SHOULD THE U.S. ADAPT TO THE WORLD? THE FIRST DEBATE ON AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND ITS IMPACT ON THE FOUNDING OF THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

This paper aims at putting into perspective the recent, post 9/11 debate on the United States' alleged exceptionalism and its impact on the definition of American foreign policy. It reminds the readers that the United States was born as a result of a similar debate, at a time when a crucial choice for its future was to be made. Indeed, the Founding Fathers discarded the revolutionary idea that America was altogether different from other (European) nations and, as such, could succeed in saving republicanism and concentrate on domestic affairs. As Gordon Wood and Harvey Mansfield have shown, the 1787 version of republicanism stood as a departure from its earlier version, and such a change was necessary to the creation of a full-fledged federation, therefore paving the way to the current powerful Federal Republic. The early failure of the exceptionalist creed did not cause its disappearance, as the contemporary form of exceptionalism demonstrates, but created conditions that made an enduring and powerful influence very difficult.

Keywords: exceptionalism; republicanism; Founding fathers; Scottish enlightenment; 9/11; American foreign policy.

The idea that the United States is altogether different from other nations and should act accordingly in the international arena is as old as the Federal republic, and its roots go back to the very beginning of its colonial history. Indeed, in few countries has this question had such an enduring importance as in the United States. As is well known, the colonial history of British America in New England began with the puritan project of building a new Jerusalem, a model Christian society free of European corruption. To these days, almost 400 years after it was called forth, John Winthrop's description of Massachusetts as a "city upon a hill" still resonates. Neither time nor the contemporary claims of an American loss of "innocence" appear to have undermined the notion of an American exception. On the contrary, the end of the cold war and the advent of a unipolar world dominated by the United States seems to have revived it, as if the current hegemony vindicated the initial puritan vision. As critics have pointed out, the 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* and much of the foreign policy of George W. Bush during its first term relied on implicit recognition of America's difference[1]. Yet, few Americans are aware that the Founding Fathers were the first to discard the already popular notion of an American exception, and probably even fewer realize the role that their initial rejection played in bringing about today's powerful Federal Republic. The aim of this paper is to remind the readers that, among the many debates generated by the claims of American exceptionalism, the earliest ones deserve careful scrutiny because they were crucial for the future of the U.S. Through them we can see the confrontation of diverging opinions on politics, society and men, the intertwining of classical and modern thoughts. Out of them emerged the modern United States, with its ambiguities and paradoxes, some of them related to the lingering conception of a God-chosen nation endowed with a

[1] More details on the most recent form of exceptionalism in the U.S may be found in Hoffmann, Stanley. "American Exceptionalism—The New Version: 'The National Security Strategy of the United States of America', September 2002". *Chaos and Violence*. Ed. Stanley Hoffmann. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006. 115-131. Other critics of the post 9/11 version of American exceptionalism include Francis Fukuyama (See *America at the Crossroads*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. 95- 113) and Andrew Bacevich (See *The Limits of Power. The End of American Exceptionalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008.).

mission.

Independence as faith in American exceptionalism—and classical republicanism

The idea that America was different, that the peculiar American environment and the colonial history had combined to create a people entirely different from their forebears in old Europe was very common in the 18th century, on both sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, it was expressed by liberal intellectuals such as the French philosophes or the English radical Whigs, who saw in the New World what they thought was lacking in the Old. America was described as the place where "universal well-being was wisely distributed by the first land allotment", the sole example on earth of a country whose population "consisted of landowners, farmers, equal citizens"[2]. To English radicals, Americans were immune to the corrupting refinement and selfishness that were causing the decline of their own country, being "all independent, and nearly upon a level" and "inspired by the noblest of all passions, the passion of being free"[3]. In America, these opinions helped dispel fears that the British colonies were also showing signs of decadence and reinforced the confidence that they would be up to the task of creating republics and meeting the high republican standards once independence was achieved. The history of republicanism was not encouraging: most republics of the past had been short-lived, not to mention the English one, which had ended in tyranny. Modern republics of the 18th century were all tiny and weak compared with the mighty monarchies surrounding them, and the much vaunted British model of mixed government seemed to confirm the final disrepute of

[2] First quotation from Raynal, Guillaume. *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*. Vol.6. Amsterdam, 1772. 583 ; the second quote if from Champion de Cicé, in a Speech to the National Assembly, August 1, 1789. Both quotes (translated by the author of this article) are borrowed from Lacorne, Denis. *L'invention de la république. Le modèle américain*. Paris: Hachette, 1991. 182-183.

[3] Richard Price, Observations on Civil liberty (1776), quoted by Wood, Gordon. *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787,* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969. 99.

republicanism.

Only the sense that America was an exception, a "mirage in the West" as the French saw it[4], could make North Americans believe that they could succeed where so many had failed, and prove the world that *they* could rescue republicanism. What made the difference was the belief that Americans were "natural republicans" as some argued at the time, and Alexis de Tocqueville confirmed later on.[5] The lack of any established Church, aristocracy and of any great distinctions of wealth in America distinguished it from the ancient republics, which had to resort to artificial means destructive of personal freedom to achieve equality. Ancient republics were doomed, in other words, because they forced society into the procrustean bed of republican equality. "All this was done and suffered to obtain (which yet they could never obtain) that natural equal level basis on which Ye, American Citizens, stand", argued Thomas Pownall in a 1783 address celebrating independence[6]. In the century of the Enlightenment, being republican by nature guaranteed the success of republicanism, belied Montesquieu's maxim that it could only thrive in small, homogeneous societies, and strengthened Paine's bold assertion that it was a matter of common sense. For Paine however, remaining an exception meant breaking up with the irrational and corrupt system of government of the metropolis without delay, before the corrupting forces that had already doomed Britain to decadence set in America as well. Exceptionalism was synonymous with republicanism.

The belief in an American exception on the eve of the Revolution is thus related to what Gordon Wood has called the spirit of 1776, dominated as it was by the ideology of the radical Whigs and neo-classical political thought, particularly classical republicanism. Even Paine, who did not think that the extent of territory was an obstacle to republicanism and was not against representation, viewed the

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[4] See Echeverria, Dumond. *Mirage in the West: A History of the French Image of American Society to 1815*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.

[5] Americans, wrote Tocqueville, "were born equals instead of becoming so". See Tocqueville, Alexis de. *De la Démocratie en Amérique*. Vol.2. Paris : Garnier-Flamarion, 1981. 130 (my translation)

[6] Thomas Pownall, A Memorial Addressed to the Sovereigns of America (London, 1783), quoted by Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*, op. cit., p.99.

uniformity of interests as necessary and warned against the baneful influence of commerce upon patriotism and virtue. British and American radical Whigs saw the Glorious Revolution of 1688 as the first step towards liberty, which George III was committed to destroying. Britain being the only place where it could have flourished in Europe, but the British people being already too corrupt to save it, liberty was fleeing the Old continent and "seeking an asylum westward"[7]. In his celebrated *Letters from an American Farmer*, De Crèvecoeur defined Americans as "the western pilgrims, who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry, which began long since in the east"[8]. But Paine is the one who expressed the idea of American refuge of liberty most emphatically:

> *O ! ye that love mankind ! ye that dare oppose not only the tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth ! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted around the Globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her as a stranger, and England has given her warning to depart. O ! receive the fugitive and prepare in time an asylum for mankind![9]*

Only in America could liberty thrive and human progress develop, the Whigs argued, because the people was made of independent, virtuous, property-holding individuals who formed a homogeneous society. There, their representatives would not be the spokesmen for opposing factions, but would represent the "public good" of all citizens united by the understanding of their

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[7] William Hooper to James Iredell in 1776, quoted by Gordon Wood, ibid, p.43. For more details on the Whigs' view on republicanism and on America the "home" of liberty, see Wood, ibid, chapter II.

[8] Crèvecoeur, Michel-Guillaume-Jean de, "What is an American", *Letters from an American Farmer. Living Ideas in America*. Ed. Henry S. Commager. New York: Harper and Bro., 1951. 20) For more information on the belief on a westward course of civilization, which will later be used by the proponents of territorial expansion, see Marienstras, Elise. *Nous le peuple*. Paris: Gallimard, 1988. 350. By adding "they will finish the great circle" to the sentence quoted, Paine himself suggests that the independent colonies will expand westward.

[9] Thomas Paine, "Common Sense". *Selected Work*. New York: Modern Library, 1945.

common interest. To be sure, not all Americans agreed and in the succeeding years less and less would; but in 1776 most of them did, as the impact of *Common sense*, the Declaration of independence, and the establishment of the 13 republics showed. Only atypical Americans such as John Adams were prepared to accept the inevitability of conflicting interests and a pluralistic American society, even though European societies were obviously divided into countless factions and social distinctions.[10] The positive and sanguine vision of their society reflects the prevailing belief in an exceptional America, that is also noticeable in the first vision of an American foreign policy.

What Classical Republicanism Meant for Foreign Policy

The implication of the dominant ideology for foreign policy was obvious in *Common Sense*, and was even presented by Paine as a cogent reason why independence should be declared. As long as America remained part of the British empire, it would be involved in Britain's wars and more generally in the European state of war, he suggests. Protection was not to be regarded as an argument against independence because Britain "did not protect us from *our* enemies on *our account*; but from *her enemies* on *her own account*, from those who had no quarrel with us on any other account". "Let Britain waive her pretensions to the Continent, or the Continent throw off the dependence", he added, "and we should be at peace with France and Spain, were they at war with Britain"[11]. Paine's underlying reasoning is based on Montesquieu's opinion that "the spirit of monarchies is war, while the spirit of republics is peace and moderation"[12]. By separating itself from the power politics of the metropolis and refraining from any political relations with other

[10] For references of Adam's early misgivings about American virtue and the homogeneous nature of its people, see *The Creation of the American Republic,* op. cit., p.59; 569-571.

[11] Thomas Paine, "Common Sense", op. cit.

[12] Montesquieu, *L'esprit des lois*, Book IX, chap.2 (my translation) The same idea is expressed in *Common Sense*, where Paine writes that "Europe is too thickly planted with Kingdoms to be long at peace" […] "The Republics of Europe are all (and we may say always) in peace."

states, America would be at peace even with monarchies. "Our plan is commerce", he explained, "and that, well attended to, will secure us the peace and friendship of all Europe; because it is in the interest of all Europe to have America a free port"[13]. In short, separation from Britain would allow America to dispense altogether with foreign policy, move away from diplomacy and focus on commercial policy only. It would also allow the former colonies to create genuine republican institutions devoid of executive power, consisting of assemblies only, and "their business wholly domestic"[14].

But what about relations between the new republics that would be created following independence? Was the plurality of American states likely to produce an American version of the European state of war? Paine discarded such a possibility provided three conditions were met. The first one is equality between the different American states, a situation that is inherent to republics, since "where there are no distinctions there can be no superiority" and "perfect equality affords no temptation". The second is to create a political system that truly reflects the people, i.e., based on legislative power, representation and frequent elections, "by which the world may know, that so far as we approve of monarchy, that in America the law is king". The third is dependent on "always remembering that our strength is Continental, not provincial", and on remaining united through continental institutions, like the existing Continental Congress. What Paine suggested, however, was not to create a full-fledged federation, which would not be compatible with the classical republican emphasis on small republics, but only the amount of union necessary to foster some cooperation and prevent absolute sovereignty from leading to war. Some ten years later, those who opposed the creation of a federation used very similar arguments, as the following words by Thomas Pinkney show:

[13] Thomas Paine, "Common Sense", op. cit.
[14] Ibid

> *Our true situation appears to me to be this—a new extensive Country containing within itself the materials for forming a Government capable of extending to its citizens all the blessings of civil and religious liberty, capable of making them happy at home. This is the great end of republican Establishments. We mistake the object of our government, if we hope or wish that it is to make us respectable abroad. Conquest or superiority among other powers is not or ought not ever to be the object of republican systems. If they are sufficiently active and energetic to rescue us from contempt and preserve our domestic happiness and security, it is all we can expect from them—it is more than almost any other Government ensures to its citizens.*[15]

For the early proponents of exceptionalism, republicanism and the primacy of domestic policy were interconnected, but in 1787 the idea that America could discard foreign policy altogether had declined. As Felix Gilbert has pointed out, the French-American alliance of 1778 was already a clear sign that American opinion on the subject had changed, less than two years after the Declaration of Independence[16]. The Model Treaty drafted by the Continental Congress (by John Adams) in August 1776, which stands as the first foreign policy act of the independent American republics, was in keeping with the principles expressed in *Common Sense*: the three American commissioners (Franklin, Silas Deane and Jefferson) who brought it with them to France were instructed to seek an alliance with France "that was entirely alien to the spirit of the diplomatic practice of the time"[17]. The proposals they initially put forward, based on the Model Treaty, included no political or military alliance, "only a commercial connection" by which

[15] Thomas Pinkney. *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*. Vol.1. Ed. Farrand, Max. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937. 402.

[16] Gilbert, Felix. *To the Farewell Address. Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961. See chapter III: *Novus Ordo Seculorum*

[17] These words are Felix Gilbert's in *To the Farewell Address* p.54

France was to help the former American colonies on the sea in exchange for American commerce. But three months later, American leaders took the first step towards traditional diplomacy by empowering the three commissioners to offer the British West Indies to France in order to secure a much needed alliance[18]. When the Treaty of Amity and Commerce was eventually secured in February 1778, it included a "conditional and defensive alliance", by which the United States and France pledged to help each other militarily, that reflected at least partly traditional European diplomacy.

It is true that John Adams, the author of the Model Treaty, had never shared the radical Whigs' or the *philosophes*' belief in a new era and the advent of a new diplomacy based on commerce. As Walter McDougall observed, his effort to exclude what he called "political connections" should not be misinterpreted: "His purpose was not to reform world politics" but to secure France's assistance without the Americans becoming pawns of French imperialism, as they had previously been pawns of the British"[19]. Indeed, Adams's thoughts on interstate relations have always been very traditional, based on the European doctrine of interests. "I know of no better rule than this", he said to a British general who criticized the alliance with France, "when two nations have the same interests in general, they are natural allies; when they have opposite interests, they are natural enemies; but the habits of affection or enmity between nations are easily changed as circumstances vary, and as essential interests alter"[20]. As the similarity of these words with Washington's "non entangling alliance" message suggests, such an opinion would become more and more common, particularly among the Founding Fathers.

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[18] See Gilbert, ibid, p.84.

[19] McDougall, Walter. *Promised Land, Crusader State. The American Encounter with the World Since 1776*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. 25.

[20] See Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address*, op. cit., p.81-82

Towards a Federal Republic: Exceptionalism Qualified

The institutions created in the wake of the Declaration of Independence belied the influence of "the Whig science of politics". Both the states' institutions and the confederate Congress were devoid of a genuine executive. The power of state governors was very limited and they were viewed as the creature of the legislative assemblies. The Articles of Confederation, ratified by all states by 1781, had created no executive power either, as if to act upon Paine's tenets and show the world that "in America the law is king". Until 1780, the Congress was dominated by radicals staunchly opposed to creating any executive independent from the legislative[21].

Yet the assumptions behind the supremacy of the legislative were increasingly blamed for the political upheavals that America experienced during the Confederation era, particularly by those who were to become the Founding Fathers. Most of these were part of an economic, social and political elite, and some of them—and not the least influential—were Virginian planters who did not necessarily agreed with the idea that the people was always right and ought to rule[22]. They were well-read in history and knew that many republics of the past had disappeared as a result of the unchecked power of the people, which had resulted in political instability. Hence they could not agree with the radical Whigs when these claimed that America was an exception, that it could save republicanism because the American people was not divided into factions. Not only had they misgivings about the veracity of the Whigs's opinion on the American people, whose opinion they deemed as versatile, short term and unenlightened as those of the Europeans, but they also questioned the wisdom of granting the majority

[21] See Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address*, op. cit., p.81-82

[22] As John Nelson remarked, "Inculcated from birth with an awareness of the unending effort required to maintain hegemony over a hostile labor force, the planter class produced most of the early national leaders". Nelson, John R. *Liberty and Property. Political Economy and Policymaking in the New Nation, 1789-1812*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987. 13

absolute power. To be sure, all Founders were republican, even those who, like Hamilton, had leaned toward monarchism had turned republicans by 1787[23]. Yet they thought there was a need to invent a new form of "mixed republicanism", based on the British principle of mixed government but devoid its monarchical element, that would provide more stability and durability by checking the power of the people and its baneful effects.

To the Founders, and more generally to the moderate political leaders who controlled the Confederation Congress after 1780, the political upheavals that followed the onset of the economic crisis in 1785 were proof that unchecked popular power in America was paving the way to the same instability that had doomed previous republics. In Rhode Island, riots broke out when creditors refused to accept as payment the fiat money that the state legislature had created to relieve debt-ridden farmers. As John Nelson wrote, "without a senate, without an executive veto, and without judicial review the popular assembly of Rhode Island had passed and enforced a law repugnant to the sanctity of contract and security of property".[24] In Massachusetts, which had a two-house legislature and an executive with veto power, depression and money contraction had driven the government to the opposite direction under the creditors' pressure, i.e. retirement of paper money and tax increase. The result was the so-called Shays rebellion, the uprising of farmers under Daniel Shays's leadership to prevent debt collection and the sale of their farms. A former soldier in the revolutionary army, Shays acted on the same principles and used the same means as during the revolution, that is the right to oppose a tyrannical government and what he considered its illegitimate laws. But once English tyranny was defeated and independence achieved, it became obvious

[23] If needed, Hamilton's writings in the *Federalist papers* leave no doubt about it. See for example the last words of the *The Federalist* n°22: "The fabric of American empire ought to rest on the solid basis of THE CONSENT OF THE PEOPLE. The streams of national power ought to flow immediately from that pure, original fountain of all legitimate authority". On Hamilton and republicanism, see also Harper John L. *American Machiavelli. Alexander Hamilton and the Origins of U.S. Foreign Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 89; 174-5

[24] John R. Nelson, *Liberty and Property*, p.12.

that the maintenance of these principles was no longer appropriate and were wholly incompatible with other American intellectual trends, such as Lockean liberalism, based as it was on the sanctity of contract and private property.

These required some government authority for their protection, including institutional checks on popular rule, that the moderate members of the Confederation Congress, particularly the nationalists—thus the Founders--were eager to provide or strengthen. Madison interpreted the political instability he was witnessing as the result of a situation "in which the Government is the mere instrument of the major number of the constituents"; it amounted to an "abuse of power, by the majority trampling on the rights of the minority… which, in republics, have more frequently than any other cause, produced despotism"[25]. In a private letter to George Washington in July 1787, Hamilton blamed the "anarchy and misery" on the "impudence of democracy" and on the weak governments which "had entirely given way to the people"[26]. Other nationalists, who would soon be among the state delegates at the Philadelphia convention, likewise criticized "the excess of democracy", "the levelling spirit", or the "follies of democracy", and shared the opinion that America was experiencing a political crisis due to the failure of the either the state governments or the Confederation Congress to prevent the tyranny of the majority from trampling on the rights of the minorities[27].

Similar views illustrate what Gordon Wood has characterized as the "spirit of 1787", as opposed to the "spirit of 1776", the former reflecting the ideology of the radical Whigs, whereas the latter was rather influenced by their British opponents, the representatives of the Scottish enlightenment. Building on Locke's assumption that private property was the cornerstone of civil societies, David Hume, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson substituted the modern *homo oeconomicus* for

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[25] James Madison in a letter to Jefferson (October 17, 1788) and in a speech before the Virginia Ratifying Convention (June 5, 1788) respectively, quoted by John R. Nelson, *Liberty and Property*, p.15.

[26] Hamilton to Washington, July 3, 1787, quoted by Nelson, ibid.

[27] The first two quotes are from Elbridge Gerry, the last from Edmund Randolph, both expressed on May 31, 1787 at the Federal Convention, and are also borrowed from Nelson, ibid, p.14.

the *homo civicus* of the Ancients, and legitimized self-interest rather than virtue. For Hume, "Ancient policy was violent and contrary to the more natural and usual course of things […] And the less natural any set of principles are which support a particular society, the more difficulty will a legislator meet with in raising and cultivating them. It is his best policy to comply with the common bent of mankind and give it all the improvements of which it is susceptible"[28]. Politics and institutions had to be adapted to the ordinary man, with his shortcomings and his natural desire to promote his interest. In doing so, Adam Smith added, individuals work for the benefit of all, as if guided by an "invisible hand"[29].

Hume's conception of society and politics, based as it was on a universal vision of man, was increasingly influential in the 1780's and contributed to ruining the conception of America as a social and political exception. "As riches increase and accumulate in few hands", Hamilton declared before his state's assembly, "as luxury prevails in society, virtue will be in a greater degree considered as only a graceful appendage of wealth, and the tendency of things will be to depart from the republican standard. This is the real disposition in human nature: It is what neither the honourable member nor myself can correct. It is a common misfortune, that awaits our state constitution, as well as all others"[30]. On the eve of the Constitutional Convention, John Adams had lost any hopes that the Revolution and republicanism could foster the public virtue that was essential to a successful republic, and had come to the conclusion that there was "no special providence for Americans, and their nature is the same with that of others"[31]. Contrary to what the radicals had claimed, American society was not homogeneous and classless but divided into "the rich and the poor, the laborious and the idle, the learned and the

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[28] Hume, David, *Political Essays*. New York: Charles Hendel, 1953. 133-134.

[29] Smith, Adam. *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. New York: Modern Library, 1937.

[30] Hamilton, Alexander. *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*. Vol.5. Ed. Harold Syrett and Jacob Cooke. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962. 42.

[31] Adams, John. "Defence of the Constitutions". *Works of John Adams*. Vol.4. Ed. Charles Francis Adams. Boston: Little, Brown, 1851. 401.

ignorant". "All that we can say in America", he wrote in his *Defence of the Constitutions*, "is, that, legal distinctions, titles, powers, and privileges, are not hereditary".[32] Many, the Founders included, shared both Adams's opinion on the lack of public virtue and Hume's opposition to artificially creating it. "This would be slavery, and not that liberty which the bill of rights has made inviolable", Jefferson observed in 1782. Nor was virtue deemed a prerequisite to republicanism. Noah Webster and Williams Vans Murray challenged Montesquieu's claim in this respect, and John Stevens was one of the first to suggest that good institutions could be a modern substitute for it.[33]

Not surprisingly, these views were challenged by those who clung to classical republicanism and prompted the debate between the Federalists to the Anti-federalists at the Philadelphia Convention. The former went to Philadelphia with the desire to move away from the spirit of 1776 and from its offspring, the confederation. They wanted to build new institutions that would be based on a modern, and they thought more scientific, hence universal, assessment of human nature that contradicted the notion of American exceptionalism[34]. More than any other Founders, Hamilton set out to undermine it at the Constitutional Convention and in the subsequent *Federalist papers*:

From this summary of what has taken place in other countries, whose situations have borne the nearest resemblance to our own, what reason can we have to confide in those reveries which would seduce us into an expectation of peace and cordiality between the members of the present confederacy, in a state of separation? Have we not already seen enough of the fallacy and extravagance of those idle theories which have amused us with the promises of an exemption from the imperfection, the weaknesses, and the evils incident to society in every shape?

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[32] Ibid, p.488.

[33] These quotes and their interpretation are borrowed from Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787,* op. cit., p.610-11.

[34] For an analysis of the theory on human nature in the *Federalist Papers*, see Jean-marie Ruiz, "Publius et la nature humaine", *Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines*, 87-1 (2001): 7-16.

Is it not time to awake from the deceitful dream of a golden age and to adopt as a practical maxim for the direction of our political conduct that we, as well as the other inhabitants of the globe, are yet remote from the happy empire of perfect wisdom and perfect virtue[35]?

If the American society was similar to the others, then it had similar needs and problems that had to be dealt with by somehow similar institutions. Since the legislative supremacy that characterized the Confederation was rooted in exceptionalism, the latter had to be refuted before a much needed federal executive power could be created. Which means that Madison's plan would probably not have prevailed over the Paterson plan (which included no independent executive and was much more congenial to the radical and anti-federalist political philosophy) if the American claim to uniqueness had not been qualified in the years that preceded the Philadelphia Convention. In fact, the decline of the first version of exceptionalism was both the cause and the consequence of the 1787 institutional reforms. Indeed, as Harvey Mansfield has argued, the creation of an independent and powerful federal executive amounted to adding a monarchical and Machiavellian element to the Federal republic, thus making it less different, more ordinary and more European[36]. Saving republicanism meant that, from the very beginning, America had to adapt to the world, and it did so by providing what Hamilton called "energy" to the federal government.

The contemporary debate shows that, in spite of its early failure to prevail, exceptionalism is still "alive and kicking". Indeed, as Andrew Bacevich regretfully notes, "paying homage to, and therefore renewing, this tradition of American exceptionalism has long been one of the presidency's primary extraconstitutional obligations"[37]. Yet, paradoxically enough, American exceptionalism is even less

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[35] Alexander Hamilton, *The Federalist n°6 The Federalist Papers*. Ed. Clinton Rossiter. New York: Mentor Books, 1961. 59.

[36] Mansfield, Harvey. *Taming the Prince. The Ambivalence of Modern Executive Power*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

[37] Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*, p.18.

likely to prevail today than at the end of the 18th century, for today's world is too globalized and America's interests too global—a situation that, to a great extent, stems from the initial rejection of the first version of exceptionalism.