

RELEASE IN PART B6

From: Sullivan, Jacob J <SullivanJJ@state.gov>
Sent: Friday, November 18, 2011 9:06 PM
To: H
Subject: Fw: Exceptionalism

FYI

----- Original Message -----

From: Dan Schwerin [mailto:]
Sent: Friday, November 18, 2011 11:52 AM
To: Benaim, Daniel; Kurtz-Phelan, Daniel; Sullivan, Jacob J
Subject: Exceptionalism

'Exceptionalism' Argument May Prove Potent for Republicans By RICHARD W. STEVENSON The New York Times

Few themes have recurred more regularly in the race for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination than American exceptionalism, and few are as potentially powerful — or divisive.

The idea that the United States is inherently special is well established in American politics, if a bit vaguely defined. By and large, Republicans have used the concept over the years to mean strength and to signal resolve. Democrats have tended to cite it when talking about values and the ideals of American democracy.

In the context of the 2012 campaign, however, it has taken on a much more partisan edge, invoked by Republicans as a way to define President Obama as weak, lacking in core American values and almost unpatriotic.

It is easy to dismiss as election-season jingoism, the political equivalent of a "We're No. 1" chant from the cheap seats. But the exceptionalism argument offers some voters a reassuring counternarrative to persistent joblessness, a long-term hollowing out of the middle class and a sense that the nation's best days are past. And it intensifies the pressure on Mr. Obama to avoid sounding defensive about the difficult challenges he has faced as president and to articulate a positive story for why he deserves another four years.

"We have a president right now who thinks America's just another nation," Mitt Romney said last Saturday, at the most recent debate.

"America is an exceptional nation. We have a president who thinks that the way to conduct foreign policy is through his personal effects on other people. I believe the way to conduct foreign policy is with American strength."

At a Values Voter convention in October, Gov. Rick Perry of Texas said that "those in the White House today" do not believe in American exceptionalism and would rather emulate Europe.

"The answer to our troubles lies in a positive, optimistic vision, with policies rooted in American exceptionalism," Mr. Perry said.

"See, American exceptionalism is the product of unlimited freedom. And there is nothing troubling our nation today that cannot be solved by the rebirth of freedom — nothing."

Conservatives have used the concept as part of a broader indictment of liberalism in the age of Obama. Writing in The Wall Street Journal in September, the author Shelby Steele suggested that Mr. Obama's upbringing in the 1960s shaped him into the embodiment of an anti-exceptionalism world view.

B6

"In this liberalism," he wrote, "America's exceptional status in the world follows from a bargain with the devil — an indulgence in militarism, racism, sexism, corporate greed, and environmental disregard as the means to a broad economic, military, and even cultural supremacy in the world. And therefore America's greatness is as much the fruit of evil as of a devotion to freedom."

In Mr. Obama, wrote Mr. Steele, "America gained a president with ambivalence, if not some antipathy, toward the singular greatness of the nation he had been elected to lead."

Voters of different ideological persuasions will read different things into these critiques: a malicious effort to identify Mr. Obama as the Other; a rallying cry for a new commitment to fundamental shared values; an emotional lashing out driven by fear of national decline, and a patriotic reassertion of American strength after a long and very difficult decade.

There are factual and narrative rebuttals to much of the Republican case. In some ways, Mr. Obama has pursued a more aggressive national security policy than did his Republican predecessor, asserting American power, and presidential power, in a manner that is hard to characterize plausibly as weak. Mr. Obama's own personal story is nothing if not celebratory of the dynamism of American society.

When asked directly about American exceptionalism in 2009, Mr. Obama replied that people in Britain or Greece would also feel that their own countries are exceptional, then went on to say, "I think that we have a core set of values that are enshrined in our Constitution, in our body of law, in our democratic practices, in our belief in free speech and equality, that, though imperfect, are exceptional."

But at a time when the country is facing an array of big challenges at home and abroad, there is clearly an opening among some voters for arguments of the sort being made by the Republican candidates. In a Time poll last month, 71 percent said America's position in the world is declining.

According to a poll released this month by the Pew Research Center, just under half of Americans say the United States is the greatest country in the world, while most of the rest say it is one of the greatest countries. But there are striking differences between the generations. Only about a third of Americans between 18 and 30 say the United States is the greatest nation, about half the proportion of people 66 and older say they feel the same way.

If the exceptionalism arguments resonate in the general election campaign, it will be because they speak to the feelings of anxiety and anger coursing through much of the electorate. One of the most striking poll findings of the season, from the most recent NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, is that nearly 60 percent of Americans view either the Tea Party or the Occupy Wall Street movements positively.

This is not a happy electorate. That is why exceptionalism arguments, for all that they can bump uncomfortably close against the dark, divisive side of politics, may prove especially potent, and irresistible to Republicans, in this election. Their thematic power is in part negative, framing Mr. Obama as out of step with American values.

But invoking exceptionalism and the sense of power and destiny at the heart of the concept also seems to tap into a desire to reassert control: over America's place in the world in an era of globalization and threats from stateless terrorists; over institutions judged to have failed us, and over a social contract — that if you work hard you will get your fair share — that seems to have frayed.

<http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/18/exceptionalism-argument-may-prove-potent-for-republicans/?hp>