

Prisoner Abuse Calls into Question America's Position of Moral "Exceptionalism"

By Jim Lobe | May 19, 2004

The American soldier, then-Secretary of State Elihu Root said in 1899 as the United States first emerged as a global power, is “different from all other soldiers of all other countries since the world began.”

“He is the advance guard of liberty and justice, of law and order and of peace and happiness.” But as evidence of abuse by U.S. military personnel continues to surface, so do questions about America's oft-revisited concept of itself as a nation called by Providence to spread liberty around the world.

It was an expression of “Manifest Destiny II” when American soldiers routed the forces of a decadent Spanish Empire from the Caribbean and the Pacific a hundred years ago. Just as the original 13 states that hugged the Atlantic seaboard in the 18th century expanded to the shores of the Pacific, annexing large parts of Mexico and wiping out most of the native indigenous population in the process, so the expansion at the turn of the 20th century was seen as the necessary fulfillment of Providence—to spread the blessings of American civilization, as described by Root, from Puerto Rico to the Philippines.

The relative ease with which this was accomplished naturally contributed to the notion that the United States was an “exceptional” country, one singled out by divine providence for a higher purpose. The sense the nation was on a moral mission dated back to the 17th-century Puritans who colonized Massachusetts and whose “Calvinist cast of mind saw America as the redeemer nation” that would build “a city on a hill” for all the world to follow, according to Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger.

This notion is a constant throughout U.S. history. “I believe that God planted in us the vision of liberty,” declared President Woodrow Wilson as Washington entered World War I. “I cannot be deprived of the hope that we are chosen, and prominently chosen, to show the nations of the world how

they shall walk in the paths of liberty.” The continuing growth of U.S. global power, particularly its defeat of Nazi Germany, confirmed the country's moral exceptionalism, as did the collapse of Soviet communism just 15 years ago. It is in this context that Francis Fukuyama's ‘The End of History’ thesis that after 8,000 years of social development humankind had discovered that liberal, democratic capitalism, preferably of the U.S. variety, was the answer, could become a best-seller.

National Greatness

It was likewise in this context that other neo-conservative thinkers, notably William Kristol and Robert Kagan, revived Roosevelt's idea of “national greatness” with an explicitly moral underpinning. On the eve of founding the Project for the New American Century (PNAC)—whose charter would be signed by many top officials of the future Bush administration—they alluded explicitly to U.S. exceptionalism by arguing for a “neo-Reaganite foreign policy (that) would be good for conservatives, good for America, and good for the world.”

It was time, they wrote, for Washington to turn its back on the 170-year-old admonition of an earlier president, John Quincy Adams, that America should not go “abroad in search of monsters to destroy.”

The unacceptable alternative, they argued, “is to leave monsters on the loose, ravaging and pillaging to their hearts' content, as Americans stand by and watch.” Given America's enormous power and “understanding that its moral goals and its fundamental national interests are almost always in harmony,” the two wrote, failure to slay the monsters

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“becomes in practice a policy of cowardice and dishonor.”

The notion that U.S. “moral goals and fundamental national interests” are virtually identical is often dismissed by people outside the United States who believe that the U.S. elites are motivated primarily by greed and power—in the case of Iraq perhaps, by oil—just like the colonial powers of Europe.

To some extent, of course, this is true. But, as noted by Owen Harries, an astute Australian observer who edited the U.S. journal *National Interest* for many years, European pretensions of a moral or civilizing mission were “episodic and not deeply rooted—usually limited to when their power was at its zenith and usually clearly recognizable as a rationalization for what they were doing for other reasons. In the case of the United States, it has been constant and central.”

A Blow for U.S. Exceptionalist Ideology?

Thus, as previously noted, moral exceptionalism can be traced all the way back to the very first settlers who established a “city upon a hill” to serve as a beacon for the rest of the world, to President Thomas Jefferson’s description of the U.S. as an “empire of liberty” as opposed to European empires of territory, straight through Manifest Destinies I and II, World Wars I and II, and the Cold War.

“Since America’s emergence as a world power roughly a century ago, we have made many errors,” wrote Elliott Abrams, a PNAC Charter signer and currently national security adviser Condoleezza Rice’s top Middle East aide, back in 2000. “But we have been the greatest force for good among the nations of the earth. A diminution of American power or influence bodes ill for our country, our friends, and our principles.”

This indeed is why it is so important, in the view of U.S. “exceptionalists,” that Washington retains its freedom of action and not be accountable to multi-lateral organizations, like the United Nations, or even international law. Moral exceptionalism dictates unilateralism. If the U.S., after all, is morally superior to other nations, such as China or France, then tying it to the decisions of UN Security Council, for exam-

ple, would in itself be immoral, as pointed out by Charles Krauthammer, a neo-conservative columnist for *The Washington Post*. “By what moral calculus,” he asked on the eve of last year’s Iraq invasion, “does an American intervention to liberate 25 million people forfeit legitimacy because it lacks the blessing of the butchers of Tiananmen Square or the cynics of the Quai d’Orsay?”

As the vanguard of that moral superiority, the U.S. soldier, “different from all other soldiers from all other countries since the world began,” has always been expected to embody the country’s extraordinary goodness. That’s what makes the photos from Abu Ghraib so shocking. They put into question the whole notion of U.S. exceptionalism, just as similar photos of the victims of the My Lai massacre, of U.S. troops setting fire to peasants’ huts with their Zippo lighters, and of a terrified young girl burned by napalm running naked down a highway helped turn the nation against the Vietnam War and military intervention 35 years ago.

That’s why those who defend the war are insisting, contrary to mounting evidence, that the abuses depicted there are an aberration committed by just a handful of rogue elements. “America is a force for good,” sputtered Rep. Duncan Hunter, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee which has jurisdiction over the military, as the photo scandal swirled around Washington this week.

Or, as Krauthammer himself wrote Friday, the perpetrators of the abuses “do not ...reflect the ethos of the U.S. military, which has performed with remarkable grace and courage in Iraq, or of U.S. society.”

“Our troops are changing the world and building a future for the people of Iraq—sacrificing more than most of us can know for the survival and success of liberty,” House Speaker Tom DeLay insisted this week. “Operation Iraqi Freedom, whatever flaws it may have, has been an absolute good.”

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