

Obama's eloquent expression of exceptionalism in Selma

By [John D. Wilsey](#)

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This past Saturday, President Obama spoke in Selma, Alabama, marking the 50th anniversary of "Bloody Sunday"—the assault by Alabama state troopers on marchers from Selma to Montgomery for equal voting rights for African Americans.

His speech is remarkable for many reasons, but one of the things I find really remarkable is that it ranks as a singular example of presidential exceptionalist rhetoric.

There's nothing new in all that. We've come to expect our presidents to use exceptionalist rhetoric in their speeches. Ronald Reagan was particularly skilled at portraying America in exceptionalist terms, being fond of quoting Thomas Paine from *Common Sense*, who [famously wrote](#) of Americans, "We have it in our power to begin the world over again." He also liked to use Abraham Lincoln's [descriptor](#) of America as the "last, best hope of earth," although Reagan often substituted *mankind* for *earth* in his use of the phrase.

But President Obama is considered by many to [lack love for his country](#). Early in his presidency, [at a press conference in Cherbourg, France on April 4, 2009](#), Obama himself watered down American exceptionalism by saying, "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism." But Obama's views on exceptionalism have evolved over the course of his presidency. In September 2013, in his address to the nation regarding a possible U.S. military intervention in Syria, President Obama [embraced exceptionalism](#) by saying, "But when, with modest effort and risk, we can stop children from being gassed to death, and thereby make our own children safer over the long run, I believe we should act. . . . That's what makes America different. That's what makes us exceptional." And [speaking at West Point's commencement](#) in 2014, the president said, "I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being."

Unlike Reagan, Obama's view of exceptionalism subtracts the idea of American innocence. Central to Obama's patriotism is the notion that true love of country entails national self-examination in order to more sincerely pursue the highest ideals of the American liberal tradition. This notion comes through in most, if not all, of President Obama's articulations of American exceptionalism.

His Selma speech is, at least to me, his most eloquent expression of this form of exceptionalism. Consider these lines from his speech:

What greater expression of faith in the American experiment than this; what greater form of patriotism is there; than the belief that America is not yet finished, that we are strong enough to be self-critical, that each successive generation can look upon our imperfections and decide that it is in our power to remake this nation to more closely align with our highest ideals?

American exceptionalism is a controversial idea because two political groups at odds with one another often claim it—conservatives and liberals. What adds to the controversy is that both of these groups often seem to see their contention as going far beyond a simple political disagreement. They often seem to be at war with one another, with the complete destruction of the other as the shared goal between them. The question of what constitutes a true American is thus a fundamental, existential question in today's political and cultural discourse.

For many, a true American is specially favored of God, carrying out a divine mandate to spread the American way of life around the globe, situated on a sacred land, heir to a glorious heritage—and defined by an innate righteousness, no matter by what agency he uses in America's name. For many, these are the aspects that define American exceptionalism.

But Obama's conception of exceptionalism is the right one, both historically and practically. It is historically right because it is this vision of exceptionalism that has carried Americans ever closer to their stated ideals of individual rights, democracy, human equality based on innate dignity, and peace, since the drafting of the Declaration of Independence. It is practically right because it fosters unity by eliminating the false dichotomy of the "Chosen" and the "Other," a dichotomy borne out of racial, religious, ethnic, and class prejudices.

Read the [transcript](#) of the speech. Obama's articulation of American exceptionalism is expansive, inclusive, and consistent with the canon of American civil religion: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and Bill of Rights, the Gettysburg Address, and Lincoln's Second Inaugural, to name a few texts in that canon. But most importantly, it is marked by self-examination. Without self-examination, Americans cannot live up to their ideals. Without self-examination, America implodes.

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