. Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, New York 1921, pp. 1–3, 38.

¹³ F. J. Turner, *The Significance...*, pp. 37–38.

¹⁴ F. J. Turner, *The West and American Ideals*, (in:) F. J. Turner, *The Frontier...*, p. 293.

¹⁵ There is interesting and important Polish contribution in writing on the subject, namely Krzysztof Michałek’s book – *Poza granice kontynentu. Teoria pogranicza Fredericka Jacksona Turnera a idea ekspansji dalekowschodniej w amerykańskiej polityce zagranicznej, 1893–1922*, Warszawa 1992; R. G. Athearn, op. cit., pp. 15–16, 167, 234.

¹⁶ H. R. Guggisberg, *American...*, pp. 271–5.

¹⁷ S. H. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism...*, pp. 30–31.

*myth of the rejuvenating innocence of the West, may have been more vision than reality, but it has stimulated whole generations of historians, who at least had to admit how alluringly beautiful the distortion of the past could be*¹⁸.

Obviously, the West and the frontier shaped heavily the American history, and above all its myths and ethos. Forgive the long quotation from Aron Gutfield, but it condenses some arguments about the US exceptionalism. He argues that: *Americans venerated the myths of free enterprise and equality of opportunity together with the individual material advancement offered by abundance and the frontier experience – the frontier which for most of American history before the beginning of the twentieth century had served as an effective psychological safety-valve, symbolizing opportunities for economic betterment and upward social mobility. The abundance of land and the positive ratio between human and natural resources highlighted differences in comparison with Europe, where the population was comparatively large and resources were relatively meager. In the consciousness of many, the vast resources of the “free” land became closely tied to individual success and were foundations for numerous American myths*¹⁹.

The United States is quite unique as a country of immigrants. For centuries American democracy created an opportunity and possibility for a better life for its citizens, also foreigners, who for a long time were admitted to the “New Land” without any restrictions. This unique ethnic, religious and cultural mixture has always been seen as an “exceptional history of American society”, making it – to a considerable degree – both tolerant and open to other cultures²⁰.

It is worth noticing that the meaning of exceptionalism is pretty capacious and Americans quite easily redefine it and find many other useful definitions of their uniqueness. One of the most and better known around the world is the belief that the United States was a country of “progress”, an “opportunity, abundance and plenty”, and sort of “promising land” for the newcomers. Writings and 19th century reportages about the “fantastic land” and a “great republic” strongly influenced the image of Poles about America and their mass fascination about a legendary country far away from Europe²¹.

Henryk Sienkiewicz, the novelist and later Nobel Prize winner have played a significant role in creating the image and popularizing America among Poles. He went there in February 1876 and spent two years traveling around the conti-

¹⁸ J. W. Schulte Nordholt, *The Turner Thesis Revisited*, (in:) D. K. Adams, C. A. van Minnen, eds., *Reflections on American Exceptionalism*, Staffordshire 1994, p. 16.

¹⁹ A. Gutfield, *American Exceptionalism. The Effects of Plenty on the American Experience*, Brighton – Portland 2002, pp. XVI–Xvii.

²⁰ H. R. Guggisberg, *American...*, p. 265.

²¹ J. Gordon, *Przechadzki po Ameryce*, Warszawa 1866; S. Wiśniowski, *Listy z Czarnych Gór*, Warszawa 1875; R. Łubieński, *Z Ameryki*, Warszawa 1900. Some of these were already published, first in the Polish newspapers and periodicals, such as “Gazeta Polska”, “Kronika Rodzinna”, “Kłosa”, “Przegląd Tygodniowy”, “Niwa”.

nent and sending impressions in the form of “letters” from America to the daily “Gazeta Polska”²².

Henryk Sienkiewicz, who was familiar with Alexis de Tocqueville’s book, focused a lot of attention on the political system, democracy and freedom. He was impressed enormously by American democracy, which he admired, the more so he compared it with the European autocracies. He became quite fond of the American political system making chance and opportunity not only for its citizens but also for the newcomers. He noticed and repeated many times that America had been a truly rich and promising country.

Sienkiewicz’s writing distributed around some knowledge about the United States, but, above all, stimulated eagerness and fascination about this magic, rich and open country. The image of the democratic republic, which offered freedom, opportunity and abundance of farmland impressed readers tremendously. It needs to be remarked that Sienkiewicz influenced visibly the writing about America in the 1920s, especially reportages from the trips of Zdzisław Dębicki²³, Janusz Makarczyk²⁴, Juliusz Makarewicz²⁵.

The concept of the US exceptionalism was associated by people around the world with the image of the country of “boundless opportunity,” “abundance and plenty” and sort of a “Promised Land” for immigrants. For the millions of newcomers from East-Central Europe at the turn of the 19th century America was unique and quite exceptional because of the offered opportunity in terms of financial/career success, democracy, freedom etc. By comparison to what they left behind in their homelands, America was a dream come true, very special and unique.

The “legendary America” became the most exciting and desired object for millions of people from East-Central and Southern Europe. For many America became almost a “sort of paradise”, the country of justice, abundance and opportunity. Poles, Ruthenians, Slovaks and Czechs, but also Jews, Hungarians and Italians had quite similar expectations and dreams about the “Promised Land”, full of “milk and honey”²⁶.

²² Some “letters” appeared in the same years, 1876–1878 in various newspapers and journals, such as the “Kurier Codzienny”, “Przegląd Tygodniowy” and “Gazeta Handlowa and later on had them published in a book version with several editions (H. Sienkiewicz, *Listy z podróży do Ameryki*, Warszawa 1950).

²³ Z. Dębicki, *Za Atlantykiem. Wrażenia z pobytu w Stanach Zjednoczonych Ameryki Północnej*, Warszawa–Kraków 1921.

²⁴ J. Makarczyk, *USA. Obrazki z Ameryki powojennej*, Warszawa 1925.

²⁵ J. Makarewicz, *USA. Kartki z podróży po Stanach Zjednoczonych*, Lwów 1929.

²⁶ For more, Halina Parafianowicz, *American Exceptionalism: The American Dream and the Americanization of East-Central Europe* (in:) *World and Global History. Research and Teaching. A CLIOHWORLD reader*, ed. by S. Jalagin, S. Tavera and A. Dilley, Pisa 2011, pp. 107–121.

Since the turn of the 19th century and during the prosperity of the 1920s, as exemplified also by Seymour Martin Lipset, the promise of material success for everyone working for it became the fulfillment of the “American dream”²⁷. This alone might be somehow enough to consider America exceptional or superior. For millions of immigrants – who realized their hopes for the better life – America became truly a special country – a land of opportunity, freedom, abundance and prosperity.

Notion that the United States and its history are different from other countries is obvious. In a sense America is exceptional, the more so that the faith in the uniqueness of its experience, destiny and the idea of promotion of its ideas and progress in the world (e.g. mission) were inherent parts of American history. The missionary politics of Woodrow Wilson and spreading the “American dream” and fascination about America during and after the First World War became “the proof” for the uniqueness of the great republic behind the ocean. The remodelling of the world according to American ideals and promotion of American superiority became dominant parts of US foreign policy.

Since the First World War spreading American culture and values came under greater US governmental direction. Created in 1917 the Committee on Public Information (CPI), under the direction of George Creel, undertook the first official effort to convert the world to “the Gospel of Americanism”. The main goal of CPI was popularization of America and spreading its ideals, generosity, superiority etc. Posters, leaflets and pamphlets with a brief information about American ideas and reasons for the intervention in Europe were disseminated around the fronts. In a sense it was spreading or selling the “American dream”²⁸. American mission appeared as a national fight against tyranny and injustice and also as a national sense of responsibility for saving and spreading democracy in Europe and throughout the world. It inspired President Wilson to declare his “Fourteen Points” message and build the idea of the League of Nation, which would establish the peaceful order. Exceptionalism justified then the US intervention in the First World War.

Woodrow Wilson, deeply involved in the international affairs, continued to seek more adequate and noble motivations for the American involvement. The president, believed to be the advocate of national states, saw in their creation part of the US mission and “the act of historical justice” in building the new international order. For him it was a “war to end all wars” and a war to make the world “safe for democracy”. His declarations were considered by Americans and

²⁷ S. M. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism. A Double...*, pp. 77–90, 287. He also argues about the absence of socialism as an element of US exceptionalism.

²⁸ E. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream. American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890–1945*, New York, 1982, pp. 1, 79–81; F. Costigliola, *Awkward Dominion. American Political, Economic, and Cultural Relations with Europe, 1919–1933*, Ithaca 1984, pp. 169–173.

many Europeans as a part of the US special mission in spreading of the American values, e.g. individualism, liberty and democracy. Such rhetoric was willing and appreciated also in Europe, the more so it was connected with the American Relief Administration (ARA) activities. The ARA and its director Herbert C. Hoover contributed extensively, especially in East-Central Europe, to promote the American uniqueness e.g. charity, idealism, generosity, but also the superiority of US economic and political system. American values were also demonstrated in the Soviet Russia in the early 1920s. What's more, the ARA activities, organized so fast and efficiently in a time of despair and horrible famine, were appreciated even by many of its earlier critics, also by the Soviet establishment. Its main aim – providing food for millions of starving people, mostly children – was to a great extent accomplished after almost 2-years of ARA activities. It is worth remembering that among humanitarian workers there were many women, Quakers, and pacifists involved with a great passion in “improving the world”²⁹.

Soon after the termination of ARA aid the tone of expression of Soviet politicians underwent a considerable change, and many Russians working with Americans were accused of counterrevolutionary and spying activities for “the USA and western imperialists” and “bourgeois philanthropy”. Yet, still in the “Great Soviet Encyclopedia” in 1926, ARA activity was described in a long and quite objective entry. The scope of food, clothing and medical aid was indicated, and it was stated that, irrespective of the motives behind it, the ARA played a significant role in fighting the calamity of famine and saving a great number of people from death³⁰. In the years to come Soviet officials depreciated the role and the scope of this aid, spreading a critical picture of ARA in the mass media although the notion of American philanthropy and altruism had a visible impact on the US image. Such a rivalry between capitalism and bolshevism (or wilsonism versus leninism) raised for decades the notion of American or Soviet exceptionalism.

It should be mentioned that Herbert C. Hoover, as the head of the Department of Commerce in the 1920s, efficiently promoted not only the American products but also, in a sense of US exceptionalism, its values and superiority of its political and economic system. Obviously, the success of American food, money and technical know-how cultivated its prestige in Europe, especially in East-Central Europe. It was also believed that American government and policymaking were based on moral basis, what makes them quite unique and highly evaluated.

Certainly, the impact of spreading the “American dream” (read: the freest, strongest and most prosperous country on the earth) at East-Central Europe va-

²⁹ More on it see, H. Parafianowicz, *Herbert C. Hoover and American Relief Administration in Soviet Russia, 1921–1923*, (in:) J. W. Stulov, ed., *American and European Studies: 2008–2009*, Minsk 2010.

³⁰ *Bolszaja Sovietskaja Encyklopedia*, Moskva 1926, v. I, p. 516.

ried widely. Many people in this region were fascinated by the United States' economic, political and ideological power, and its mechanization, efficiency, mass production, openness, generosity etc. Exhausted by the war, disillusioned with their own societies, Europeans wondered whether they should not adopt the methods of prosperous Americans. Fascination with America and a certain cult of this democratic, wealthy and modern country, offering great prospects of financial success and career, functioned in Poland, Czechoslovakia and countries of the region till the end of the 1920s and the great economic crisis. But later on even in extremely difficult and darkest times of depressions, recessions and wars Americans kept faith in the US uniqueness.

Exceptionalism remained an inherent (sometimes even predominant) part of the US foreign policy and important theme for scholars and citizens. The president Wilson's moral leadership and mission (to "end all wars" and make the world "safe for democracy") was continued during the Second World War by Franklin D. Roosevelt ("arsenal of democracy", "four freedoms message"). After 1945 the concept of the US exceptionalism was reborn again with astonishing strength, also outside of America. The assumption that the United States had always been different (read: better) from the "Old World" and on the other hand a real fascination by its abundance and culture, proved in many ways truly exceptional situation of America in the bipolar system after 1945. During the "Cold War" American exceptionalism relied on a comparison with "other" (means: dangerous, corrupt, enemy etc.), becoming the challenge for the Soviet Union and its satellites. It also justified its drive to expand over the world and to use its power³¹.

The exceptionalist interpretations and tendencies have not vanished totally till now in American historiography and policymaking nor in the way of thinking of ordinary Americans about the past, developments and further mission of the US. The concept seems to return again and again not only just as a piece of rhetoric. The notion of uniqueness of America has endured right down to the present, to mention President Ronald Reagan ("shining city on a hill"), and George W. Bush ("the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world"). Barack Obama's own career – as he repeated many times – is another proof of America's uniqueness ("In no other country on Earth is my story even possible").

Many Americans, even if they were not buying exceptionalism in the old meaning, still believe that the United States has a unique identity and values and a "special role" to play in the world and in the building of the international order. Perhaps America was rather less exceptional than it was imagined and propagated by its believers. But till today for many of conservatives such a concept of exceptionalism is still alive and they see the country as the *beacon lighting the*

³¹ S. McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy: Public Diplomacy at the End of the Cold War*, New York 2001, p. 26–27.

*way to political and individual freedoms – to equality of right before the law, equality of economic opportunity, and equality of all races and creeds. It is still, as always in the past, the torch held aloft by the nation at its gate – to the world and to itself*³².

Such a charge of the US exceptionalism and mission in the world (even if it includes some elements of altruism) is based mostly upon the assumption of the national superiority and messianic streak, which is perceived more often around the world as the “arrogance of power” and expanding militarism of super power³³.

Exceptionalist tendencies, positive or negative, have not vanished till now and they are still visible in political declarations and many writings in recent American historiography. What’s more they wouldn’t totally disappear. We may also simply agree that the topic of exceptionalism is not distinctively American one because it is pretty hard to find a country and/or nation that had not developed the ideology of its uniqueness at certain period of its history. The repeated question, how Americans and their experience can be more unique than any other country and nation, may be treated simply as a scholarly issue and a piece of rhetoric.

Resume

The concept of American exceptionalism was used to search for the peculiar and unique in American identity, character and history, and to describe the “more perfect society”, the “best political system”, and its high values, superiority etc. According to its supporters and believers, American unique political philosophy and its democracy provided the best model also for other nations. Certainly, such rhetoric gave also a lot of counter-arguments to many skeptics and critics of the idea of the US exceptionalism.

The meaning of exceptionalism is pretty capacious and Americans quite easily redefine it while finding many other useful definitions of their uniqueness. One of the most and better known around the world is the belief that the United

³² F. Merk, op. cit., p. 266.

³³ There is abundant literature on the raising anti-Americanism in the recent years: A. Ross, K. Ross, eds., *Anti-Americanism*, New York 2004; P. Hollander, ed., *Understanding Anti-Americanism, Its Origins and Impact at Home and Abroad*, Chicago 2004; T. Judt, D. Lacorne, eds., *With Us or Against Us. Studies in Global Anti-Americanism*, New York 2005; B. O’Connor, M. Griffiths, eds., *The Rise of Anti-Americanism*, London–New York, 2006; J. E. Sweig, *Friendly Fire. Losing Friends and Making Enemies in the Anti-American Century*, New York 2006; P. J. Katzenstein, R. O. Keohane, eds., *Anti-Americanism in World Politics*, New York 2006; R. Higgott, I. Malbasics, eds., *The Political Consequences of Anti-Americanism*, Milton Park 2008; G. Chiozza, *Anti-Americanism and the American World Order*, Baltimore 2009.

States was a country of “progress”, an “opportunity, abundance and plenty”, and sort of “promising land” for the newcomers.

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