



The Roots of American Exceptionalism & Alternative Visions to it | With Peter Kuznick

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Biography:

Peter Kuznick is Professor of History and Director of the Nuclear Studies Institute at American University in Washington, D.C. He's the co-author of the book *The Untold History of the United States*, written together with Hollywood film director and producer Oliver Stone. He was active in the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements and remains active in antiwar and nuclear abolition efforts.

actVism (acTV):

Thank you for your time Peter! In your book "The Untold History of the United States" you talk about "American Exceptionalism". Could you tell us what you mean when you refer to this concept, track its historical roots as well as provide some modern day examples?

Peter Kuznick (PK):

American exceptionalism is the deeply deeply held belief in the United States that the United States is not only different from all other countries, but the United States is better than all other countries. That all other countries are motivated by greed, by territorial acquisition, by geopolitics, but the United States is different. The United States is motivated to want to do good in the world. The United States wants to spread freedom and democracy. The US is benevolent, it's altruistic, it only wants to improve the world. And so that makes the United States different from all other countries, it makes the United States better than all of the countries, and it gives the United States rights and prerogatives that no other country deserves. That's the way Americans think.

This idea of American exceptionalism is deeply ingrained in American thinking. And even before it was called American exceptionalism it goes back to the colonial roots of America, when John Winthrop came here from England, aboard the *Arbella*, before the settlers disembarked in order to create Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, John Winthrop gives his famous sermon aboard the *Arbella*. And he says, we shall be as a city upon the hill, the eyes of the world will be upon us. We will be God's messengers. If we fail, if we fall to pursue our carnal desires, then we'll be a shame to the Word of God, but if we succeed in what we're trying to do here, then we're gonna lift up God's forces, they will triumph over the Antichrist and they will set the standard for the entire world.

That kind of, both narcissistic approach, but also this idea — this megalomaniacal approach — that the United States represents something different, better, and that we're gonna set the standard for the

rest of mankind, and pull up the other, more lowly, people to our higher esteemed plane. That's the beginning of the concept, it evolves over the years, but it's something uniquely American. We see it in the 1890s when the United States is embarking upon its empire. This idea of the American Empire as uplifting the rest of mankind.

So we've got a responsibility throughout Latin America where we intervene over and over again. We have a responsibility in the Philippines — because up to that point the belief was we had to choose, we could either be a republic and stand for our positive values, or we could become an empire. And that's actually the core of the 1911 election: William Jennings Bryan said we have to stay a Republic, we can't be an empire. McKinley said we must become an empire. But you look at some of the wording — if you give me a chance to read something — when we were deciding what to do with the Philippines, we have Senator Alfred Beveridge of Indiana and he's talking about US Imperial policy. He was the only senator or congressman to actually go to the Philippines, somebody who weighted his word when he got back, and he says, “the Philippines are ours forever. This island empire is the last land left in all the oceans... Our largest trade henceforth must be with Asia. The Pacific is our ocean. More and more Europe will manufacture the most it needs, secure from its colonies the most it consumes. Where shall we turn for consumers of our surplus? Geography answers the question. China is our natural customer... The Philippines give us a base at the door of all the East.... Most future wars will be conflicts for commerce. The power that rules the Pacific, therefore, is the power that rules the world. And, with the Philippines, that power is and will forever be the American Republic.... God has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world. This is the divine mission of America and it holds for us all the profit, all the glory, all the happiness possible to man. We are trustees of the world's progress, guardians of its righteous peace. The judgment of the Master is upon us: Ye have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things.“

That's American exceptionalism: God's chosen people. 58% of Americans, according to a recent survey, said that they believe that God has chosen the United States for a special mission and that mission is to uplift the rest of humanity: 58%. So you go back to Woodrow Wilson at Versailles — Woodrow Wilson says now the world will see the United States as the savior of the world — Savior of the world: Woodrow Wilson.

The idea of American exceptionalism really takes off during the Cold War, when you've got the sociologists and other academics trying to say, What's different about the United States? And at that point they were saying, well we can look at the fact that we don't have a feudal past — that makes the United States different; we can look at our Constitution; we can look at our frontier; we can look at the fact that, unlike the Europeans, we don't have socialism. The big debate was why no socialism in the United States. Europeans have big socialist, labor, communist Parties. The US is different again but they were looking for what was different.

That later becomes a different kind of trope — this idea that not only is the United States is different but the United States is better — and that really emerges with Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. The United States had suffered a lot of blows in the 60s and 70s. The United States had been defeated in Vietnam — by a “peasant” nation — after coming to a stalemate in Korea. The United States was not so mighty and powerful as it wanted to believe it was. We had such racial strife in the 1960s and 1970s, a lot of social discord. And so Ronald Reagan was gonna try to unite the United States around

this glowing vision of America — that America is again the city upon a hill, God's nation, superior in every way. And that idea really takes hold during the 1980s again and it becomes a rallying cry especially for Republicans. Democrats, in those days, were critics of US foreign policy and the US role in the world. Republicans embrace that kind of vision and that superior role for the United States.

By the 1990s and the Clinton era, you've got Secretary of State Madeleine Albright saying, if we “use force, it's because we are America, we are the indispensable nation. We stand taller and see further than other nations into the future.” We have a special right to do this. After 9/11, it became America's national birthright under George W. Bush. This idea of great Americanism and the neocon vision that we can overturn governments at will and try to remake the world, remake the face of the Middle East. We're gonna start with Afghanistan and then we're going to do Iraq and then we're gonna overthrow Syria, then we're gonna overthrow Lebanon. We had a list, they came up with lists of eight or more countries that the United States was obliged to overthrow and recreate in America's image.

And we see this again with Barack Obama. Obama's smarter, he's much smarter than a Reagan or Bush or Trump — much more sophisticated thinker — so he understood some of the irony involved in this. He grew up in Hawaii, grew up you know in Indonesia – countries that had seen that the consequences of American militarism; blood baths in Indonesia and the conquest and the planters in Hawaii. And he also was mixed-race with a father from Kenya and there are a lot of questionable things about his family background, but Obama had a more nuanced view. And at some points, he said I believe in American exceptionalism just as the Brits believe in British exceptionalism, and the Greeks in Greek exceptionalism, and he got attacked for that. He got attacked by Mike Huckabee among others who said, if you don't believe in American exceptionalism you're undercutting the essence the heart of America.

So Obama retrenched and he said, I believe in American exceptionalism. The Washington Post had an article that cited the fact that Obama cites American exceptionalism more than any other president ever did, and it was true. If you would indulge me to look at read something else, when Obama welcomed the troops when they came home from Iraq, he welcomed the troops at Fort Bragg and he says there - he says a lot of crazy stuff — he says, “we're leaving behind a sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq, with a representative government that was elected by its people.” Sure (*Sarcastically said “Sure”*). He says, “... the most important lesson was ... about our national character ... that there's nothing we Americans can't do when we stick together.... And that's why the US military is the most respected institution in our land.” Sadly that might be true (*Peter comments here*). And he says, “that it's our willingness to sacrifice so much for a people that you had never met.” He says, “it was part of what makes us special as Americans. Unlike the old empires, we don't make these sacrifices for territory or for resources, we do it because it's right. There could be no fuller expression of America's support for self-determination than our leaving Iraq to its people.” He says, America has made “America stronger and the world more secure.”

This idea that even a sophisticated, intelligent person like Obama — who knows better — would say that what makes us different is that we just want to make things better. We go to Iraq, you know there was the sign that people used to have during the Iraq war, the sticker, “what is our oil doing under their sand?” You know, Greenspan says in his book that, of course we went to Iraq for oil, but Obama can't admit that; we go there to help the people we make it a better country, and we don't want territory we don't want wealth we just want them to be happier and have more freedom and

democracy. That nonsense runs through. Kissinger says that that only America is inspired by this greater vision.

So this idea runs, you know as we say an untold history, it's the air we breathe in America, it's the water we drink, it's the narcotic that that allows us to think these crazy things about ourselves. I point to Samuel Huntington when Huntington says, the West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion but the subject by the superior application of organized violence. Westerners often forget that fact non-westerners never do. I disagree with Huntington about most almost almost everything, but about that he was right. And so this is deep, very dangerous blindness that runs through America and I see the signs of it everywhere.

I see it when I look at, for example, you turn on the TV and you've got four talking heads saying that the Russian interference in the American election is an act of war. How dare they interfere in American democracy? They're attacking our democracy, is what American broadcasters say. None of them have even the slightest sense of how ironic this is, how blind this is. The United States, which has special forces in 142 countries this year. The United States which is bombing nine countries, the United States which has surveillance all over the entire world. The United States which intervenes in elections all over the world – not just in Russia but everywhere – has been doing so since the creation of the CIA in 1947. How could they not have some sense of perspective and proportion in understanding this, of thinking that when somebody does it to us it is unconscionable but when you do it to everybody else it's our birthright.

And that's the kind of thinking that is so dangerous among American foreign policy elites, and it's what Oliver and I are trying to combat — trying to hold the mirror up to America and say look at yourself. Get a view of what the United States really is, what our history has been. Take it back to the founding there were a lot of great things about the United States but there also was the genocide of the Native Americans.

The fact that our country was born in slavery that we've been a slave nation more than we've been a non-slave nation. That the United States has been the American Empire, has been extensive throughout the world in a way that no other empire has ever been, and that blinds us to the kind of self consciousness that'll allow us to step outside of this.

One of the people who had that understanding better than anybody, as you know Zain, is Henry Wallace. When Wallace became Vice President in 1941 he tried to set an example, he tried to present a vision of a kinder America. And in 1941, Henry Luce declared – Henry Luce is the founder of the Time Life empire (the publishing magnate) – he said that the 20th century must be the American Century, the United States will dominate the world. Henry Wallace the Vice President countered that in his famous speech, the century of the common man, which defined him. He says the 20th century should not be the American Century it should be the century of the common man. Henry Wallace calls for a worldwide People's Revolution in the tradition of the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the Latin American revolutions and the Russian Revolution. He said, we've got to bring the light to people everywhere, that we've got to extend the fruits of science and technology to people all over the world. He says, we've got to end colonialism, end economic exploitation, end imperialism, end monopolies and cartels. We've gotta uplift people around the world and that would be a positive role for the United States, and he says we should do this hand-in-hand with the Soviet Union.

He was opposed to a nuclear arms race, the dropping of the atomic bomb, the Cold War – he fought against that. And you know it's a different vision, there are people throughout American history who have had a different vision of the role the United States should play. Unfortunately they've been silenced too often.

Henry Wallace should have become President in 1945, because he should have been back on the ticket as Vice President for a second term. When Democratic voters were asked on the eve of the Convention in 1944 who they wanted on the ticket as Vice President, 65% said they wanted Henry Wallace, 2% said they wanted Harry Truman. It's a travesty that Truman became Vice President and then President when Roosevelt died on April 12 1945. Had it been Wallace then history would have been so different, but there's that possibility. We've had that possibility time and time again. But you look at how this plays out now, for example, we could talk more about Wallace, I love talking about Wallace. But you look now at the United States versus North Korea or the United States versus Iran, or Israel, or anybody. Why does the United States have the right to have nuclear weapons and then tell other people they don't have the right?

The United States is the only country to have used nuclear weapons in warfare: bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The United States hasn't used nuclear weapons only twice, the United States has used nuclear weapons repeatedly, in the same sense that a robber holding a gun to someone's head uses that gun without pulling the trigger. This has been the essence of American foreign policy every time an American leader – and everybody has, from Truman up through Trump, says that all options are on the table – what they're saying is that nuclear weapons are a threat, are an option. They all say that.

The Republican convention, the opening line in the Republican Party platform in 2016 was, We the Republicans affirm our belief in American exceptionalism. Trump actually questioned that. You know, Trump is a funny sort in that way; Trump believes in Trumpian exceptionalism. Trump doesn't even extend it to the rest of the country, he says that he's the savior and he's what the world needs, it's not even the United States. So Trump is perhaps an outlier in that regard, but he acts as if the United States has the right to throw its weight around and do whatever it wants to do.

acTV:

You mentioned Former U.S. Vice President Henry Wallace who was also the presidential nominee of the left-wing Progressive Party in the 1948 election. What was his vision in terms of foreign policy and how did it differ from “American Exceptionalism”?

PK:

Well, Henry Wallace is my favorite example because he bucked the tide. The United States was a different country in the 1930s and 1940s and it's become since then and Wallace was the expression of the best of that difference in the United States. After Truman gets chosen as the Vice Presidential candidate, Roosevelt begged Wallace to stay in the Cabinet, and he gave him a choice of whatever position he wanted and Wallace took Secretary of Commerce – as Herbert Hoover had once done given the same choice. And from that position inside the Cabinet — for more than a year — he's gonna fight a solitary battle against Truman, trying to win Truman over to a different view of the

world, in terms of foreign policy, in terms of nuclear policy. And what he kept trying to do to Truman was get him to understand how the world looked to the Soviets. Beginning with the dropping of the atomic bomb. Well actually Truman's bad behavior toward the Soviets starts even much earlier. Roosevelt, in his last cable to Churchill before he died says that, these issues between us and the Soviets come up all the time but they get resolved, they go away, we should not make a big deal of them, we should downplay that, we should move together as allies in the future, just like we've been allies in the war.

Truman takes off — his first full day is April 13th — he doesn't know anything. He's been Vice President for 82 days. During that time Roosevelt has spoken to him twice and not about anything of substance. So he's in there — and one of the most amazing facts in history — is that Truman was Vice President 82 days, during that time nobody even had enough regard for him to bother to tell him the United States was building an atomic bomb. He doesn't find out till that first night after the emergency cabinet meeting, and then the next day he gets a full briefing from Jimmy Byrnes who flies up from Spartanburg, South Carolina to brief him. And among the things that Byrnes tells him is that the Soviets are breaking all of their agreements and the advisors who Truman turns to are the ones who held that view, they were not the ones who Roosevelt counted on — because Roosevelt had a very different view and Wallace had a very different view. So when Truman meets with Molotov on April 23rd, ten days later, he berates him — Soviet foreign minister Molotov — and he accuses him of breaking all the Yalta agreements. Molotov is appalled he says, I've never been spoken to that way in my life, and Truman says, carry out your agreements we won't have to be talked to like that. And then Truman come down, he brags, I gave it to him 1-2 to the jaw and he says if we might not get a 100% of what we want but we're looking at 85%. Stalin sends him a telegram the next day trying to set him straight as to what the actual agreements were and the Soviets had been living up to their agreements, as Admiral Leahy and Secretary of War Stimson, General Marshall and others tried to convince Truman. But Wallace was the main one who tried to talk sense into him, as did Joseph Davies — the former ambassador to the Soviet Union.

So Wallace keeps on trying to do what we've been trying to do, (which) is to say how does the world look to the Soviets now. And that takes us to dropping the atomic bomb — there was no excuse for dropping the atomic bomb. Right, there are other ways to get the Japanese to surrender without use of the bomb; change the surrender terms of them so they know that they can keep the Emperor, not have him tried as a war criminal, the Emperor was a god to them: number one.

Number two: wait for the Soviet invasion. At Yalta the Soviets promised to come into the Pacific War three months after the end of the war in Europe. The war in Europe ends on May 8th, the Soviets do come in midnight on August 8th — three months — and the Americans knew that that was going to win the war. American intelligence have been saying that for months; that once the Soviets invade, the Japanese will all know that defeat is inevitable. But the fact that the US uses the bomb, the ones who understood the most how desperate the Japanese were to surrender were the Soviets, because the Japanese strategy had been to appeal to the Soviets to intervene on their behalf to get them better surrender terms.

And so when former Prime Minister Hirota meets with the Japanese ambassador in Tokyo on June 2nd and 3rd, Ambassador Moloch writes back to the Kremlin saying the Japanese are desperate to surrender. So when the US decides to drop the bomb the Soviets know that there was no legitimate

military excuse for doing so and they interpret it as if the bomb had been dropped on them — that they were the target — and the US was sending a warning. Number one, that there is no bounds to American ruthlessness. And number two, this is what the Soviets are gonna get and worse if they interfere with the US plans in Europe or in Asia. And Wallace understood that and so Wallace tries to make Truman understand how it looks to the Soviets when US has a monopoly on atomic bombs. US has bombers that can bomb the Soviets from all over the world; the US has it this ring of bases that we got during the war that spread all around the world; the US has the thriving economy; the US GNP increased 15% a year during the war — the fastest its ever increased. Every other economy is destroyed.

As John Kennedy said, what happened the Soviets suffered in World War II was the equivalent of the entire United States east of Chicago being destroyed. Soviets lost 27 million in that war; when I tell my students what that means it's the equivalent of one 9/11 a day, every day for 24 years. We had 9/11, we've invaded how many countries since then. The Soviets suffered one 9/11 a day every day for 24 years, and so Wallace urges Truman to show some compassion, to have some largesse, to help them rebuild, to understand the situation they're in – not to threaten them, not to challenge them in the ways the US was. So that's the kind of vision – the ability to see the world through the eyes of your adversaries is such an important trait that is lacking.

I mean, you take a Trump is the extreme example as a pathological narcissist almost a solipsist. He can't see the world through the eyes of anybody other than himself, but even American leaders like Truman, or you know go through the ranks. We see that ability in John F Kennedy, in the last year of his presidency, after the Cuban Missile Crisis, he has an epiphany, and it doesn't happen overnight but he begins to understand. He and Khrushchev both understood during the Cuban Missile Crisis that that situation was not salvaged by brilliant statesmanship. That they both realized they had lost control of the situation and that we had survived by pure blind luck, not by their brilliant statesmanship. Although they did do everything they could after the crisis began to resolve it peacefully, but they knew they had no control over what was unraveling.

When that U-2 plane got shot down in Cuba, Khrushchev had given orders not to shoot it down, not to shoot down the U-2 planes and then Kennedy says if it happens again we're gonna have to go in there. And the Americans had no idea what they were gonna find there, it they didn't know well that's another talk for another day. Kennedy woke up as a result, and the last year of his life, Kennedy and Khrushchev dedicated to pulling the US out of Vietnam, ending the Space Race and cooperating in space, ending the Cold War that passing the limited arms control treaty the first nuclear arms control treaty, the neutralization of Laos had already happened. They were just moving toward a peaceful relationship in a way that we had not seen before because they got it, how the world looked to each other, which they didn't understand before.

We had that a little bit under Carter in the beginning — the first year or two under Carter — before Brzezinski and Strauss from the right wing the Democratic Party takes over and sabotages that. We didn't really see it under Clinton, we hoped we were gonna see it under Obama, but unfortunately that wasn't the case.

And so now we're back to a new distorted form of American exceptionalism, where we think we have the right to do things. What other the country abrogates to itself the right to be bombing nine

countries. Who else does such things? The Americans don't even question it. It's like Fahrenheit 451, the Americans are caught up in their television shows, and their Twitter accounts, and their social media, and the planes go flying off to other countries and nobody even is aware of it. So that's the kind of blindness that I think is so dangerous in the world right now. So we have the right to nuclear weapons; we have the right to threaten people; we have the right to decide who can and can't have these things; we have the right to to use force whenever and wherever we want because we're God's chosen people.

THE END