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## Exceptional Down to the Bone

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In recent months, National Review has hosted a fascinating and important discussion of American exceptionalism — the belief that the United States is qualitatively different from all other nations in important ways, and that these differences have given its people different characteristics and caused it to follow different paths. This discussion is particularly relevant now, because there is a sense on the right that President Obama and his allies want to move the country in a direction that is not consistent with “who we are” — to paraphrase the title of Samuel Huntington’s 2004 book [Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity](#). Is America really exceptional? And does our uniqueness mean that what works in other countries cannot work here? In answering these questions, it helps to look at the deep historical roots of what makes us different, and why.

To pursue this inquiry, we do not need to discuss America in terms of its moral qualities, as political commentators like to do. The Right tends to see exceptionalism in America’s unique virtues, such as its freedom, prosperity, and innovativeness. The Left is more likely to see exceptionalism in America’s unique evil or guilt, focusing on its history of slavery and claiming that it is uniquely oppressive or destructive to the environment. While I generally agree with the former and disagree with the latter, American exceptionalism, if it exists, is not just an opinion or a moral judgment, but a testable and falsifiable hypothesis. To meet this condition, a claim of exceptionalism should have (overall) predictive value, and be subject to negation by identification of contrary evidence.

The first place to look for American exceptionalism is in the underlying culture of the United States. We can think of the deep things in our culture as its bones and the surface things as its flesh, with the narratives we tell about ourselves being the clothes. Since clothes can be self-consciously chosen, and changed frequently, they are sensitive to current conditions, while bones and flesh are much more permanent. Although all are significant, it helps, when thinking about the surface features, to understand what lies beneath.

Consider three critically important bone-level characteristics that contribute to defining a culture. They may at first seem remote from the usual issues people talk about when discussing American exceptionalism, but they form the basis of any culture, including America’s.

The first is a culture’s marriage practices — specifically, who is allowed to marry whom? Are people expected to marry cousins or other relatives (which is called endogamy), or

are they expected to marry people who are not related to them (which is called exogamy)? And do adult children get to pick their own spouses?

The second bone-level feature is a culture's inheritance practices. Are parents required to transmit property to one child only or to divide it equally between their children, or are they free to distribute it however they want?

The third bone-level feature is whether adult children form their own households. Do they stay with their parents or move out? Does the head of the family retain any legal authority over the adult children?

We take for granted the American way of life in these matters. People don't marry their relatives; they marry by mutual agreement, without their families telling them whom to pick; they can leave their property to whomever they wish; and when they grow up, they move out and start their own families. As normal as all this may sound to us, it has not always been normal in the rest of the world (though Europe has moved more in our direction in modern times, and Japan has always shown some parallels to us in family structure). In fact, taking all these characteristics together, America has been normal only in comparison with the other English-speaking countries.

Admittedly, most of the world practices exogamous marriage. But as to the other items on the list, the only people who have this particular set of family practices are the other English-speaking countries (meaning those that were settled by large numbers of English speakers, instead of ones such as India that were colonies). This makes sense, since we all inherited these features from England, even if our biological ancestors came from somewhere else.

The English allowed people to make their own marriage decisions to what was, until modern times, an unusual degree. Similarly, unlike almost all other cultures, in which designated persons are heirs by law and cannot be disinherited, the English, as far back as our records go, established no mandatory pattern of inheritance. (The Normans did impose on England the law of primogeniture, which required that the eldest son inherit all of his father's real estate. But the English never liked it and developed ways to get around it before finally abolishing it.) So Americans resemble other English-speakers with respect to the treatment of inherited property, but are exceptional compared with the rest of the world.

The third bone-level cultural question is whether adult children form their own households rather than living with their parents. Americans, and residents of the other English speaking countries, have shown a strong preference to form their own nuclear-family homes while granting no authority over adult children to parents.

These cultural practices establish the basic structure of American exceptionalism. Immigrants who have come to America have, by and large, adopted them (until recently,

anyway), largely because the law declined to enforce any others. Parents had no legal authority to interfere with the marriage decisions of adult children, for example.

The social consequences of these practices are somewhere between substantial and overwhelming. The individual in the English-speaking world has always been psychologically more independent and less willing to place himself under the control of others. He expects to be on his own, with a spouse of his own choosing, to make his own way in the world, and if possible to live in a home of his own.

These individualist nuclear families, rather than relying on extended family ties, create new networks and new sets of voluntary associations, with all their potential for exposure to new information, outlooks, and opportunities. This pattern is less extraordinary now, when most people in developed countries no longer live in farming villages and everyone is saturated in media, and active in voluntary associations, that provide such stimulation. But it's easy to see that in earlier eras, a society with an individualist family structure would be far more dynamic than one in which adult children were controlled by parents and grandparents, and where the extended family took the place of voluntary associations.

The flip side of this freedom and autonomy is that English-speaking nuclear families do not live as part of an extended family group, which would be a source of help and protection in a hard world. English-speaking families have always been "on their own" far more than families in other cultures. As a result, American families have always coped with a stronger sense of insecurity, always knowing that they had to work hard and make a go of things. This has led to our well-known "go-getting" and "hustling" spirit. It has made the English-speaking nuclear family a powerful engine of economic development.

In sum, a person living in an individualistic society is less likely to believe he is entitled automatically to a share of anything, is less troubled by inequality, and is driven to provide for himself and his family through his own effort. By contrast, the family structures of many other cultures have over the centuries led people to feel a much stronger sense of entitlement. In parts of Western Europe, for example, it was mandatory that male children receive equal shares of the parents' land. This led to an expectation that there would be equality of incomes. Further, the degree of parental control in many types of families leads people outside the English-speaking world to be far more willing to cede control over large areas of their lives to a lifelong, provident, controlling authority. In other words, political beliefs are a reflection of the deep structure of society, particularly family practices.

Modern life has of course made developed nations, Anglophone and non-Anglophone alike, more individualistic. In an era when most such nations are experiencing birth rates of less than two children per family, patterns of property division between brothers begin to seem irrelevant. Yet the historical family practices remain important today, because the expectations and demands once made on the family by the individual, and on the

individual by the family, have been transferred to the state. This has had liberal effects — the state had no need to dictate marriage partners — but it has also aggravated the bad consequences of collective wealth-sharing. In pre-industrial times, the ideal of equality of wealth in egalitarian cultures applied only within the family or clan, or at most within a village.

This still permitted the feedback of reality: Unless all worked hard and exercised peasant thrift, there would be little or nothing to share. When in modern times the ideal of paternalistic egalitarianism was transferred to the state, the chain of cause and effect weakened dramatically, especially when techniques like sovereign debt and inflation caused consequences to be pushed far out of sight.

The paternalistic welfare state is a recent import to the English-speaking world, and in adopting it we have not been immune to the attraction of the (illusory) free lunch. Yet we still do not have the bone-deep expectation of entitlement seen in other nations. English-speaking people generally do not feel the sense of outrage and betrayal displayed by, for example, the Greeks when their expectations of paternal beneficence from the state are violated.

The French anthropologist Emmanuel Todd, and scholars building on his research, have done fascinating work speculating on the correlations between historical family patterns and contemporary attitudes and expectations toward the state. Many details of these studies remain debatable, but it is becoming clearer that bone-deep cultural patterns contribute, perhaps decisively, to the appeal of (broadly speaking) government-skeptical, individualist politics in America, as opposed to many other countries. These studies seem to explain both the limited success of such policies elsewhere and the fact that fascist and Communist movements failed to develop mass followings in any English-speaking country.

When it comes to these fundamental characteristics, then, the histories of all the English-speaking countries are virtually identical. For all the differences between the U.S. and the other English-speaking countries, in comparison with the rest of the world, we are more individualistic, market-oriented, enterprising, and averse to taxation and regulation, and less likely to look on the state as either the provider of benefits or the guarantor of equal outcomes.

At the same time, particular characteristics, histories, and situations have created important differences between America and the rest of the Anglosphere at the levels of flesh and clothing. America's uniqueness can be explained in two main ways. First is the "frontier thesis" of the historian Frederick Jackson Turner. In the 1890s Turner wrote that early settlers in America underwent a psychological transformation because of the constant lure of open land to the west, which turned deferential, class-conscious Englishmen into egalitarian, assertive, republican Americans. The other view, most recently stated by David Hackett Fischer, is that, in essence, all the ingredients that made Americans what they are today were present when the first colonists left the

British Isles. According to Fischer, what the Americans brought to the wilderness was at least as important as what they found there.

What Fischer showed was that the early settlers in what is now the United States came from different regional cultures in England. The middle-class Puritans of East Anglia settled in New England; Quakers of the English North and Midlands moved to the Delaware Valley; and the aristocratic younger sons of southern England planted themselves in Virginia. These first settler groups were not fixated by the frontier; it was not until the Scotch-Irish arrived in the early 18th century and found the best coastal land taken that large numbers of people began to move inland and settle the trans-Appalachian West. These first settlers established the culture of the American regions that they and their descendants settled in as they spread across the continent. Immigrants who came after them adapted themselves to that culture.

At the flesh level, American exceptionalism is a result of the encounter of these various regional cultures with the conditions of North America. The transatlantic passage left behind many of the aristocratic institutions of England and gave America a much more thoroughly middle-class character. England's manorial system was ill-suited to the tobacco plantations of Virginia, where the land wore out within a generation and inheriting it was no great prize. The Puritan colonists of New England brought both the religious republicanism of the English Civil War and the urgent missionary universalism of the radical wing of the Reformation. Quakers brought a democratization of manners — the handshake, once reserved for sealing a business deal, replaced the aristocratic bow as an everyday greeting. The Scotch-Irish, tempered in centuries of raids across the Anglo-Scottish border and accustomed to fighting for their land, added to these English characteristics a combativeness, a restlessness, and a contempt for constraints. Over time, and not without conflict, this assortment of British Isles characteristics combined to form the uniquely American mix of regional cultures.

American exceptionalism took on institutional and legal form with the Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution. These milestones certainly make us exceptional, but they should be understood in the context of the cultural foundations that preceded them, which gave rise to a constitutional republic and have kept it going for over two centuries. The lesson is that American exceptionalism is primarily cultural, and only secondarily constitutional or economic or technological or military. Our rule of law, our economic might, our technological dynamism, our military power, all rest on cultural foundations that have taken form over four centuries in North America, and have deeper roots going back to England.

Almost all the further differences between the U.S. and other English-speaking nations are matters not of culture, but of narrative. By narrative, we refer to the way people talk about and understand their country and its history, the words and phrases they use to understand themselves. This is not to say that narrative is trivial. Culture rarely makes anybody walk into a recruiting station and volunteer for a war; it's narrative that does. But narrative evolves from generation to generation and from circumstance to

circumstance. Every generation's understanding of what it means to be an American has been different from that of the previous one, back to the generation of 1776, which had grown up certain that to be a good American was to be loyal to king and empire.

The American narrative has developed in stages. From our multiple founding populations we inherited a variety of styles for a free and voluntaristic society (including one that relied heavily on slavery). These were fused at the time of the Revolution into a republican universalism expressed in Anglo-American Enlightenment language of natural rights and liberty. Subsequent events added a patriotic pride in American achievements, and the Civil War linked the Declaration's principles to the expansion of rights within America. Wilson and FDR turned republican universalism outward to play an assertive role in foreign affairs, and Ronald Reagan harnessed this impulse to the cause of defeating the Soviet empire in the Cold War.

We are conflicted about the universalist narrative because we are divided between an inward-looking and an outward-looking understanding of universalism. The former says "anybody can become an American," while the latter says "anyplace can become America." At present, the former proposition is widely accepted, at least with the caveat that we should strongly promote assimilation, based on a record of success over two centuries. The latter has been a problematic aspect of foreign policy in many eras, including our own.

The foregoing analysis of American exceptionalism supports several conclusions. First, other countries, because of their cultural roots, are simply better at socialism than we are. The Anglosphere in general is poorly adapted to large-scale, planned, centrally directed state enterprises or invasive measures to promote equality of outcome. Governmental mechanisms have been and will continue to be used on a pragmatic basis, but they are not immune to public-choice problems, as can be seen in the regulatory capture of the home-mortgage industry, or the taxpayer bailout of the auto industry.

Our history is filled with short-term successes of government action that eventually succumbed to these public-choice problems and required reform or abolition. The government financing of railroad construction after the Civil War was a scandal-ridden disgrace, for example. When we try to be like the French, Germans, or Japanese, we are particularly liable to poor implementation, because our cultural structures are dissimilar to theirs. Government-run enterprises in those countries are likely to work better than they would here. Even if it were desirable to imitate them, we would not be able to do as good a job.

For example, the deep-seated French spirit of equal opportunity supports a dedication to meritocracy — unequal outcomes are accepted, so long as every child has at least a theoretically equal start. This explains the creation of a school system oriented toward identifying talented students and channeling them into the elite polytechnic universities, from which they are fed into public administration. In America, by contrast, the brightest

kids find many fields open to their talents, but few aspire to become senior government bureaucrats.

The result in France is an administrative state that is quite competent at, for example, identifying the best practices in nuclear power and building a safe, effective system that has significantly reduced dependency on oil imports. Once the decision was made to create such a system, the plan was executed with a minimum of delays and obstruction. America's experience with nuclear power has been much bumpier because Americans simply do not possess a French-style centralized administrative state or have the trust in bureaucratic decision-making that permitted the French outcome.

This is only one example that shows that it is not realistic to cherry-pick the desirable aspects of other cultures, transplant them to the U.S., and expect equal results. Americans should not look to Western Europe as a model, as they are so frequently asked to do.

To the extent that we do look abroad, it's most useful to look at other English-speaking countries for both good and bad examples — but even there, it's important to be mindful of the whole context. For example, advocates of government health provision often point to Britain and Canada as models, but they rarely discuss the much less pro-plaintiff civil-law systems in those countries, which do much to limit malpractice costs.

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The differences between America and other English-speaking countries are real, but often exaggerated. This is partly because of what anthropologists call “ethnographic dazzle” — the obsession with obvious surface-level differences. It is also an artifact of journalistic incentives: Reportage on, say, Anglo-American differences is news, whereas an account of the similarities is the ultimate dog-bites-man story.

From a global perspective, the politics of the English-speaking world are more similar than different, exactly because of the underlying cultural commonalities. This is both good news and bad. It is highly unlikely that America will ever become as dysfunctional as East Germany; however, it is quite possible that we could become as dysfunctional as 1979 Britain.

The U.S. has created a particularly robust form of Anglosphere culture that has been remarkably successful at assimilating millions of immigrants. The idea that anyone can become an American has proven to be true most of the time. (It has also proved to be a warning to continue encouraging immigrants and their children to adopt American culture.) Openness to immigration, with the requirement of robust assimilation, has worked for us, and it can continue to work. So, with some caveats, we can say that it is generally true that “anyone can become an American.” But the outward-looking variety of universalism in U.S. foreign policy, the idea that anyplace can become America, has been a mixed bag.

After the Second World War, this attitude helped create the open, accessible, and effective structures that rebuilt Western Europe, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. It was similarly effective in helping much of Eastern Europe shake off the remnants of Communism after 1989, and to a lesser extent in establishing liberal democracy in Latin America. It has been much less successful in trying to promote liberal democracy elsewhere, particularly in Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia.

America really is exceptional, which means that not everyone can be like us and we should not expect them to be. The flip side is also true. Some things that other countries do well would not work well for us — Western European–style socialism, for example. This is not an argument for isolationism; American action may be justified to remove threats, to liberate societies from tyrants, or to move societies in a better direction. In debating such actions, though, we should refrain from believing that other societies will change quickly or easily, or that the result could or should look exactly like the United States.

Americans appreciate their exceptionalism at gut level. This is where the American Right is in touch with the nation, and the Left is not; John F. Kennedy was probably the last Democratic president with an instinctive feeling for it. But we must understand our exceptionalism accurately, as it were choosing clothing — our arts and literature, our politics, our diplomacy — in a way that suits the underlying structure of bone and flesh. Success, both politically and in the cause of freedom, requires that we keep our enduring values in mind.

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