

OPINION

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What is Truly 'Exceptional' About America?

When words ring hollow

BY LEE A. DANIELS

Here's a suggestion: Whenever you hear or read someone boasting of "American exceptionalism,"—



the notion that America has since its founding been uniquely ordained by God and its own moral character to lead the world—reach for your wallet. Because, intellectually speaking, someone is surely trying to pick your pocket.

The political arena has recently become awash in simplistic assertions from assorted conservatives bruited the purity of the Founders' belief in liberty and equality and the projection of a serene, almost beatific version of the history of America.

To recall an old phrase: don't believe the hype. Another political stratagem to question President Obama's patriotism and his very American-ness? Yes. Another expression of many conservatives' anxiety about the greater democracy the hard-fought struggle to expand opportunity has produced? Yes. The truth about American history? Not even close.

The right-wing, exceptionalist version of the nation's history is so scrubbed of reality it's like a Potemkin Village, or to put it an

American context, like those fake towns of pre-1960s Hollywood B-movie westerns: all facades with no substance behind them. The words ring hollow because they leave out the complexity of the reality.

Representative Michele Bachmann's recent speech before a conservative gathering in Iowa offers a prime example of how fantastical these views are.

Speaking of slavery, the Minnesota Republican declared that "We also know that the very founders who wrote [the Constitution] worked tirelessly until slavery was no more in the United States," and said at another point:

"How unique in all the world, that one nation that was the resting point from people groups all across the world. It didn't matter the color of their skin. It didn't matter their language. It didn't matter their economic status... Once you got here, we were all the same. Isn't that remarkable? It's absolutely remarkable."

One of the many remarkable things about this funhouse-mirror version of American history is that it makes Negro slavery abstract, virtually invisible as an activity involving human beings, let alone as what it really was: a criminal enterprise in which Africans and African Americans were enslaved so that individual whites and the whites-only America the 1787 Constitution constructed could grow rich.

That is the mental slight-of-hand

which enables George F. Will to avoid admitting that the Constitution's endorsement of Negro slavery most certainly was not about "emancipating individuals for the pursuit of happiness," and that it was indeed a most perverse use of the power of the state to allocate wealth and opportunity.

One should laugh but so freely, however, at these delusional accounts of the American past. Before the ascendancy of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, as most any

the vote and true opportunity for women is conveniently forgotten.

One could go on down a very long list.

In fact, that list is worth exploring in detail, not to damn America—which, for all its flaws, has been the modern era's great hope. It is worth examining because that activity underscores what is truly exceptional about America. That is its capacity for democratic reform: to, ultimately, heed insistent demands to fix what's wrong

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school and college history text from those decades will show, they were the "official" view of America's past.

In the exceptionalist world of fantasy, Negro slavery is barely mentioned; the exclusion of Asian immigrants from citizenship for more than a century is ignored; the near-extinction of Native Americans is passed over; the fierce bigotry white ethnic immigrants endured for nearly a century is suppressed; the denial of

that come from a Frederick Douglass; a Samuel Gompers; a Jane Addams; a Cesar Chavez; or a Martin Luther King Jr. — and, more importantly, from the Americans they represent.

Indeed, America's ability to correct its flaws and expand the meaning of the rights of human beings was never more dramatically stated than in the 14th Amendment to the Constitution Congress enacted in the wake of

the Civil War.

There, driven by the lesson of slavery's terrible injustice but applied to everyone, Congress stated plainly: All persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside.

The assertion of a right of citizenship by birth was as "exceptional" an idea in the 19th century as the idea that all human beings had an "inalienable right" to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness had been a century earlier; and "birthright citizenship"—which continues to make the U.S. "exceptional" among the nations of the world—has to America's great profit been consistently reaffirmed by the Supreme Court.

A Washington Post reader who took exception to Will's exceptionalist claims got it just right when he wrote in a letter to the editor, "Our birth does not make us exceptional. Our aspirations do— aspirations that we can continue to improve the present society through future progress..."

It's so revealing that today's American exceptionalists, blinded by their peculiar vision of America's past, can't see that, too.

Lee A. Daniels is Director of Communications for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., and Editor-in-Chief of *TheDefendersOnline*.

Letter to the Editor

In the feature report on OMSI's new exhibit "Mysteries of Ancient Egypt Unearthed," (Portland Observer, Jan. 26 issue) it showed four sculptures of women from 2,200 and 2,900 years ago. That is before Jesus Christ and Julius Cesar and shows that that Egypt at that time was quite advanced.

Over the years many very interesting facts have come to light about Egypt. I would like to take this time to bring forward some other facts and present a theory:

Facts:

1. The face on the Sphinx is not an Arab face, it is a black African face.
2. The inspiration for the Sphinx, come from the "Age of Leo, the Lion", from 12,000 BC. Not 10,500 BC as some have proposed that was the start of the Egyptian Empire.
3. There is an African tribe, the Maasai, I believe. In one of their ceremonies they dance around on stilts (about 12"), as they believe that they were taller and had migrated from

the North eons ago.

4. On the Nile River, on the bank there is a six foot obelisk. That states "From this point North, no black man shall remain free."

Theory:

1. The Egyptian Empire started during the "Age of Leo/ the Lion" and progressed over the eons. Over time they one way or the other acquired slaves and other lower classes of people. Many of these people were used in the palaces and temples to perform many of the tasks required of the ruling Egyptians. And, these people over time adopted the customs and religion of their masters.
2. There was a rebellion at some time and many of the masters were killed and the survivors were run off. And, went south.
3. The "Obelisk on the Nile River" was erected to remind them not to return or else.

On Egypt's History

4. After the rebellion, the palace and temple people knew a good deal and assumed the top positions.
5. Over time the Egyptian culture and religion assumed an Arab face by the time of Moses.

It is just a theory.

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