

American Exceptionalism

Over the next century and a half, from the first English colony of Jamestown in 1607 to the time the 13 English colonies rebelled against Great Britain in the American Revolution (1775-1783), a new nation was born. In some ways, this new nation looked similar to others in the world, with a common language, similar ways of living and thinking, and a geographical boundary. In other more important ways, America was different than any nation on Earth. These differences form the main reason for what some historians correctly call “American Exceptionalism.” American exceptionalism means that in its founding and throughout its history, the United States of America has been the exception to the rule.

We can see at least eight elements of American Exceptionalism in the English colonies of the 1600s and 1700s.

1. Limited, Representative Democracy
2. Constitutionalism
3. Protestant Christian Heritage and the Birth of Religious Freedom
4. Militia System
5. Free Market Principles, Private Property, and Availability of Land
6. Abundant Natural Resources
7. Rebellion Against an Unpopular Government
8. Accessible Education

Limited, Representative Democracy

In most of the colonies, the government consisted of a governor and council appointed by the King of England, and a legislature and judiciary elected by citizens of the colony. The first legislature in colonial America was the Virginia House of Burgesses. The American Founding Fathers recognized the legislature as the most important branch of government. The legislature makes laws and taxes citizens. The fact that English colonists could choose their lawmakers is exceptional. This represented the greatest political participation of people in the world. In no other country did average people have the right to vote.

Some may argue that it was unfair that slaves, free blacks, women, and at first men who did not own land could not vote. If we judge history by today’s values, that is true. However, this is not a fair comparison. In the 1600s, throughout the world, only those lucky enough to be born into a royal family, or who took power violently, could participate in government. Compared with this fact, the English colonists were the freest people in the world.

Constitutionalism

Constitutionalism is a set of ideas, attitudes, and behavior based on the principle that the authority of government comes from a body of fundamental law. It means that government is limited by its laws and the practices of law and government over a period of time. The rule of law is another concept that is part of constitutionalism. The rule of law means that a country is

governed not by the opinions and whims of its rulers, but by written laws. Constitutionalism and the rule of law are two concepts that make it impossible for a ruler to take full control of a government.

In the English colonies, each colony had a written charter, with the laws of the colony specifically written. No official was above the law. In 1639, for instance, colonists wrote the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut. This document explained how the government of Connecticut would work, describing the powers and limits of the government.

Protestant Christian Heritage and the Birth of Religious Freedom

The English colonists practiced their strong religious beliefs on a daily basis. Most colonists were very strong Christians, read the Bible as families, individually, and in churches, and tried to follow God's will in everything they did. American Protestant Christians believed in working hard and that every person should be able to read and understand the Bible. In large part because of this, colonial America became a big success, and literacy was widespread.

In most of the colonies and in Europe of the 1600s, there was an established state church. Virginia required Anglican membership. Massachusetts required Puritan membership. Those of other faiths could not live in these colonies. As in Europe, church attendance was mandatory, and people were fined if they did not attend. In some colonies, individuals could be publicly beaten for not following the established church.

Three English colonies led the way in establishing freedom of religion: Rhode Island, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. Each of these colonies was founded by people who disagreed with the Anglican Church, but who did not want to persecute peoples of other faiths. Roger Williams, banished from Massachusetts for his beliefs that went counter to the official Puritan colonial religion, founded Rhode Island as a colony where an individual could practice any religion he chose. William Penn, a Quaker, founded Pennsylvania and established religious freedom there. Lord Baltimore, a Roman Catholic, founded Maryland (the Land of Mary) and for a time in Maryland each colonist had religious freedom. Religious freedom ended in Maryland after the Glorious Revolution, 1688-1689, when Protestants established the Anglican Church and expelled Jesuits, thus forcing Catholics to practice their faith clandestinely.

Religious freedom was born in the American colonies for a number of reasons. Many colonists left Europe for the express purpose of practicing their own religion. Once in America, some colonists did enjoy religious freedom, but others did not. Nevertheless, by the time the U.S. Constitution was ratified in 1789, Americans realized that life was better for everyone without an established church. Those who faced persecution did not want to persecute others.

Militia System

In the 1600s and for most of the 1700s, the colonists developed a military mindset and a number of practices that historian Daniel Boorstin described as the militia system. This mindset continues in a transformed way in America today. English colonists had a distrust of a king's

standing army, but needed to protect themselves from Indians. Each man aged 16-60 was expected to have his own gun and ammunition, and if he lived in a village or town, he was expected to volunteer and train for a potential war. Once the war ended, it was expected that he would return to his farm to work, and there would be no standing army. No one earned a permanent salary for military service.

The militia system operated throughout the colonies, though there was little communication between them. When the colonists fought the Indians, they engaged them with a “western way of war” that proved most effective. Daniel Boorstin wrote that the Americans borrowed Indian guerilla warfare tactics and combined them with European tactics like volleys. Guerilla warfare tactics include ambushing superior forces when they divide, attacking supply lines, and “hit and run” tactics, or using the environment as cover. In addition, there was equality, or at least a heightened mutual respect, among commanders and troops. This relationship helped commanders listen to soldiers on the battlefield and change tactics, if necessary.

Free Market Principles and Availability of Private Property

Free market principles are ways of thinking and acting that allow each individual to determine what is best and to freely work toward the ends he wants. Private property is an essential part of the free market because each person can strive to own his own farm or business, and reap the rewards from his labors.

At the founding of the first two colonies, Jamestown and Plymouth Plantation, the land was held by a company, and each colonist shared everything. This meant that the laziest person received the same amount of food and goods as the hardest working. When this system failed miserably, bringing great destruction and death, the leaders of both colonies decided to allow the colonists to own their own land, and to benefit from their own hard work. Once these reforms occurred, both Jamestown and Plymouth Plantation became successful.

Throughout the 13 English colonies, individuals could own land. Nowhere else in the world was this similar. In most places, landowners had to be born into a royal family. This unmatched right to own private property drew many Europeans to settle in the English colonies, and it was a major reason why the English colonies became so prosperous.

Abundant Natural Resources

When Englishmen first came to America, they expected to find gold. Of course, they did not. However, what they found was perhaps more valuable than gold. America’s vast natural resources were unparalleled in the world. Nowhere else was there so much open land, with varied climate, soil, and minerals. The American Indians did occupy North America, but they were not everywhere, and in many places, Indians were nomads. European settlers found much open land to call home, and they won land from Indians by military victory or by treaties.

Rebellion Against an Unpopular Government

In at least two instances, the English colonists of the 1600s rebelled against the government. Nathaniel Bacon of Virginia led the first revolt in 1679. Bacon and many Virginians were angry at Governor Berkeley for not providing enough protection against the Indians. Bacon and about 1,000 rebels rose against the governor, chased him from Jamestown, and burned the capital city. Bacon caught a sickness and died, and the rebellion was put down, but the King recalled the governor to England. Bacon's Rebellion showed how the English colonists were willing to fight against the royal government.

The second instance American colonists opposed the government was during the English Glorious Revolution, 1688-1689. The English did not like King James II because he was Catholic and had issued a Toleration Act, allowing English people to be Anglican or Catholic. In America, King James II took away all New England royal charters and tried to establish one central colonial government in Boston. Colonists resisted with force. Colonists overthrew King James' government in America, and forced the king to surrender the colonies back to their original colonial governments. In England, the English overthrew King James II and established William and Mary as rulers. Catholics were persecuted in England after the Glorious Revolution.

Parliament asked the Protestant daughter of King James II, Mary, and her husband William, to rule England, after they agreed to the Declaration of Rights. Some of the rights in this declaration closely resemble the American Bill of Rights created only 100 years later. The following are a few of these rights:

1. Monarch was not supreme but shared authority with Parliament and the courts
2. House of Commons was the source of all revenue bills (power of the purse)
3. Right to free speech and petition
4. Due process of law
5. No excessive punishment
6. No standing army during peacetime and the right of English Protestants to keep and bear arms

Soon thereafter, Whig John Locke advocated in his *Two Treatises* that all men are born free, equal, and rational, and entitled to the God-given rights of life, liberty, and property.

Accessible Education

For education, colonists of the 1600s learned nearly exclusively in the home. Because the great majority of colonists were Puritans, Anglicans (members of the Anglican Church) or other Protestant religions, parents felt it necessary to teach children how to read and understand the Bible. As the Old Testament and New Testament in the Bible are challenging, most English settlers had a good command of reading. At the time of the American Revolution, Americans were among the best educated people in the world.