

What Is \223American Exceptionalism?\224
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Most Americans believe in \223American Exceptionalism,\224 even when they have never heard the term. This means that the history of the United States is unlike that of most of the world; we have neither hereditary nobility, king or dictator, nor a state-supported ethnic or religious identity.

One becomes American by birth or by choice (immigrants)\227with identical rights. Our constitution is very much alive\227changing as conditions in our world change, providing an adaptability very rare in the world. These factors, including two oceans to separate us from the old worlds of Europe and Asia, have kept us unusually safe. We also had a vast continent to settle and a homestead program that provided land ownership to those willing to work for it.

But of late, the term \223American Exceptionalism\224 has been questioned by some who believe that America is not exceptional at all\227and that those who think it is are right-wing political bigots. They remind us that our history included slavery, imperialism, the dreadful mistreatment of our Native Americans, and ask how that jibes with \223exceptionalism.\224

Even President Obama, when asked if he believes in American exceptionalism said yes, just as the French and British believe in their own exceptionalism. And this remark raised the hackles of those who believe that with all our flaws, we have managed to be exceptional in almost every way\227including the constant effort to admit and correct our shortcomings.

A fascinating book has just come out that jumps into this fray: Intellectual Curiosity and the Scientific Revolution, by professor Toby E. Huff. This book answers the most basic question: why has the West (Western Europe and its American and Australian offspring) dominated the world for the past four centuries while the other great civilizations declined?

Jared Diamond, in Guns, Germs, and Steel, was asked that question by a New Guinea native who wanted to know why White Men have \223cargo\224 but his people do not. He wanted to know if there was something that White people had that made them superior. Diamond thought a lot about this\227and in his book, he showed that geography matters, and those lucky enough to come from places with temperate climate; an east-west axis of travel, trade, and diseases (developing immunities); and the right plants and animals to be domesticated; have more \223cargo\224 (success and wealth).

Now Toby Huff adds to this explanation that the geography, history, legal practices, and religions of Western Civilization from Ancient Greece through the 17th century all provided the basis for the scientific revolution that made the West the great power it has been for the past four centuries.

He compares the intellectual curiosity of the West with the notable but static achievements of the three other great societies of the 17th century: China, India, and the Ottoman Turks. It turned out to be no contest.

Although there were brilliant Chinese, Indian, and Arab scholars, including inventors, their findings never made it into their school systems, which resisted the new knowledge, nor gained the support of their absolute monarchs. Even when the telescope found its way to China and India, it was gladly used\227but neither improved nor spawned further inventions.

For a scientific revolution to happen as it did in the west, you would need continent-wide scholars who communicated and shared findings; the printing press and its spread of literacy; a school system that taught the new sciences; and a legal system that protected property and was the basis for economic expansion. None of these institutions thrived in imperial China, Moghul India, or Ottoman Turkey. Chinese schools were hidebound Mandarin, resistant to any changes. The Muslim madrassas taught (and still teach) memorization of the Koran, shunning other subjects. By the 20th century, all three great empires were backwaters.

Europe\222s exceptionalism and scientific revolution spread to the United States, where it has gone even further. Huff shows us that this was no fluke, but was the consequence of good institutions and a civilization that supported intellectual curiosity.

671 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and writer. You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.