

American Exceptionalism makes the United States unique

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By [Randy W. Bright](#)

When I travel on an airline, I like to read, and so I always try to plan ahead to buy some good books to keep my mind occupied and to learn something new. This time I read a very short book entitled, American Exceptionalism, by Charles Murray.

Except for the past decade or two, I think most Americans have possessed a very deep-seated knowledge that America is truly different from any other place in the world. Most Americans can find something to say to articulate why they believe it is so, and most of their comments would likely contain something to do with their freedoms, but most would be unlikely to be able to explain what American Exceptionalism really encompasses.

At America's birth, the Founders set out to do something that had never been done in human history, and that was to create a government that served at the will of its own people. But that alone was not enough to create our exceptionalism. American had begun to develop an entire culture that was unlike any other that had ever existed, and the interaction of a new government type and that culture led to a society that did what has been described in another book that I have recommended for years – The Five Thousand Year Leap - after 5,000 years of essentially the same standard of living, within 250 years, Americans elevated that standard of living far beyond what it had ever been.

Murray describes our exceptionalism, or our civic culture, in four ways: our industriousness, egalitarianism, community life and religiosity.

In the mid-1800s, European writer Francis Grund wrote, "Active occupation is not only the principal source of happiness, and the foundation of their natural greatness, but they are absolutely wretched without it...It is the very soul of an American; he pursues it, not as a means of procuring for himself and his family the necessary comforts of life, but as the fountain of all human felicity."

Our Constitution had given Americans something that humans had never before possessed in pure form - property rights. The fact that someone could earn the money to buy property to keep for their own purposes and posterity - out of the reach of their own government - made people form a new culture.

Murray called the resulting traits of industriousness self-reliance, hard work and getting ahead.

The term egalitarianism has taken on a negative connotation, but he describes it in its classical meaning - in the new America, there was no class of aristocracy, most people identified with the middle class (even when they were richer or poorer), and there was a deep-seated desire for the equality of human dignity.

He wrote, "America was by no means a classless society, but Americans retained a strong sense that whatever class you were in was a matter of what you had made of yourself, not who your family was, and an equally strong sense that richer does not mean more virtuous or of greater human worth."

Today's urban planners make much of community life and a desire to go back to the way it used to be (though they don't want to go back to the Constitution), and to seek social justice through government and the built environment. For lack of better terms, they seek an equality of "stuff" - housing, food and other basic and non-essentials of life.

But the early American lifestyle they claim to seek was not like that. With them, Murray describes, community life was about civic engagement, neighborliness, and social trust.

One example he gives describes the difference between Americans and other nationalities: "...to them, Americans seemed almost childlike in their trust in the good faith of any random person they came across. In the first half-hour after meeting a total stranger, an American was likely to confide personal information and ask personal questions that might require years of friendship before they would be raised between Europeans or Asians."

Murray describes religiosity as a source of social activism, utopian aspirations, and inner self-government. In Europe and other countries, the church had become a government institution, and in many cases had become as corrupt as their government. Most countries had a state religion, prohibiting the freedom to worship.

But America was different; freedom to worship is the reason we have so many different denominations.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, other nations, and especially Europe, found America to be a fascinating country, and to this day, they still do. American Exceptionalism is something we should be proud of, and equally motivated to understand.



Randy W. Bright, AIA, NCARB, is an architect who specializes in church and church-related projects. You may contact him at 918-582-3972, rwbrightchurcharch@sbcglobal.net or www.churcharchitect.net.

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