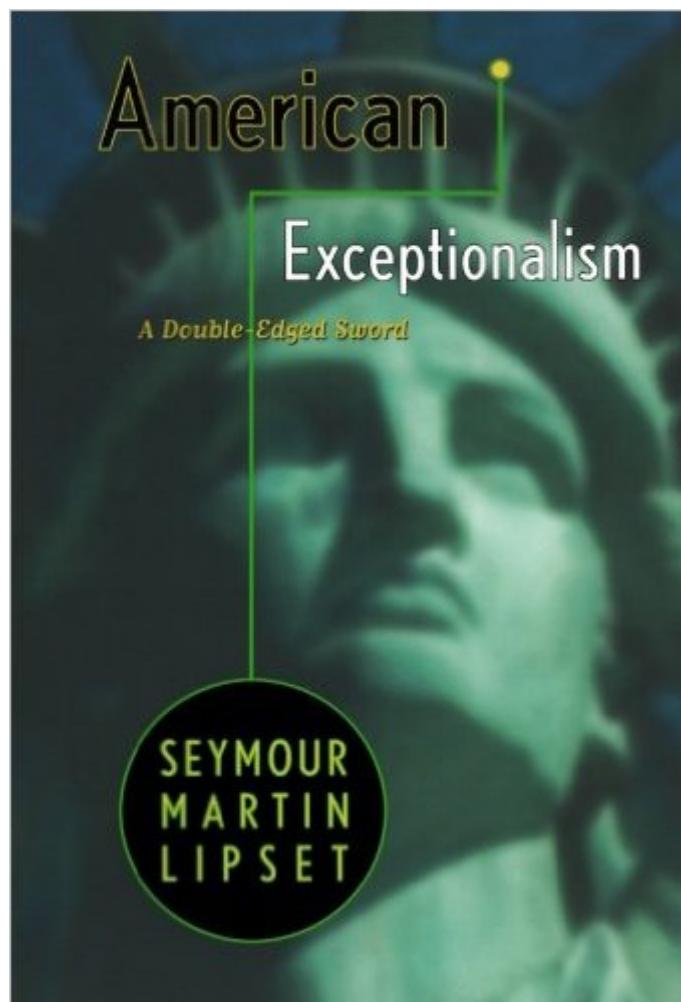


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American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword



Synopsis

Is America unique? One of our major political analysts explores the deeply held but often inarticulated beliefs that shape the American creed. "American values are quite complex," writes Seymour Martin Lipset, "particularly because of paradoxes within our culture that permit pernicious and beneficial social phenomena to arise simultaneously from the same basic beliefs." Born out of revolution, the United States has always considered itself an exceptional country of citizens unified by an allegiance to a common set of ideals, individualism, anti-statism, populism, and egalitarianism. This ideology, Professor Lipset observes, defines the limits of political debate in the United States and shapes our society. American Exceptionalism explains why socialism has never taken hold in the United States, why Americans are resistant to absolute quotas as a way to integrate blacks and other minorities, and why American religion and foreign policy have a moralistic, crusading streak.

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Customer Reviews

If everything else about him is forgotten, Lipset, who died in 2006, will surely be remembered for coining the term, "American Exceptionalism". Before I took up social science as a "second language" at Lipset's last academic residence (School of Public Policy, George Mason University) I was an earth scientist - avocationally interested in public policy. The only political and other social scientists whose names appeared at regular intervals in Science Magazine were Lipset, Robert Merton, and Amitai Etzioni. Lipset had omnivorous curiosity and interests. Among his many

memberships and honors, he was the only person to serve as President of both the American Sociological Association and the American Political Science Association. In almost every publication Lipset effortlessly tosses out bold and often accurate generalizations that other academics did not mention - either because the relationship didn't occur to them, or because they were afraid to venture conclusions not quantitatively established by "empirical" studies. [Empirical studies are social scientists' term for research that tests hypotheses using statistical proofs.] For example, in his Introduction, Lipset states that the U.S. is the most religious country in Christendom, and the only one where churchgoers adhere to sects. Protestantism has not only influenced opposition to wars, but determined the American style of foreign policy. The U.S. disdain of authority has led to the highest crime rate and the lowest level of voting participation in the developed world, etc. I found that Lipset's penchant for generalization had to be respected but taken advisedly. This is illustrated by the abovementioned claim that the U.S. had the lowest level of voting participation in the developed world.

More reviews here (30 pages):[...]American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword; book reviews Commonweal September 13, 1996, Pg. 38There is no dearth of opinions about what ails the United States today. Everyone seems to have a diagnosis as well as a prescription for our reputed moral decline. However, new books by political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset and by legal scholar Ronald Dworkin go beyond merely expounding a set of predetermined conclusions or recommendations and provide readers with analytic tools for use in the assessment of American political culture. Lipset's title gives a reliable indication of the central thesis of this work, which proceeds in continuity, with a well-developed body of social science literature to which Lipset himself has been a major contributor. The United States is different from other countries because it is founded upon a national creed rather than upon the social bonds of ethnicity and history that normally cement peoples together. Our national sense of self is derived from a broadly shared ideology which includes commitment to liberty, equality, populism, individualism, and antistatism. This consensus does not, of course, eliminate all conflict, but it does constrict considerably the range of mainstream opinion to one or another form of liberalism (in the classical sense of the word). From these same cultural roots stem both faces of U.S. distinctiveness: the laudable (voluntarism, individual initiative, personal responsibility) and lamentable (self-serving behavior, atomism, disregard for the common good). Lipset takes seriously the adage: "to know only one culture is to know none." Group traits are best highlighted by observing patterns of variation and contrast.

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