

# Why American Exceptionalism Is Different from Other Nations’ “Nationalisms”

*Kim R. Holmes, PhD*

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

An exceptional mix of liberty, limited government, natural rights, and religious freedom made the American Founding unique.

Americans must not call American exceptionalism a form of nationalism—adopting the mantle of nationalism would weaken their claim to being an exceptional nation.

Statist nationalism is a dead end for conservatives. It will end up forming a tacit alliance with statist progressivism to destroy American liberty.

**T**hese are turbulent times. Mobs are toppling statues of American heroes. America and America’s past are on trial. People are protesting and rioting over the very ideas of what America stands for.

The future of the country depends on what Americans do next. It depends on how they answer some direct, but not so simple, questions: Who are we as Americans? What does it mean to be American? Can it even be said, these days, that all Americans share the same heritage and commitment to the same values?

## The Meaning of the American Founding

To answer these questions, we have to start with the American Founding. It gave America its ethos, its characteristic spirit and culture. It is from this ethos that America draws its beliefs and aspirations.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/hl1317>

The Heritage Foundation | 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE | Washington, DC 20002 | (202) 546-4400 | [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

The American ethos has a firm philosophical foundation. It comprises a set of philosophical ideas on which the American Founders relied to create the system of government that we enjoy to this day.

So, what did the “Founding” mean to the Founders? How did they actually see the ideas and principles they enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution?

To start with, the Founders had a very distinct idea of the moral order. They believed that morality and government should be in accordance with what they called “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.” Natural law is universal and thus morally binding on all mankind. Although mankind did not invent natural law—in fact it was “invented” by God—it was discoverable by using human reason, a faculty that God gave to mankind.

Since natural law was universal, to go against it was to go against human nature itself. The purpose or “end state” of nature was what the Founders broadly understood as happiness, and in order to be truly happy, one had to be good. Happiness was not understood, as it often is now, as pleasure or owning things. Rather, it was understood as living a virtuous life. Washington, Adams, and other Founders said time and time again that freedom could not be enjoyed without virtue. Freedom actually was the perfect practice of virtue. Without it, one would get nothing but tyranny based on power and selfishness—a war of all against all, as imagined darkly by the 17th-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes.

It is up to government to safeguard liberty so that the people have a choice. Governments must be instituted to protect the natural rights and liberties of their people.

This is where the idea of limited government comes from. Governments must be limited, and their powers constitutionally enumerated, as they are in the Constitution, to protect liberties and rights. The enemy of rights and liberties was and is absolute power concentrated in one place or person, as represented by an absolute monarch or dictator, or by a tyrannical parliament acting as an arbitrary power.

This is why the Founders used checks and balances in government—to prevent that concentration of power. To stave off tyranny. Unlike Hobbes, who argued that an absolute monarch was necessary to keep peace and order, the Founders looked to Montesquieu and Locke. The Founders believed that the best way to keep peace and order was to respect people’s rights and liberties, and to keep self-interested people or groups of people from controlling the government at everyone else’s expense.

Also key is the American idea of equality—the idea of equality before the law. All individuals should be treated equally by the law. The modern

sociological notion of society as an independent functioning entity would have been foreign to the Founders. They did not think about social equality as we often do today, where everyone is supposed to be equal in income and in social status. The Founders assumed that individuals had different talents and opportunities, and wanted to ensure that, to the best extent possible, the *law* treated everyone equally.

The American idea of equality has distinct philosophical roots. As Robert Reilly argues in his new book *America on Trial*, it is from Athens that the Founders received “the existence of universal truth, a rational universe ordered by a divine intellect, the primacy of reason in man’s moral life, the existence and immutability of human nature, and the existence of immortality of the human soul.” Many of these ideas were echoed in Christianity, which also provided the Founders with the ideas of Creation being good (because God made it), that man was made in the image of God (and thus had sacred rights), and that mankind could be saved by God.

The Founding idea that all men are created equal was first derived from the Christian notion that mankind was created in the image of God. People have souls, and those souls belong to the individual. Souls are not collective. They do not belong to groups, like gender or class, but to individual human beings. Individual souls could come together in the church and be part of the Body of Christ, but they made their choices to do so, individually.

Layered on top of these ideas were the secular ideas of the Enlightenment. Jefferson, in particular, was influenced by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, especially Locke and Montesquieu.

Now, Locke is controversial these days among some conservative philosophers. But suffice it to say that the Founders, including Jefferson, were not Lockean puppets. They took from him what they wanted—mainly his ideas of rights and the social contract—and ignored what they did not need, namely, his epistemological theories about the origins of knowledge. To go back in history and assign to the Founding these theoretical ideas from Locke that the Founders did *not* use, as some scholars do today, is ahistorical and factually incorrect.

The American Founding was also specifically influenced by Protestantism. The Protestant emphasis on the right of conscience was a key idea behind the notion of religious liberty that was enshrined in the Bill of Rights. Thus the right to worship as one sees fit is as much a natural right as is freedom of expression or the right to property. The compatibility of faith and reason, as recognized in the ability of everyone to read and understand the Bible, reinforced the broader notion of rights being enshrined in natural law.

Madison once said, “If men were angels, no government would be necessary.... In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and the next place, oblige it to control itself.”

That, in a nutshell, shows the realistic skepticism the Founders had of government. They did not see it as a moral force unto itself, but as a framework of rules and laws that would allow people, in civil society and through liberty, to construct a moral civil order as a free people.

Finally, before I move off the topic of the Founding, I must say a few words about slavery. The persistence of slavery after the Founding was clearly a grave moral failure; a failure that was not corrected until the Civil War and the rise of the civil rights movement. And we still contend with the legacy of racism to this day.

But for all the faults of the Founders in this regard, it was the very principles of the Founding that were used to overturn slavery—to redeem America on this score. Yes, it took a war to end slavery, but we should remember that Lincoln referred to the principles of equality in the Declaration of Independence when he called for the freedom of the slaves. Martin Luther King, Jr., did much the same when he called for the civil rights of black people.

The principles of the American Founding—the American creed, if you will—allowed our country to correct its mistakes. We were, and still are, redeemed by the very ideas upon which the nation was founded.

## What, Then, Is American Exceptionalism?

That brings me to the idea of American exceptionalism, which is, I believe, the answer to the question of what America’s national identity is and should remain.

It is a beautiful idea. It captures both the reality and the ambiguity of the American experience. It is based on a universal creed. It is grounded in America’s Founding principles: natural law, liberty, limited government, individual rights, the checks and balances of government, popular sovereignty, the civilizing role of religion in society, and the crucial role of civil society and civil institutions in grounding and mediating our democracy and our freedom.

We as Americans believe these principles are right and true for all peoples, not just for us. That was the way that Washington and Jefferson understood them, and it was certainly what Lincoln believed. That is what makes them universal.

But what, you may ask, makes us so exceptional? If the principles are universal, how are *Americans* different? How are we exceptional?

The answer is a bit of a paradox, but it can be explained by understanding the implications of the American creed.

We believe that Americans are different because our creed is both universal and exceptional at the same time. We are exceptional in the unique way we *apply* these universal principles. There is no other country in the world that embodied the blend of classical philosophy, Christianity, and even Enlightenment ideas in the unique way America did in the Founding of the republic from 1776 to 1789. It was an exceptional (meaning uncommon) mix of liberty, limited government, natural rights, and religious liberty that made the American Founding unique.

America is the only country in the world that derives its legitimacy from natural rights and natural law.

I really do not mean “exceptional” in a normative sense, but in a descriptive sense, of what was different and unique. It is not about bragging rights. Rather, it is a statement of historical fact that there is something truly unique about the United States.

Some people doubt the importance of the American creed in defining America. Wanting to make America fit into the larger narrative of nationalism—a celebration of the nation and the nation-state as a general matter—they downplay the creed as mere words, supposedly not strong enough to carry the patriotic history of the American nation.

Let’s just think about that for a minute. If the creed does not matter to Americans, what, then, is so special about America, really?

Is it our language? Well, no. We share that with Britain, and with much of the world today, as well. So, strike linguistic nationalism from the list.

Is it our ethnicity? Well, that does not work either because there is no such thing as a common American ethnicity. Even in the beginning, Americans were a mixture of English, Scots-Irish, Highland Scot, German, African, Native American, French, Dutch, and other ethnicities. So, strike ethnic nationalism from the list.

Is it a specific religion? We are indeed a religious country, but no, we have freedom of religion, not one official religion. Strike religious nationalism from the list.

Is it our beautiful rivers and mountains? No. We have some beautiful rivers and mountains, but so do other countries. Strike romantic nationalism.

Is it our culture? Yes, I suppose so, but how does one understand American culture without the American creed and the Founding principles?

The closest thing that comes to our experience is civic nationalism. But even here the word “nationalism” rings wrong. It conjures up an image of the nation-state as carrying the patriotic cause, when we all know that, for the first Patriots and afterwards, a healthy mistrust of government and the power of the state was in their original DNA. Frankly, the idea of the nation-state as we understand it today did not even exist at the time of the Founding.

To understand what makes America unique, just look at the immigrant experience. People from all over the world come here and become Americans not just by learning English, or by buying land, but by living the American creed and the American dream. By adopting our history. And by fighting in our wars.

Try becoming accepted as Chinese in China if you are not ethnic Chinese and were born in New York. And, as tolerant and open-minded as the Germans are today, try getting accepted as a true German if you were born in Turkey.

It is different here. Anyone can be accepted as a real American by adopting our creed and our way of life, and by believing in the country.

After World War II, the American way of life and our devotion to democracy became a beacon of freedom for the whole world. That was the foundation of our claim to world leadership in the Cold War, and it is no different today. If we become a nation just like any other, then, frankly, I would not expect any other nation to grant us any special trust or support.

Another benefit of American exceptionalism is that it is self-correcting. When we fail to live up to our ideals, as we did with slavery before the Civil War, and during the era of Jim Crow, we can appeal as Lincoln did to our “better nature” to correct our flaws.

There is no American identity without the American creed. But the creed is more than a set of abstract ideas. It is shared cultural experience, based on living out the creed, across space and historical time in a specific place called America. It is burned into our very memories of hearth and home.

## **So, Why Not Call This American Exceptionalism an American Form of Nationalism?**

Some people today want to do that. There is a push afoot to ground American conservatism in the concept of “Nationalism”—with a capital N. They think it fits the urgency of the times. It is strong, they say. And muscular; more muscular than the idea of American Exceptionalism. They think it captures the notion of “America First.”

Unfortunately, it does not do that; it does the opposite. It implies that as a “nation,” America is just like any other nation. There is nothing particularly exceptional about America because, in this way of thinking, America derives its legitimacy not from the people or from its form of government, but from that the fact that it is a *mere* nation like any other.

This is a grave error not because of an objection to a word—nationalism—*per se*. It is not about semantics at all.

Nor is it an objection to vigorously advancing American sovereignty, interests, and values. I strongly believe in doing that, as I believe strongly in patriotism. The whole point of American Exceptionalism is to provide moral and political legitimacy to the very idea of “America First”—to keep the moral legitimacy of the specialness that the nationalists hope to claim, without all the terrible historical baggage of the idea.

Rather, the problem is that adopting the mantle of Nationalism would weaken America’s claim to being an exceptional nation. It would make us—well—just like everybody else, a nation like any other. But most important, it would undermine our claim to belonging to a nation that is grounded in principles that are universal—that is, true not just for Americans but for all human beings.

If we Americans pride ourselves in our way of life, why would we want to throw our lot in with an idea—Nationalism—that was invented and defined mainly by other nations (mainly Europeans) that did not share our values and our history? And why would we want to associate American patriotism with a cause that in other times and places has produced militarism, fascism, wars, and even genocide?

I know that Americans who want to call themselves “nationalists” want no part of this history. And I believe they are sincere. But why raise the specter of this history at all? If you have to spend all your time explaining that “my nationalism is not *that* nationalism, but a good kind of nationalism because it’s us,” you are not going to sound very convincing. That is particularly true for some Americans who associate the cause of nationalism with ethnic causes and remember its rather dark history.

Frankly, the idea of Nationalism is too small for America. It is too cramped to capture the greatness and complexities of the American experience. It is as if the Nationalists want to reduce our historical experience to a global cause of nation-states that all nations supposedly represent.

They seem to think it will make us look special. But in reality, it is the opposite. It will just make us look like any other nation.

Not all nation-states are the same. Some nations are democratic. Others are communist. Some are simply authoritarian. The kind of government



they have matters. If one believes that the doctrine of Nationalism has merit, one must believe that all nation-states, regardless of their form of government, deserve the same fidelity, sovereignty, and respect as the American nation. That is exactly what the United Nations thinks. Regardless of how oppressive a country is, because it is a nation-state, the U.N. thinks its sovereignty should be just as respected as ours.

But North Korea and Iran, recognized as nation-states by the U.N., are dictatorships. I do not respect their sovereignty as much as I do that of the United States.

American exceptionalism is built on our Founding principles, not cultural and ethnic differences. Americans recognize their varied ethnic and cultural origins, but in the end, come together as Americans. Nationalism is often defined by a sole cultural or ethnic reference, regardless of the form of government. The democratic nation-state, on the other hand, grounds its legitimacy and its sovereignty in democratic governance, and in the American experience, in a government that reflects the principles of natural law.

Modern nationalism did not begin in America or with the American Revolution. Rather, it began in France with the French Revolution. The Terror and Napoleonic imperialism were the highest expression of this new-born French nationalism. It was militaristic. And it was expansionist. It sparked counter nationalisms all over Europe, especially in Germany where it reached a particular virulent form of Nazism in the 20th century.

Philosophically and historically, nationalism arose from the disintegration of the universal Christian order of the Middle Ages. It arose first as a cause of the nation-state, and then expanded into a populist ideology in the 20th century, which reached some very virulent forms, especially in Germany and Italy.

In the grand scheme of history, nationalism's particularism—its challenge to the universal order—was like a knife driven into the heart of natural law and its universal claims. For this reason—and this reason alone—it would be a tragic mistake to associate the American cause with it.

The American Founding was grounded in natural law, not in the idea of the nation-state.

Quite simply, nationalism is incompatible with the universality of natural law. Yes, each country, including our own, can make its own way in interpreting to what degree its positive law—the rights granted by government—is based on natural law, from which rights granted by nature, not government, emanate.

But if you are a nationalist, your claim to legitimacy is not that you are true to universal principles, but that you are superior to other people by



virtue of *what makes you different*. Your language is more beautiful. Your ethnicity is superior. Your military prowess is better. Your civilization is older and deeper. Your history is more interesting.

We do not trace our greatness to “blood and soil” ideologies like the Germans did, or to anti-clerical ideologies grounded in the radical Enlightenment as the French do. It is not language, ethnicity, or even ideology that makes us great and good.

It is our creed and how we have woven it into our culture, way of life, and our form of government.

## The Two-Front War on America

As powerful as this idea of America is, it is under threat. Serious threat. And the threats come from two very different directions. One is from the progressive Left. The other is from certain circles of the New Right.

Let’s start with the familiar one first, the Left.

The Left has been making war on America for decades. It is the familiar charge that America is irredeemably tainted by racism and that our Founding Fathers were slave-owning hypocrites. Our written Constitution is outdated and needs to be “living,” which means its text and original intent cannot only be ignored, but intentionally overthrown. The free-market system needs to be replaced with some form of socialism. Natural rights have been replaced by the group rights of gender and other identity groups. It is culturally Marxist and socialist in its economics.

The philosophical ideas behind this war on America are these: (1) Natural law is a myth—there are no fixed truths (relativism); (2) rights are not fixed by natural law but invented and change over time, defined as seeking ever new forms of individual expression based on appetites, desires, and preferences; (3) history is progressive, always marching toward some undefined goal of ever greater personal liberation (historicism); and, finally, (4) individual freedom is a radical undertaking, completely devoid of personal responsibility and the Founding notion of virtue, and always focused on personal pleasures, needs, desires, and experiences.

Oddly, although the Left’s ideology is ostensibly collectivist—supposedly focused on social justice and the common good—it actually is mainly about the ever-changing demands of radical individualism, usually associated with group rights, that gives the Left most of its cultural power and influence.

Think of it as radical individualism (sexual rights, for example) masquerading as social liberation. That is where collectivism meets radical individualism.

So, that is the Left.

But what about the New Right? What is happening there?

There is a movement on the right that is questioning and even rejecting the very notion of the American Founding. And some of its ideas—especially the outright rejection of liberty and the principle of freedom—are finding their way into the “new Nationalism” of conservatism.

Robert Reilly refers to this as the “poison pill” thesis of the American Founding. The American Founding was doomed from the very beginning because the Founders, under the nefarious influence of Locke, imported the poison pill of liberalism (liberty) into our Founding documents and our mindset. Over time, this original idea of liberty morphed into the progressive liberalism of today. The evil philosophers are Locke and his ilk from the Enlightenment.

Some on the New Right even go so far as to join the progressive Left in challenging the philosophy of originalism in interpreting the Constitution. Believing the Constitution itself is a flawed liberal document, they want to ignore original intent as much as a liberal Supreme Court judge would want to do.

There are a number of problems with the poison pill thesis. First off, the history is all wrong. As mentioned before, the Founders borrowed from Locke’s ideas of rights. They had little or no interest in his theories of knowledge that so bother some conservatives today. The New Right is reading its particular interpretation of Locke back into history and erroneously applying it to Founders like James Madison and Jefferson.

This is worse than just bad history—making up something that did not happen. It is actually using and abusing the very method of historicism that they claim to decry. They have to argue that an original idea of rights—one born in natural law by the way, and one that has no bearing at all to what is happening today—somehow transmogrified into the identity politics of today. And it did so in some Hegelian-like unfolding of history in which the supposedly true meaning of the original idea is found only in its “realization” today.

This is Hegelian historicism. It is the philosophy one normally finds behind Marxism.

It is precisely the mistake made by all historical revisionists. It is the key error made by the 1619 Project. It is reading current ideology back into history and pretending the true meaning *then* is only what we think it is *now*.

To realize how absurd this is, just imagine Locke or Madison grappling with transgender rights. Something tells me they would not have found a right to enter opposite-sex bathrooms at will in natural law.

The origins of today's radical individualism, which the New Right derides as "libertarianism," was not invented by libertarians. It was invented by atheistic philosophers like Nietzsche, and Marxists like Marcuse. It got a huge boost from the sexual revolution of the 1960s. These philosophers were widely influential in the American academy for the past 60 years—far more so than Locke was—and it is from their influence that we can see the strange striving of the Left for personal liberation as a goal of the social collective.

Whether from the left or the right, the philosophical mindset is thoroughly modern—even post-modern. All the bad ideas of the modern age are at play here—relativism, historicism, and bad faith.

I cannot conceive of a conservative American cause without the patriotic cause of liberty. It would literally be rejecting one of the central ideas of the American Revolution. Without liberty, the country would lose its moorings and eventually drift into authoritarianism. The radical individualism and libertinism of today is derived not from the Founding, but from cultural Marxism and the radical individualism of identity politics. If we turn on our own Founding, we will lose the very principles and convictions needed to defeat radical progressivism.

## Conclusion

So, you ask, what has this all to do with Nationalism?

The ideology of Nationalism—its relativism and its implicit opposition to universal truth—is finding new philosophical succor and support among some of these trends. Some conservatives are losing their respect for liberty. Some are making outright war on the idea, deriding it as "libertarianism." These ideas are working their way into a new nationalist perspective that is turning its back on freedom and liberty.

In doing so, these conservatives are ultimately turning their backs on natural law, because it is from natural law that the American Founders first derived their notion of the right to be free.

The New Nationalists are creating the philosophical foundations for a new, statist, kind of conservatism, one that draws its power and legitimacy from the power of the state to impose a moral and social order. Some conservatives may think this moral order is fixed and grounded in natural law, and therefore is universal. And for that reason they may think they have a right to impose it.

But let me explain how this is likely to turn out: No matter what good intentions they think they may have, the end result will be an all-powerful and possibly authoritarian state. For some it will be in the name of the New

Nationalism. For others it will be in the name of the values of the church and a new holy order. Either way, the enemy will be liberty standing in the way. And the end result will be more centralized state power or an administrative state that must make a war on liberty to achieve its ends.

Once the power of that state, especially one largely owned by the progressive Left, is expanded with the complicity of the New Right, conservatives will no longer have the liberty to defend themselves. The only thing left will be a competition for brute power, a kind of Hobbesian war for will to power to control that state, to ensure that one's enemies do not prevail.

This is why statist nationalism is a dead end for conservatives. Ultimately, it will form a tacit alliance with statist progressivism to destroy American liberty.

This is why these debates matter. They are about *the* American identity. They are about American liberty.

They are at the very heart of what it means to be an American.

Thank you.

**Kim R. Holmes, PhD**, is Executive Vice President of The Heritage Foundation.