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**PURITANIZMI DHE RRËNJËT E EKSPACIONALIZMIT
AMERIKAN**

**ПУРИТАНИЗМОТ И КОРЕНИТЕ НА АМЕРИКАНСКИОТ
ЕКСПЕЦИОНАЛИЗАМ**

**PURITANISM AND THE ROOTS OF AMERICAN
EXCEPTIONALISM**

ABSTRACT

From the very beginning of the U.S. history the idea of a burden mission to spread its high values thus ‘civilizing’ the other parts of the decadent world has been a crucial part of American foreign policy. Puritans during their journey to New England, the place where they immigrated from British Empire’s religious oppression were referring to as ‘the city upon the hill’. Their leader Winthrop stated that God has given to the Puritans a special commission to build America as a moral model because ‘the eyes of all people are upon us’. That was a destiny according to Puritans.

After the Thirteen Colonies declared independence the idea of being different and unique from the Old World was seen as the core feature of Americanism, thereupon, a missionary impulse took root in foreign policy. Some of the Founding Fathers were Puritans and believed that U.S. has a global mission to promote their model of liberty because it is the highest moral level comparing with others. In every

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U.S. Presidency the messianic view was articulated upon the American exceptionalism concept meaning that U.S. virtues are worthy to spread and a religious lexicon was a key concept within this approach. During the history the American exceptionalism was used to justify isolationism, the Manifest Destiny in 19th century, the fight against communism, the war on terror and the idea of “imposing democracy” were undertaken in the name of God to expand American civilization, thus, rescuing the world.

The main focus of this article is the connection between Puritanism and the U.S. foreign policy. What is the legacy of Puritanism in American messianic attitude? Is the American exceptionalism just another face of Puritanism? What tells today Puritanism about the U.S. foreign policy and vice versa?

Keywords: *Puritanism, American Exceptionalism, Foreign Policy.*

FROM PURITANS TO THE FOUNDING FATHERS

The American history, have told us, starts on July 4, 1776, when leaders of thirteen Colonies in a federal holiday commemorating decided to adopt a constitution and unanimously declared the countries' independence. The so-called ‘founding fathers’ established thirteen American colonies and the United States of America was born that day as an antipode of the British Empire. A famous declaration of independence was adopted by proclaiming that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”³ “The ‘pursuit of happiness’ is such a key element of the ‘American (ideological) dream’.”⁴ According to the ‘founding fathers’, these rights were self-evident truths that no one could abolish it, were taken for granted because these were rights *per se*. But does really American *civilization* start on July 4? Is the American history only 240 years old? How happened that the Founding Fathers were illuminated with these rights and values such as the idea of freedom and liberty?

We can trace The *Western* American history back to the 16th and 17th century, and there we can meet the *real* Founding Fathers of the

³ Declaration of Independence “The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen United States of America”, CONGRESS, July 4, 1776.

⁴ SlavojZizek, In defense of lost cause, Verso, London 2008, p. 466.

America nation named Puritans, whom we symbolically call as ‘the founding fathers of the founding fathers.’ Directly or indirectly almost all of the ‘Founding Fathers’ who declared and signed the declaration of independence of the Thirteen Colonies were influenced or at least have had detailed knowledge or at least heard about Puritanism. Therefore, we can draw a connection between the Pilgrim Fathers, who gave conditionally the ‘ideological background’ of America’s values and morality, and the Founding Fathers, who tried to materialize Puritans values. Put differently, Puritans made up the spirit of the American identity, they created a comprehensive set of values known as the American Creed – basically based on the Bible, which they tried to re-interpret, thus, purifying Protestant Reformation from errors and deviations. This re-interpretation of the Bible, made them to behave many times in an intolerant way towards other religious sects that somehow did not subjugate to Puritanism. On the other hand, these values – directly or indirectly – were taken from the Founding Fathers, thus, creating a new nation based primarily on Puritanism. To put a long story shortly, it is not an exaggeration at all to say that “there are two ‘Fathers’ in American history: the ‘Pilgrim Fathers’ and the ‘Founding Fathers.’ Their thoughts make up the source of the American spirit received by later generations of Americans.”⁵

PURITANS JOURNEY TO “THE CITY ON THE HILL”

Puritans were a sect within Protestantism that sought “to purify the existing England Church whose Catholic ‘rights’ they believed, had no foundation in the Holy Bible.”⁶ The existing England Church establishment labeled them as extremists and radicals, thus, “by the time of the early 1600s, the Puritans were facing religious persecution at the merciless hands of Charles I.”⁷ Living under pressure and threatened to be persecuted by the British Empire’s institutions – indeed many of them were persecuted or even killed – Puritans agreed that the only remained solution is emigrating i.e. leaving the country. The pilgrimage of Puritans has shaped the modern history deeply, substantially and in many different ways as well. Maybe there are no other cases in

⁵ Koichi Mori, “Religious roots of American Foreign Policy: The origin of the Consciousness of the Mission of America”, *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Summer 2001, p. 69.

⁶ Seongjong Song, “American Exceptionalism at a Crossroads”, *The Korean Journal of International Studies*, Vol.13-1 (April 2015), p. 243.

⁷ Robert Joseph Napoli, “Thirteen Colonies: the Real History of America”, 2014, p. 27.

human history that a single journey had more influence in shaping the world as we know it today.

Everything started on the shores of the Massachusetts Bay colony in a sermon given by John Winthrop – later labeled as the greatest sermon of the millennium – where he “described the Puritan settlement to be built as the city on the hill.”⁸ The passage was ‘borrowed’ directly from the Bible⁹ which shows that Puritans were religious people that believed to bewitness for other nations and on the highest moral scale as Winthrop once put it “(the) eyes of all people were upon them”¹⁰. The sermon ‘A Model of Christian Charity’ delivered by Winthrop¹¹ and particularly these phrases quoted above has “certainly become one of the sacred texts of that account of American history known as ‘American Exceptionalism’.”¹² Surely, “in any case Winthrop bequeathed no political manifesto. The famous ‘City on a Hill’ passage appears in the Sermon on the Mount as one in a list of metaphors Jesus uses to describe his disciples. He speaks of them as the salt of the earth, the light of the world, a city on a hill, and a lamp not hidden under a bushel... But those pastors were quoting the Bible to make theological points to Christian audiences; none was quoting Winthrop to make political points to American audiences.”¹³

Puritans have believed in a really comprehensive set of ideas and values that profoundly influenced the establishing of a new commonwealth under God’s eyes named the New England. They continually have referred to themselves as *the children of Tradition*, and have believed that they represent the Divine will on the Promised Land, which was built up totally in contrary to Europe’s political and religious inheritance and was different i.e. unique due to the fact of these historical developments. Undoubtedly, the Thirteen Colonies would be a

⁸ James W. Ceaser, “American Exceptionalism: Is it real, is it good? The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism”, *American Political Thought: A Journal of Ideas, Institutions, and Culture*, vol. 1 (Spring 2012), p.5.

⁹ See: Bible, Matthew 5:14. The passage says that: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” (English Standard Version).

¹⁰ Newt Gingrich, “A Nation Like No Other: Why American Exceptionalism Matters”, Regnery Publishing, Washington 2011, p. 35.

¹¹ Although, there is not a single historical document that clarifies the circumstances in which this sermon has been delivered by Winthrop or even that proves that this sermon has been delivered at all.

¹² Godfrey Hodgson, “The Myth of American Exceptionalism”, Yale University Press, London 2009, p. 1.

¹³ Walter A. McDougall, “American Exceptionalism...Exposed”, Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 2012, p 6.

religious country because as Winthrop argued that “previous colonies had failed because they were carnal not religious. Only an enterprise governed in the name of the reformed religions stood a chance.”¹⁴ Of course these colonies differed greatly from each other as a result of their historical, societal and ideological background but all of them were “founded largely in accordance with the Puritan Creed.”¹⁵ What is interesting to bear in mind is that “shortly after the founding of the Massachusetts Bay colony in the seventeenth century, some Puritans lamented a decline from earlier virtue.”¹⁶ The very same feeling – the feeling of moral, political and economic decline – we can trace in the Founding Fathers worries about the decline of the new American Republic. Here upon, we can say that “America always is depressed, and always is stagnated, and always is in an alarming crisis, and never was otherwise,”¹⁷ and that “in part, cultural pessimism is simply very American, extending back to our Puritan roots.”¹⁸

Despite that the term exceptionalism is a tremendous new ‘*creation*’, which came into usage only during the 20th century, Puritans’ beliefs of uniqueness and Puritanism idea of their settlements/ colonies¹⁹ as an exceptional case is centuries old. Without any doubts that their efforts were directed into establishing a new Godly state as a city on the hill and not an irreligious or deviated carnal. This city on the hill would be a nation based on Puritans understandings of Protestantism and would serve as model for other nations across the globe. Even more, Puritans believed to have the right to spread their high civilization to ‘the other’ nations, thus, civilizing the barbarians. This attempt to civilize the others as they understood was a calling from the Almighty God – a duty that unconditionally and regardless of circumstances should be fulfilled. Here we see the idea of America as an exceptional nation taking root and the very first missionary impulse of the early New England settlers. In really similar way but many years later the Manifest

¹⁴ Paul Johnson, “A history of the American people”, HarperCollins Publishers, New York 1997, p. 31.

¹⁵ Yu-yeh Wang, “The codification movement in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1630-1650: early development of the rule of law in the American colony”, *American Studies* XIX, No. 2, June 1989, p. 73.

¹⁶ Joseph S. Nye, “Is the American century over?”, Polity Press Polity Press, Cambridge 2015 pp. 22.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.22.

¹⁸ Joseph Nye, “The Paradox of American Power”, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002, p.114.

¹⁹ See: Samuel P. Huntington, “Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity”, Simon & Schuster, London 2004.

Destiny resembled the Puritans idea of being chosen by God to spread the American civilization and rescuing ‘the other’. In recent years, the Bush’s idea of ‘imposing democracy’ and especially the ‘global war on terrorism’ policy can be seen as a new phase of Puritans idea of the Divine Will. Needles to mention, the ultimate aim of the Bush’s global war on terrorism policy is to rescue Muslims or as Slavoj Zizek put it “to save Muslims themselves from the fundamentalist threat.”²⁰ It stands to reason that the ‘war on terror’ in which America is engaged in the 21st century is taken in the name of ‘*principle and values*’, for the sake of the greater good and to rescue humanity from the devil forces.

Undoubtedly, the Puritans settlement is the most important moment in America’s history, as Alexis de Tocqueville – a famous French traveler – proclaimed that he sees “the whole destiny of America contained in the first Puritan who reached its shores, like the whole human race in the first man.”²¹ Perhaps in order to understand American civilization, society and even today’s U.S. foreign policy, we have to reassess Puritanism and its heritage. Because most of the US foreign ideological standpoints are “products or adaptations of traditions of American political thought reaching back to the Puritans.”²² But the Puritan idea of America as an exceptional case or other Puritans’ beliefs differ substantially in many aspects with today’s understandings of American exceptionalism. However, the US foreign policy discourse is remarkably consistent – paradoxically and surprisingly – in maintaining the basic features of Puritanism that of the America as exceptional case “and therefore qualitatively different from all other countries.”²³

AMERICA: A NATION LIKE NO OTHER

The very same discourse of uniqueness, greatness and the messianic attitude, which can be traced back to the first generation of Pilgrim Fathers, are the core elements of American exceptionalism as well. The core element of American Exceptionalism is the public support for America’s ‘special’ burden and role in the world affairs. America a nation like no other” – is not a sentence like any other but is the shortest

²⁰ Slavoj Zizek, “Welcome to the desert of the real! Five essays on September 11 and related dates”, Verso, London 2002, p. 90.

²¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, “Democracy in America”, volume 2, Liberty Fund, Indiana 2010. p. 455.

²² Siobhan McEvoy- Levy, “American Exceptionalism and US foreign policy”, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, p. 20.

²³ Seymour Martin Lipset, “American Exceptionalism: A double-edged sword”, Norton & Company LTD, London 1996 p. 4.

symbolic explanation of the so-called American Exceptionalism ideology, and at the same time it is a meaningful maxim that helps us to straighten out the basics of America as an exceptional case. Furthermore, it resembles the Puritans fundamental belief of being unique, qualitatively different, and great. But we have to bear in mind that “American exceptionalism does not refer to a single monolithic body of thought. Rather, it includes a wide range of unique features, from religious liberty and political freedom to justice, republicanism, egalitarianism, individuality, democracy, laissez-faire economics, social mobility, equality before the law, economic prosperity, and populism.”²⁴ What everyone needs to know about the American exceptionalism is that “[the] American exceptionalism has always had two sides: the one eager to set the world to rights, the other ready to turn its back with contempt if its message should be ignored.”²⁵ As we see the American exceptionalism is a complex and twofold concept or as Lipset put it is a double-edged sword concept, which “not only celebrates the uniqueness and special of the US, but also elevates America to a higher moral plan than other countries.”²⁶ Hereupon, “a political culture of American exceptionalism complicates matters by making the US foreign policy uniquely moralistic.”²⁷

American exceptionalism is the cornerstone of American foreign moralist policy that is in a paradoxical way followed persistently by most of the US Presidencies, and can be seen as the American peculiar version of Euro-centrism. From an overwhelmingly exceptionalist discourse within the U.S. foreign policy, the exceptionalist vision of America with unique burdens and privileges is drawn as derivation of this extreme moralism. This American version of Euro-centrism or Americano-centrism has been perfectly defined by Steven Walt, who famously identified the U.S. ‘as the nation that has a divinely ordained mission to lead the rest of the world.’²⁸ On the one hand, we can fearlessly conclude that the American exceptionalism ironically “can stimulate both crusading interventionism and complacent withdrawal

²⁴Seongjong Song, “American Exceptionalism...” p. 241.

²⁵Koh, Harold Hongju, “On American Exceptionalism”, Faculty Scholarship Series, Paper 1778, 2003, p. 1480.

²⁶ Tami R. Davis and Sean M. Lynn-Jones, “City upon a hill”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Foreign Policy, No. 66 (Spring, 1987), p.20.

²⁷Joseph Nye, “The Paradox of American Power”, p.112.

²⁸ James L. Guth, “The religious roots of Foreign Policy exceptionalism”, The Review of Faith & International Affairs, Volume 10, 2012, p. 76.

from world affairs.”²⁹ On the other hand, the American exceptionalism is more than just a framework in foreign policy rhetoric. Certainly, it is “a Para-ideology or value-strategy syncretization. American exceptionalism has the potential both to foster and prevent international peace and stability.”³⁰ Additionally, during centuries and especially in 20th century American exceptionalism has stimulated and fueled both interventionism and isolationism in international relations arena, thus, making the US foreign policy of 20th century to fluctuate between this two different theories in matter of the world affairs.

One of the widely known peculiarities of the American exceptionalism is the promoting of the human rights in international scale, and accounts human rights, and protection of fundamental human rights as cornerstone of not only its foreign policy but in the establishment of the United States as the U.S. Department of State put it. At the same time, many presidents have advocated human rights as fundamental and Universalist rights that are granted for all human beings no matter where they live. “Under some administrations, it has promoted human rights as if they were synonymous with American values, while under others, it has emphasized the superiority of American values over international standards.”³¹ So the idea of U.S. global mission to promote their understanding of human rights, liberty, and freedom and ultimately their democracy – a Western democracy of course – was the core of U.S. foreign policy during the 20th century and prevails even today in the new millennia.

Indeed, many world leaders and famous scholars have criticized U.S. for hypocritical and inconsistent foreign policy when it comes to deal with human rights violation. As Ignatieff once said “what is exceptional, and worth explaining, is why America has both been guilty of these failings and also been a driving force behind the promotion and enforcement of global human rights. What needs explaining is the paradox of being simultaneously a leader and an outlier.”³² Especially in times of crises and “when the chips are down, when the stakes are high, American political leaders go back to the narrative and even the language of the Puritans; they do it then, especially, because that is

²⁹ Tami R. Davis and Sean M. Lynn-Jones, “City Upon a Hill...” p. 20.

³⁰ Siobhan McEvoy- Levy, “American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy”, Palgrave Publishers Ltd, New York 2001, p.5.

³¹ Michael Ignatieff, “American Exceptionalism and Human Rights”, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 2005, pp. 1.

³² Ibid, p.2.

when Americans especially want to hear it.”³³ In addition, every presidency starts to use a different discourse and speak about grace, sanctification and consecration “language found nowhere in the Constitution or even the Declaration of Independence. It is biblical, prophetic language, the language of sermons and jeremiads.”³⁴

American exceptionalism has used not only the idea of U.S. messianic mission to enlighten the world but is known as well for using a superlative discourse on defining America. Reagan in one of his speeches and often repeated afterwards claimed that the United States is “the last best hope of man on earth.”³⁵ As he left the Oval Office he explained that “in my mind it was a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace, a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity, and if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That is how I saw it and see it still.”³⁶ Another important moment is the Bush Doctrine of ‘*global war on terrorism*’ and Bush’s affiliation with the Puritanism religious lexicon and Puritans discourse. In order to push forward his foreign policy – especially his global war on terror idea –, the President George W. Bush has spoken out for the ‘*calling*’ for a mission from the ‘*Maker of Heaven*’.³⁷ The idea of using consciously religious language to explain their foreign policy from the U.S. Presidents is nothing new or exceptional, but “what has distinguished Bush from some of his predecessors is that these religious concepts have not only shaped his ultimate objectives but also colored the way in which he viewed reality-sometimes to the detriment of U.S. foreign policy.”³⁸ The current US President Barack Obama occasionally defended the idea of American exceptionalism by stating that “some may disagree, but I believe America is exceptional, in part because we have shown a willingness, to the sacrifice of blood and treasure to stand up, not only for our own narrow self-

³³ George McKenna, “The Puritan Origins of American Patriotism”, Yale University Press, New Heaven 2007, p. xiii.

³⁴ Ibid, p. xiii.

³⁵ Tami R. Davis and Sean M.Lynn-Jones, “City upon a hill”, p. 21.

³⁶ Francis J. Bremer, “John Winthrop: America’s Forgotten Founding Father”, Oxford University Press, 2003, p.368.

³⁷ See: George W. Bush’s Second Inaugural Address delivered at the United States Congress on January 20, 2005.

³⁸ Judis, “The chosen nation: the influence of religion on U.S. foreign policy”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2005, p.1.

interests, but for the interests of all.”³⁹ The American exceptionalism is a vivid concept within the US foreign policy, which is still establishing its main goals concerning the world affairs based on American Creed derived directly from Puritanism.

CONCLUSION

As we saw above, Puritanism has played a great role in shaping American history by giving the *'spirit'* and the ideological background of American Creed, and influences even today's US foreign policy rhetoric and the US God-ordained mission. The history of the Puritanism ideas has started four centuries ago within the British Empire – in their efforts to reform and divide their Anglican Church from the Papacy's influence. In addition, we have seen throughout this article that *'the Founding Fathers'* were affected from the Pilgrim Fathers by taking their ideas, thus, attempting to create a society based on Puritans ideas and beliefs. *'The founding fathers of the founding fathers'* have left behind a great legacy within the American civilization and particularly within the U.S. foreign policy. Furthermore, *the Founding Fathers* have been equipped with the Pilgrim Fathers' values and have seen these values as an ideology that needs to be taken seriously. Therefore, the Founding Fathers and all other American politicians during centuries – with some rare exceptions – have tried to materialize Puritans values in daily politics and especially within the international community.

The Declaration of Independence which was adopted on July 4, 1774 by the Second Continental Congress meeting at Philadelphia, and announced that the thirteen American colonies have declared the independence from the British Empire, has been influenced by Puritans understandings of life, liberty as undeniable rights and the pursuit of Happiness. Even today the US policymakers have established the US foreign policy based on the messianic mission of rescuing and ultimately civilizing *'the other'*. Especially the idea of America as global leader in promoting human rights and democracy can be seen as continuation of Puritans idea of *'the city upon the hill'*, thus, making the US politicians many times to have a moralistic point of view on several issues concerning the world. Because of this moralism, America has engaged in

³⁹Gracy Olmstead, “State of the Union American Exceptionalism Revisited”, The American Conservative, September 25, available at: <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/2013/09/25/american-exceptionalism-revisited-2/>, accessed: November 9, 2016.

many wars “in the name of principles and values”⁴⁰ for spreading their system – claimed to be the best, the highest and the final hope of man on earth. Thus, being the final hope of man on earth, the U.S. has unique burdens and privileges which construct the self-image of the greatest nation in humankind history. God and the religious lexicon continue to be part of the U.S. foreign policy, and influence the U.S. policy makers and society at the large scale, but are always subordinated to politics. After all, the U.S. has subordinated everything in order to ‘impose’ their understanding of democracy, human rights and freedom, because at the end of the day – according to the American Exceptionalism – this is *‘the duty that history has given to them.’*

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