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THE END OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM?

In his inauguration speech, Donald J. Trump basically announced the end of American Exceptionalism -- the concept that the United States has a special mission and place in history.

The enduring concept of American Exceptionalism dates back to French writer Alexis de Tocqueville's reflections on America in his 1835/1840 work, *Democracy in America*, where he concluded: "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."

Abraham Lincoln echoed this theme of American uniqueness when he noted in his Gettysburg address in 1863 that one of the things that sets us apart from all other countries in history was the sacred duty of the United States to ensure that "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Since the end of the Civil War, and up until January 20, 2017, the idea of American Exceptionalism has infused the rhetoric of virtually every modern President and political leader. In April 1917, near the end of the First World War, President Woodrow Wilson exhorted Americans to fulfill the country's destiny to make the world "Safe for Democracy."

In his State of the Union address in January 1941, when the future of liberal democracies in their world war against fascism hung in the balance, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt sent a message to its besieged democratic allies around the globe, reassuring them that "We Americans are vitally concerned in your defense of freedom. We are putting forth our energies, our resources and our organizing powers to give you the strength to regain and maintain a free world ... This is our purpose and our pledge."

Fifty six years ago, in his Inaugural speech in January 1961, President John F. Kennedy's reminded Americans that it was our country's fundamental duty to protect human rights "at home and around the world." He pledged that America would "bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty."

Ronald Reagan inspired us with his soaring rhetoric about America being a "Shining City on the Hill," a beacon of freedom, hope and liberty that was – and always be -- the model and example for all the world.

President Obama, in April 2009, publicly acknowledged Americas "extraordinary role in leading the world towards peace and prosperity," while cautioning that such a lofty goal could only be achieved through effective partnerships with other countries. He also often reminded us that America is, at its core, a good and caring nation that must work tirelessly in the cause of democracy and human rights around the world.

With Trump, this powerful concept of American Exceptionalism, which has been enshrined in our nation's psyche for almost two hundred years, is dead. Or so Donald Trump would like us to believe.

In the immortal words of Stephen Colbert, Trump basically compared America to a "dumpster fire." America's longstanding mission to preserve and protect the causes of democracy, freedom and human rights around the world has, according to the Trump gospel, virtually devastated the country. In Trump's view, American internationalism and free trade policies, fueled in large measure by a belief in America's special place in the world, has reduced America to a virtual wasteland. Trump painted a dark "Mad Max" picture of a country with

“rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation.” and rampant “American Carnage” in our inner cities.

Of course, Trump’s vision of America is a totally false one, or at least grossly misleading, and he knows it. But this kind of dark rhetoric that he honed on the campaign trail seemed to work, and now that he is President, he seems incapable of letting his distorted vision of America evolve into something that more closely resembles reality.

In the dark parallel universe painted by Trump in his inauguration speech, there was not even one acknowledgment that any of the former Presidents sitting behind him had done anything other than to let America go to hell in a handbasket. Since, according to the Trump Doctrine, only he and he alone can save the country from catastrophe, he could not possibly bring himself to thank the outgoing President – Barack Obama -- for literally saving the country’s economy from the virtual freefall that it was in when he took office in January 2009. He could not acknowledge that, under President Obama’s stewardship, the unemployment has dropped from a high of 10% in January 2009 down to under 5%, that poverty and welfare dependency fell sharply throughout the country, and that 20 million more Americans enjoy health insurance coverage, or at least until the Republican leadership guts the Affordable Care Act.

Questioning the value of America’s international alliances such as NATO, which have kept the peace in Europe for at least the past five decades, Trump has latched onto the slogan of “American First,” which was used by fascist sympathizers and isolationists such as Charles Lindbergh during the late 1930s to try to keep America from coming to the aid of the Western

European democracies that were being threatened, reasoning that Hitler's plan to exterminate all European Jews and minority groups was none of America's business.

Trump did make a passing reference to seeking "friendship and good will with the nations of the world," but that our interaction with other nations would be solely motivated by a new commitment to serve America's interests first, which presumably no longer include an interest in promoting freedom and human rights in other parts of the world, or combatting Climate Change, unless – in the unlikely event – that there was some economic or strategic advantage to the United States in promoting such causes.

However, despite President Trump's best efforts to drive a stake through the heart of American Exceptionalism, I strongly believe that it will not die. Indeed, I think it likely that Trump's attack on American core values will serve to energize and invigorate the American Resistance Movement. Today, as hundreds of thousands of Americans participate in the Women's March on Washington, our faith in American Exceptionalism is renewed, and will emerge from the scourge of Trumpism more powerful than ever. American has been a beacon of liberty and protector of human rights throughout the world for generations now, and this shining torch will not – and cannot – ever be extinguished.

As Woodrow Wilson proclaimed over one hundred years ago, "The history of liberty is a history of resistance." Long live the Resistance!