AMERICA: SOCIETY, LAW, & PHILOSOPHY

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“We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.”
- John Winthrop

Abstract
American Exceptionalism and the idea of America being a utopia, has caused many people to immigrate to the United States, but why? The U.S. is no more exceptional than any other democratic country. To get this answer, this article examines the philosophical utopias by both Plato and Aristotle and a contradiction to Aristotle’s utopia. It is also important to examine the form of government the founders chose and why other countries thought the United States would fail. It is also important to analyze the relationship of the United States government with its people, and how that relationship helps laws get ratified for the public’s benefit. Exploring the history of people coming to America and the changes in the country that made more people want to come to the United States is also helpful in understanding the system. Though we know that the U.S. is not perfect, we also know that there must be strong relationships between the government and the people to ensure proper
governance. It is because of these existing factors that people see America as a utopia.

Introduction

America has been viewed as the beacon of hope, freedom, liberty, and opportunity around the world. Many people wish for the chance to leave their country and come to America, where they can live the “American Dream.” Since John Winthrop’s *City Upon a Hill* speech, America has been the place to recreate what you have lost and create what you do not have. This idea of American Exceptionalism has existed for centuries, creating the idea of the American Utopia. However, America has its flaws like any other nation, including racism, sexism, inequality, etc.; but people still see America as a Utopia. Why is that? Is it because of the way the U.S. government has made a connection with its people and how that relationship has influenced its laws? We may be able to gain insights by focusing on why other countries “failed,” and how American Exceptionalism has played a role in being seen as such.

Philosophical Approach to a “Perfect Society”

The term “utopia,” was first coined in Sir Thomas More’s book *Utopia.* His book described a fictional island in the Atlantic that depicted the island’s

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3 Id.
4 Id.
5 Id.
6 Id.
society, religion, social, and political customs. It is an imagined community or society that possesses highly desirable or nearly perfect qualities for its citizens. Some would say that his book described it more like a monastery. However, this is not the first time a utopia was described after Plato and Aristotle published their views on a utopia. In *The Republic*, Plato discusses one of the first notions of justice, focusing on a fair polis (city-state) and the just man. Plato writes that the ideal society has three classes, the producers, the auxiliaries, and the guardians, and for that society to be ideal, their relationship must be at equilibrium, perfect. The classes all have their function: the producers are the people who create/produce goods, the auxiliaries are the police/military, and the guardians are the politicians, the rulers. And they must focus on their work and do their job correctly and perfectly so that a society can maintain its status as just.

Aristotle has his own idea of the “perfect society” in his book *Politics*. Aristotle somewhat believes there is no such thing as a perfect society, but one can be comfortable in society, by having political power. But, to have that political power you must be part of the polis. Aristotle believes “man is a political animal,” and that a man can do good or bad with his power. He identified the good as being a constitutional government, an aristocracy, or a kingship. The bad would be a democracy, an oligarchy, or tyranny. Aristotle said the polis goal is to help every citizen be happy, which is a realistic goal if the government, military service, religion, and land are all shared among the individuals. Many disagree with Aristotle and his “perfect society,” because it is seen as being more feasible but less utopian, while Plato and *The Republic* are the opposite. Steven Thomason argues that Aristotle’s ideas are not

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7 Id.
9 Id.
10 Id.
12 Id.
feasible nor are they recommendations. Instead, they are experiments or thoughts. However, people still prefer Plato’s ideas because it envisions more of a utopia, rather than suggestions on how to live a “comfortable” life.

**Becoming the Dystopia**

When America got its independence from Great Britain, it was a shock to the world. Not only because Great Britain lost land, but also because of their form of government. When the revolution started in America, the colonists thought they could change the British government’s law and rules by revolting against them. It did not take long before the colonists realized that there had been no change. The colonists needed to choose a type of government they hoped would rule the new nation if they won the war. There were very few successful governments that they could choose from, and they knew they did not want to choose a monarchy. Republics, such as Rome and England, often fail, as well as a number of Republics in Europe, many of which were smaller than the colonies. The American colonists feared Democracies because of the writings of Plato and Aristotle. So, they looked within and realized they wanted the people to have a say, but they want elected officials to have “the final” say. So they decided to take a gamble, with a Democratic-Republic, which they just called a Republic.

13 Steven Thomason, *Aristotle’s Ideal Regime as Utopia*, Brewminate, 2017,
14 James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America*, Internet Archive
15 Id.
16 Id.
17 Plato, *The Republic*, translated by Benjamin Jowett,
http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html, (last visited April 7, 2021.)
18 Aristotle, *Politics the History of Economic Thought*, 1999,
https://historyofeconometricthought.mcmaster.ca/aristotle/Politics.pdf, (last visited Mar 21, 2021.)
Many countries did not believe the United States would survive, because they choose to organize as a Republic and after George Washington stepped down, many believed that his successor, John Adams would not be able to lead effectively. Because America chose to be a Republic and republics were associated with Rome,\(^{19}\) which many associate with the concept of self-destruction after the fall of the Roman Republic.\(^{20}\) The norms established in Rome were broken constantly.\(^{21}\) The Senators murdered Julius Caesar, the Roman general and statesman that the Roman people liked the most. Augustus Caesar, the first Roman emperor, thought he could save the country, but by the time he was empowered Rome was too far gone, and the people revolted against the government. There are lessons to be learned from Julius Caesar and Augustus Caesar if compared with Washington and Adams, respectively, because when a popular leader is gone, and a less great leader steps in, their people usually disapprove of the lesser leader.\(^{22}\)

Another comparison would be England when they were a Republic. The Commonwealth (or the English Republic) during the period of interregnum (a period of time between two reigns) on the British Isles, occurred following the English Civil War and the execution of King Charles I. After the execution, Parliament ran the country and it was called Rump Parliament. Oliver Cromwell, one of the leaders of the Roundheads during the English Civil War and referred to as Lord Protector, dissolved parliament because he viewed them as worse than the King they executed saying, “I command ye, therefore, upon the peril of your lives, to depart immediately out of this place,”\(^{23}\) and he


\(^{20}\) Id.


ended his speech with, “In the name of God, go!”24 At first, his reign seemed better than that of Charles I and better than the Rump Parliament, and while some viewed him as better, his record shows he was worse and more oppressive. After his death, his son, Richard Cromwell,25 became Lord Protector. He was weaker than his father, and the former English/Scottish Monarchy saw that, and they used that to take back the British Isles.26

The Progression of American Law and Society

The founders of the United States and the authors of the U.S. Constitution were very fortunate that their “gamble” worked well.27 The success of the Republic established in America made the country very attractive to immigrants. Many of the first immigrants to the US were of Irish, British, and German descent.28 The U.S. was perceived as being a very inviting place for white men. These immigrants left their countries because their countries did not have the freedoms and opportunities that were available to them in America.29 They had the chance to do anything in America and saw America in the words of Seymour Martin Lipset as, “the first new nation.”30 In the immigrants’ countries of origin, it was common for only people of high socio-economic status to participate in government. And those people did not represent the public, they represented themselves. But in America, people of

24 Id.
26 Id.
29 Id.
low economic classes and social status could participate in government, but not only that, it was their right to participate in government. By the 1830s, French diplomat and philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville, described the US as “exceptional,” and from then on, the US was seen as “exceptional.”

Along with the right to participate in government, immigrants saw the U.S. had many other rights that could not be taken away. Other countries said the people had rights, but nothing as detailed as the rights in the U.S. Constitution, particularly the Bill of Rights and the other Amendments. The Amendments detail the rights of the people and how there would not be an infringement of the people’s rights. And the people were not afraid the government would take away their rights. The people saw the U.S. government as looking forward, instead of regressing. This led to some people seeing the United States as a utopia, something they thought was impossible or unrealistic.

During the Civil War, many immigrants joined the Union Army. They saw there was a need for more progress in U.S. history, and many wanted to be part of it, to be able to say we needed to make sure all men had rights, regardless of their race. In 1885, the U.S. received the Statue of Liberty as a gift from France, after World War I. The statue became a beacon and symbol

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33 Id.
35 Id.
of hope and liberty to many, especially immigrants.\(^{38}\) During World War I, the U.S. tried to stay out of the war, because the issue and cause of the war had nothing to do with America. But, following the Zimmerman Telegram, the U.S. entered the war.\(^{39}\) After the war, the U.S. ratified the Nineteenth Amendment,\(^{40}\) which gave women the right to vote, and the U.S. helped create the League of Nations. Though the U.S. would never be part of the League of Nations, President Woodrow Wilson tried in vain to join.

America the Superpower

Though there have been changes to the U.S., the American government has remained virtually the same, there have been some additional amendments to our Constitution, but the U.S. legal structure, has not changed substantially. Some countries fail and neighboring countries even fear they may be the next to fail. That was the case when the Russian Tsar failed and the remaining monarchies in Europe feared being next to fail.\(^{41}\) However, because of the relationship between the government and the people, the balance of power, and the stability experienced by the U.S. and its Constitution, this fear of failure has not traditionally been a part of the American psyche. And with this close and interactive relationship, the government can make appropriate laws to help the people. This is what many countries lack, a relationship. Because


\(^{39}\) Evan Andrews, What was the Zimmermann Telegram, History, Aug. 31, 2018, https://www.history.com/news/what-was-the-zimmermann-telegram, (last visited April 7, 2021.)

\(^{40}\) Id.

they are so separated, the government does not know what the people want or need, which many times leads a people to revolt or flee the country.\textsuperscript{42} This is where American Exceptionalism\textsuperscript{43} comes into play. The relationship that exists is unseen; as a result, many people want to live in the United States.\textsuperscript{44}

When the Great Depression struck, the U.S. was not able to recover quickly, nor was any other country. But the Hoover Administration failed to lead the charge to stop the Depression,\textsuperscript{45} resulting in President Franklin Roosevelt, winning the 1932 Election. Roosevelt saw the need for social and economic programs to help better the U.S. economy and the people suffering from the effects of the Depression.\textsuperscript{46} Roosevelt was also not afraid to help the British from 1939 to 1941 with the war efforts, even before the U.S. entered World War II. After World War II, the U.S. emerged as one of if not the largest superpower in the world.\textsuperscript{47} This drew even more immigrants to the U.S., because of its ability to maintain stability from the end of World War I through the Great Depression and World War II and emerge on top after three devastating events covering about thirty years.\textsuperscript{48} The U.S. also pioneered the creation of the United Nations,\textsuperscript{49} an organization that was needed more than ever post-World War II. That leadership, establishing the United Nations, led America to be the symbol of progression, not only domestically, but also

\textsuperscript{42} Id.
\textsuperscript{45} Lionel Robbins, \textit{The Great Depression}, 1934, https://mises.org/library/great-depression-0, (last visited April 7, 2021.)
\textsuperscript{46} Id.
\textsuperscript{48} Id.
\textsuperscript{49} Id.
internationally. From the end of WWII to 1991, the U.S. led in the fight against Communism. Even though some argue that the U.S. was looking at Communism from the “wrong angle”, it did stop dictatorships that oppressed people’s rights.\textsuperscript{50} And from the 1980s to the present, the US led in the fight against terrorism, helping to make the world a more secure place and enable it to progress into the future.\textsuperscript{51}

Conclusion

American Exceptionalism continues to be seen today. People still take chances to come to the United States because they see it as a utopia. The U.S. has always chosen to pursue progress, never to regress. The United States truly understands the meaning of “adapt or die”. And because of this, it is seen as a model for a utopia, though there are still issues that need to be fixed. President Theodore Roosevelt said, “This country will not be a good place for any of us to live in unless we make it a good place for all of us to live in.”\textsuperscript{52} Citizens of the U.S. try to practice this quote because they understand even though there are problems, a strong bond exists between the government and the people. If the government knows what the people need, they can be helped. Americans are not afraid to fix those problems that are identified and then to lead the charge to make the idea of the American utopia a reality.


\textsuperscript{51} Id.