

Strategic Visions: Volume 21, Number II

Tyrrell, Ian. *American Exceptionalism: A New History of an Old Idea*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022. 288 pp. \$35.00 (paperback).

Belief in American exceptionalism is very much alive in the country's institutions. Through denial of U.S. similarity to other Great Powers or via sheer ignorance of the nation's imperial character, many Americans still consider the United States to be a "city upon a hill." Ian Tyrrell's book *American Exceptionalism: A New History of an Old Idea* provides an incisive breakdown of this well trodden concept. In cogent prose, Tyrrell not only reconstructs foundations upon which American exceptionalism rests, but also leads the reader through themes and episodes of U.S. history that prove it flawed. Tyrrell, therefore, has produced one of the most complete volumes on this captivating idea.

Tyrrell begins his study with an explanation of exceptionalism, in terms of its origins and evolution. Early European



settlers in North America created the intellectual antecedents of exceptionalism from the material abundance of their new homeland (4). As these settlers established collective identities and founded the United States, the "American people" became the "bearer of exceptionalism," using the concept to frame their understanding of how American wealth and liberal institutions differed from the Old World (5). Foreign visitors to the republic, chiefly Alexander de Tocqueville, built this idea into a myth of U.S. difference—a myth that prescribed "America" as an experiment to replicate abroad (7). As the nation expanded, in size and power, exceptionalism came to underpin such growth in the minds of many, Americans or otherwise. Where Tyrrell is most original, however, is not in his rundown of how people constructed the

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myth, but rather in his assertion that the myth bears its greatest expression in how the American nation-state is assessed against others. Tyrrell shows how exceptionalism is not one myth, but rather a “cluster of myths that reflect and refract historical experience” (17). Grounded in pillars of material, religious, and political conditions, Americans have largely coalesced around a national ideology that frames their nation-state as positively different from others. Tyrrell then leads the reader through historical episodes that contradict exceptionalism. Predating the Revolutionary era, Americans, as Tyrrell writes, developed a sense of religious chosenness that drove their collective sensibilities as a unique people. This concept, best defined under the mid-nineteenth century moniker “Manifest Destiny,” imbued Americans with the confidence to expand their colonial settlements and separate themselves from the other peoples they encountered—much

like other foreign settler populations. Memory of the American Revolution brought a U.S. cultural nationalism centered on its exceptionality as the first republic of its kind. Yet Tyrrell notes how, like all periods of upheaval, the Revolutionary and Founding era was fraught with uncertainties and divisiveness, a memory often buried to preserve the thrust of exceptionalism. Tyrrell treats Frederick Jackson Turner’s myth of the frontier for what it was—a reductive concept used to mask state intervention and aggressive imperialism with a cloak of American individualism. Americans considered their political institutions to be more liberal than Europe’s, and more civilized than those of the Indigenous, within this constantly shifting “western” frontier. However, realities of U.S. expansion show that it was not a story of individual heroism, but rather one where the rapidly growing U.S. state shored up settlers with the capital and protection

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necessary to spread institutions that were neither liberal nor exceptional. Likewise, Tyrrell addresses Samuel Flagg Bemis's claim that 1898 marks a historical aberration for the United States. Long used by proponents of American exceptionalism to explain the nation's plunge into overseas empire, this characterization misrepresents the truth. The end of the nineteenth century was, by no means, a brief or irregular period of American empire. Americans had been expanding their trans-continental "chosen empire" since before 1776, even acquiring overseas territory as early as the 1850s. As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, U.S. military and economic primacy did not fade, but soared.

American Exceptionalism does well to break down the eponymous concept, explaining how and why Americans considered themselves an exceptional people. It also exposes exceptionalism as a flawed idea in myriad ways. That said,

Tyrrell leaves this reviewer wanting in small measure. Only cursory attention is given to international aspects of the Founding era of the United States. This was a time when American settlers felt boxed in by powerful European empires and their Indigenous allies. The inability to cross geographical boundaries and take land at whim proved an obstacle for Americans who believed they were destined to expand. Though Tyrrell does mention imperialist impulses that drove many to take up arms against the British, more on this revolutionary impetus would further expose the flaws of exceptionalist narratives. Once independent, the early republic was mired in fear of these empires—the Spanish, French, and British—and such fears factored into the calculus of U.S. foreign and domestic policy. Though the United States would emerge as hegemon of the Western Hemisphere, it rested on shaky ground in these early years when, as

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Tyrrell notes, Americans found a cultural nationalism in the legacy of their revolution.

Furthermore, the mechanisms of U.S. empire are relatively untouched in Tyrrell's narrative. American settler colonialism operated similarly to that of other expansionary powers. Settlers took land and called upon their state for protection and recognition in ways that mirror the British conquests of Australia and Canada, or the Japanese settlement of Hokkaido and Manchuria. Likewise, the United States acted much like other Great Powers when it came to seizing overseas territory and exerting influence. U.S. colonization of the Philippines, its interference in many Latin American nations' sovereignty, and its global network of military bases all testify to this fact. Tyrrell does state how denial of U.S. settler colonialism forms the bedrock of American exceptionalism—and covers, to a degree, the extent of contemporary U.S. power—but

more analysis of U.S. imperial history would help close the door on exceptionalists. Those interested in these approaches to American exceptionalism should read this book alongside Julian Go's *Patterns of Empire* and Daniel Immerwahr's *How to Hide an Empire*.

Lastly, Tyrrell misses an opportunity to discuss contemporary American exceptionalism from a standpoint of where the United States, despite its title as “leader of free nations,” falls short in some areas when compared to peers. Though perhaps beyond the scope of this study, this outlook could stimulate more conversation on how the United States appears exceptional in its resistance to universal healthcare and criminal justice reform, all while seeking to maintain armed global supremacy. Quibbles aside, *American Exceptionalism* is a valuable addition to the historiography of its titular subject. Well-written and didactic, it is of interest to any scholar of U.S. cultural

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history or anyone focused on the history of
U.S. foreign policy.

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