

# Patriotism: Why So Many Intellectuals Can't Understand It

Sam Haselby says this "[should be the end times](#)" for American patriotism. Yet the opposite seems to be happening, and he can't understand why.

America has no national education system, he notes. No conscription. No government agency that enforces the red-white-and-blue rituals performed at schools and sporting events coast-to-coast. Nor does America have a territorial rival, as France has in Germany, or China in India.

"Patriotism is the organising passion of modern political life in the United States," writes Haselby, an Ivy League-educated historian and senior editor at *Aeon*, "yet its vitality defies obvious explanation."

Whatever the cause of this strange phenomenon, it's an idea that must be rooted out, Haselby makes clear. Patriotism is a sinister force, "the most deadly form of identity politics."

Haselby's hostility toward American patriotism is related to his confusion of the concept.

First, he views it as a "salubrious version" of European nationalism. European nationalism was indeed a pernicious force with an ugly history, but are it and American patriotism truly one and the same? Are they two ideas separated by nothing more than geography?

The answer is no. But Haselby fails to see this because he prematurely rejects a second "old-style" idea interwoven with American patriotism: American exceptionalism.

American exceptionalism had its day, Haselby admits, but today it's a dead force. It is "no longer tenable," he writes,

because America no longer has a vital lesson to share with the world.

*"... if the US represents something invaluable to the rest of the world, what is that? In the 18th century, an experiment in republican government filled the bill of exceptionalist pretensions. In the long 19th century, the availability of land for settlers, combined with political democracy and capitalism, compared favourably with Europe's aristocratic regimes. After the Second World War, the shared prosperity of postwar economic boom helped to revitalise US exceptionalism. Now? There's no good answer."*

The idea that there is nothing very unique about America is fashionable in academia today. If America was exceptional at all, many will say, it was exceptional primarily in the pain it inflicted on its slave and indigenous populations (which cannot be ignored).

Another tack of intellectuals is to say that America is exceptional in the sense that all nations are unique, as President Obama did [in a 2009 press conference](#).

"I believe in American exceptionalism," Obama said at the time, "just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism."

The writer James Kirchick, then an assistant editor at the *New Republic*, was correct when he argued Obama's rhetoric rendered the idea of American exceptionalism meaningless. "If all countries are 'exceptional,' then none are, and to claim otherwise robs the word, and the idea of American exceptionalism, of any meaning," [he wrote](#) in the *L.A. Times*.

I'll admit that American exceptionalism is one of those squishy terms I've never been quite comfortable with. It's a potent and potentially dangerous idea, one that could be used to justify imperial ambitions or anti-republican concepts such as Manifest Destiny.

That said, America is exceptional in at least one respect, a fact observed by the British philosopher G.K. Chesterton.

“America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence; perhaps the only piece of practical politics that is also theoretical politics and also great literature,” Chesterton wrote in [\*What I Saw in America\*](#). “It enunciates that all men are equal in their claim to justice, that governments exist to give them that justice, and that their authority is for that reason just.”

Individualism and liberty are part of the creed (to use Chesterton’s term), as is the idea that man’s rights are not bestowed by government or king—but by a Creator. As such, these rights are inalienable.

Haselby is correct that “mere military supremacy” is not enough to sustain American exceptionalism or American patriotism in the long run. His mistake is to believe American patriotism is primarily linked to power.

America’s creed of God and liberty was forged in rebellion. Its Founding Fathers wrote a constitution that spelled out all the things its new government could not do to them. Its marines carried flags bearing coiled rattlers and the motto “Don’t Tread on Me.” It fought a bloody war over two decades against the most powerful empire in the world, a war incited by the cry of “[Liberty or Death!](#)”

The charge that American patriotism is a deadly form of identity politics overlooks a truth many intellectuals cocooned in academia and saturated in race, gender, and class ideology cannot understand: most patriots are not celebrating America’s “identity”; we are celebrating America’s *ideals*.

And as long as those ideals remain life, liberty, and the free pursuit of happiness, I say: *God Bless America*.