

OPENING ADDRESS

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM, GLOBAL SECURITY, AND HUMAN DIGNITY: THE GREAT CHALLENGE OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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Thank you, Dean Mengler, for your very kind introduction, and thank you for allowing me to participate in what I think is going to be a very interesting and very exciting day talking about some of the most important questions of our time for Americans: What is exceptionalism, how has it worked when you apply it, what have we learned from history? And I'm very glad that St. Thomas Law School is doing this. I don't think it's been done elsewhere. It's a subject that we should look into, and I'm very grateful to be included.

The idea of American exceptionalism runs through almost all of American history, probably beginning during the colonial days when John Winthrop famously told his flock in Boston Harbor that "we shall be as a city upon a hill," to act in covenant with God, a new Israel, to live nobly in his service.¹ We thought of ourselves as different from other societies: new, innocent, and free from the old cynical world, committed to doing good.

Since then, we have believed not only that we are good but at times that we are the "goodest." If you read Teddy Roosevelt's hot rhetoric about the need to civilize the Indian or about the virtue of remaking the Philippines in our image,² you get an idea of how potent and enduring this idea has been.

Woodrow Wilson was perhaps the foremost advocate of this idea, and his vision continues, I might say, to dominate American thinking. He once put it this way: "It was as if, in the Providence of God, a continent had been

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1. See generally John Winthrop, *A Modell of Christian Charity* (1630) (available at <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html>).

2. See Theodore Roosevelt, Second Annual Message, *State of the Union* (Dec. 2, 1902) (available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29543>).

kept unused and waiting for a peaceful people who loved liberty and the rights of men more than they loved anything else to come and set up an unselfish commonwealth.”³

Wilson abhorred colonialism. His experience in Mexico and his view of the Philippine disaster convinced him that empire and colonialism were wrong and that America should stand for independence and self-rule. And his League of Nations was created to establish an idealized world community of self-ruled nations to replace colonialism.

The idea that America should be a world leader—the “indispensable nation” as Madeleine Albright put it⁴—in support of democracy, freedom, and human rights is an old one, and, in my view, a precious principle of American life. Certainly, American primacy is right there for all to see. As the *Financial Times* recently noted, we spend more on our military than do all of the other nations of the world combined.⁵ All across the world, America is found as the dominant regional power, or at least, an indispensable presence in balancing local rivalries.

Our economic power is reflected not only in our unrivaled wealth but in the awesome lead we enjoy in science, technology, and innovation. And similarly, American culture—our lifestyles—are profoundly attractive across the globe, particularly to the young.

At the core of America’s prestige and stature, I truly believe, is our nation’s exceptional constitutional system that separates power among our branches of government. Millions of our fellow human beings across the globe are astounded that in America, even the president must obey the law. Yet we remain vulnerable, as 9/11 brutally reminds us.

As someone wrote: “Despite all that we have done, despite all of our Western military power, yet a small fanatical band inflicts losses upon us every day.” Those threats may well be growing and becoming increasingly dangerous as nuclear proliferation by rogue nations—like North Korea and Iran, and the illicit trading of fissile materials—seem to slip beyond our control. That’s another topic, but it is the most dangerous thing in the world today because, although all the other things are terrible, if they get their hands on these nuclear weapons or fissile materials and start using them, they can destroy us all.

I also believe ours is a more dangerous world because of the impact that hubristic ideas of American exceptionalism have had upon American policies and action. Mary McGrory, whom some of you know, the late wonderful columnist, wrote that too often under Bush, America acted like “the

3. Woodrow Wilson, Commencement Address, *A Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy* (West Point, June 13, 1916), in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* vol. 37, 214 (Arthur S. Link ed., Princeton U. Press 1981).

4. Bob Herbert, *In America; War Games*, 147 N.Y. Times sec. 4, p. 17 (Feb. 22, 1998).

5. Salamander Davoudi, *Further Request to Fund Troops Likely*, Fin. Times 10 (Feb. 3, 2004).

SUV of nations: It hogs the road and guzzles the gas and periodically has to run over something—such as another country—to get to its Middle East filling station.”⁶

We entered the war in Iraq justified by American ideals. “America,” Bush said, “has never been an empire. We may be the only great power in history that had the chance, and refused—preferring greatness to power and justice to glory.”⁷ The president’s decision to start the war was supported by advisors who have been called hard realists, who believed power is the only thing that is credible in this cruel, old world, and also by so-called neocons who believe in what has been called democratic imperialism, the idea that the muscular use of American power to topple tyrants and then to replace them with our help by democracies is the way to go.

I believe the war in Iraq has been a disaster to our kids and our families above all, but to our entire nation as well. In the name of democracy, we invaded Iraq believing that we were building democracy, removing tyranny, while attacking and weakening terrorism. All of that reasoning was tragically wrong. In fact, we walked into an ancient hornets’ nest of religious and sectarian anger, into what Churchill—who knew Iraq well—once called “an ungrateful volcano,”⁸ and while we talked of democracy the Shias, Sunnis, and Kurds have struggled for advantage over each other. Iran has angled for influence; the Sunnis receive help from abroad. As we know from this morning’s paper, the violence rises every day. We are bogged down in Iraq and have become less credible to our adversaries like Iran and North Korea who may have the bomb, not to mention to the less-helpful states who now feel less exposed to our anger.

As has been reported, world opinion turned sharply against us throughout Europe, across much of Asia, and especially in Muslim nations. Just this fall a poll by the respected German Marshall Fund showed that in Europe, 72 percent of Europeans disapprove of Bush’s foreign policy and 59 percent believe that U.S. leadership in global affairs is undesirable.⁹ These are European democracies answering those questions.

I have often been stunned by the brusque style of this administration, especially in the early years. I will never forget the president’s public humiliation of the Nobel Laureate South Korea President Kim Dae Jong during the early days. I just couldn’t believe it and still can’t believe it. But gracelessness is not the only issue. The deeper problem is that the funda-

6. Mary McGrory, *Pit-Stop Presidency*, Wash. Post B7 (Oct. 27, 2002).

7. George W. Bush, Speech, *A Distinctly American Internationalism* (Ronald Reagan Pres. Lib., Simi Valley, Cal., Nov. 19, 1999) (transcr. available at <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/bush/wspeech.htm>).

8. Ltr. from Winston S. Churchill to David Lloyd George (Sept. 1, 1922) (available at http://www.winstonchurchill.org/files/public/Ungrateful_Volcano.pdf).

9. German Marshall Fund, *Transatlantic Trends-Key Findings 2005*, <http://www.transatlantictrends.org/doc/TTKeyFindings2005.pdf> (accessed Mar. 8, 2006).

mental premise of this administration's revolution—that America's security rests on America's willingness to go it alone—proved to be a profound mistake. It is America unbound, the Bush revolution in foreign policy; I believe it has been a radical and disastrous break with the enormously successful bipartisan tradition of American foreign and security policy during the post-war years. In addition to this unilateral go-it-alone approach, the administration also withdrew from the sackful of crucial international treaties, and trashed the UN.

I hope that we are now seeing a change in those policies. The president's recent speech to the UN was far different and more respectful than his earlier speeches. Condoleezza Rice has declared that "now is the time for diplomacy."¹⁰ Our multilateral negotiations with North Korea are vastly different from the bolt-and-run train wrecks of the past.

I also hope that we are relearning that even America needs friends. Even America must use its power in a way that is seen as legitimate, and none of America's most crucial challenges can be resolved alone; they require the active cooperation of others. We simply must understand other societies and their histories. That's part of what we need to know. We must be very leery of using force in a way that looks like an American occupation or smells of empire. Read Stanley Karnow's great history of the American occupation of the Philippines entitled *In Our Image*.¹¹ We went there, we thought, to save them; but they believed in their own liberty and fought bitterly against us. We talked civilization; they saw us as colonialists. I remember Vietnam because I lived through it as a young senator. We went in there and we said, "we've come to build an independent nation for you," but the Vietnamese never believed us. They thought we were just another colonial power replacing the French and, try as we would, we couldn't change their view.

I also believe it is crucial that we act in a way that's consistent with what we believe is America, and I was sickened when I heard about Abu Ghraib. And so was John McCain, who knows something about torture. We pay such a dreadful price when we assault the very essence of our national character.

I remember sitting out there in law class, just as you are today, wondering what on earth I could do with my life. And I ended up in politics and spent much of my life working on security and foreign matters. And I believe one thing I learned—I know I learned—is that American ideals do matter: who we are, how we behave, what we say, and how we use our influence abroad. And I would like to use a couple of examples from my own experience to try to make the point that that principle suggests.

10. Condoleezza Rice, Speech, *President Thanks Secretary of State Rice at Swearing-In Ceremony*, (Washington, D.C., Jan. 28, 2005) (transcr. available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/wh/rem/41340.htm>).

11. Stanley Karnow, *In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines* (Ballantine 1990).

About halfway through our administration, there was a big problem with what they called the “boat people.” In Vietnam, Laos, that part of the world, the Communists were pushing, particularly, people of ethnic Chinese origin out to sea in a cruel way, often in unseaworthy boats, often taking all their money as they did it. And thousands and thousands of these distressed human beings were going out to sea, trying to find refuge somewhere where they could land and save their families.

Finally, the states of first refuge like Malaysia and the Philippines said they couldn’t take any more people and started pushing them back out to sea when they tried to land there. It was a major world crisis. The high commissioner of refugees took the position that this was all a poverty problem: these people were suddenly picking up and leaving Vietnam and Laos because they were poor. That wasn’t true; they were pushed out. This was a deliberate, vicious policy.

A lot of people in American government and elsewhere argued that there was nothing we could do about it; it was beyond our reach. But we decided to convene at an international conference on refugees. We, America’s leadership, went there and called for a world program to receive these people, to find and resettle them; and we ordered the Sixth Fleet out into the ocean to protect and pick up these refugees, many of whom were going to be drowned or subject to piracy. And we changed the policy, and hundreds of thousands of fellow human beings found a safe place to live.

And now, if you go over to St. Paul and you go to a public school, you’ll find about 30 percent of the school children there are Hmong.¹² They’re among the families whose lives were saved because America, responding to principle and values, did something unexpected and unachieved before. I think that’s an example of changing the world. We didn’t fire a shot but we used American ideals to do what was right.

I will never forget working under Carter to press the cause of human rights. We went after the Soviet Union for their police-state tactics; we went after the apartheid government of South Africa for their vicious racial policies; we went after the tyrannical governments of Chile and Argentina and we went after the Marcos kleptocracy. In each case it wasn’t a military invasion; it was America talking publicly to their leaders and to their citizens about things we felt were important because of what human beings should believe. And I think we made a big difference in the community in the Soviet Union fighting the Soviet dictatorship. They’ve all reported that it was the fact that our administration spoke out that gave them courage to believe that they could somehow break the dictatorship’s grip.

12. Toni Randolph, *St. Paul Delegation Visits Hmong Refugee Camp* (Minn. Pub. Radio Feb. 27, 2004) (radio broadcast, transcr. available at http://news.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/2004/02/27_randolph_t_visit/).

When we went after South Africa and apartheid, I remember people in the CIA and in the State Department coming to me and saying, don't touch that, stay away from that, that's a traditional thing, that's beyond the reach of government, stay away. But we took the position—and I think we were right—that racial discrimination, vicious segregation of people, is a topic that we, as Americans who had to learn the hard way about this issue, had a right to be heard on again.

And I remember I went to see Mr. Vorster in Vienna. Vorster is a terrible human being. He was the president of South Africa. He had sworn allegiance to Hitler in World War II—a really nice guy. And I really went after him and I said “You will never have good relations with the United States or with the rest of the world until you eliminate apartheid and allow the people of your country to be full participants in your nation.”

These are examples I give because I think they are examples of how American ideals are important. They shouldn't be latent matters in our life, and when they're used properly as moral weapons, they can make changes in the world that are deep and profound without stepping into the fateful step of, in some cases, empire or unneeded wars.

I'm not a pacifist. I think there are times when we need military forces.

I think America is truly exceptional and I think our ideals are what make us exceptional. But we still have to be reasonable and sensible, and we have to know about other nations and we have to understand the history of empire. If we do those things, we can really make a difference in the world, and I think that's what the world needs now. The world wants us, they starve for our leadership, but they want it to be responsible leadership.

So I hope when many of you students graduate, you can go out and help build and strengthen that indispensable, exceptional America—that city upon a hill—that the world needs so desperately. Thank you.