

Taking Exception to Exceptionalism

“American Exceptionalism” is a central theme for Mitt Romney and those who gathered this week at the Republican National Convention. For many conservatives, unwavering belief in the inherent goodness, unique character, and global superiority of the U.S. is a minimum requirement for admission to the circle of “real Americans.” In their eyes, President Obama’s willingness to apologize to other nations and peoples — more so than questions about his birthplace — makes him unworthy of citizenship in “Real America.”

It’s a point of differentiation Romney exploits regularly. “Let me make this very clear,” he told an audience at the Citadel in 2011. “As President of the United States, I will devote myself to an American Century. And I will never, ever apologize for America.”

The message is: our nation can do no wrong. In the minds of some, acknowledging our flaws means forfeiting one’s status as a “Real American.” It’s a viewpoint leading to situations like Florida Congressman Alan West telling President Obama, Harry Reid, and Nancy Pelosi to “get the hell out of America.”

It’s the same logic causing fellow columnist William Perugino to react forcefully to my recent column on the individualism of Paul Ryan and Ayn Rand. Though I made no reference to



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America’s global standing or any philosophy of world leadership, Perugino felt I was trying to “denigrate American exceptionalism.”

I freely pledge allegiance to this great country where I was fortunate to be born. It is a place I am proud to call home. But, I do not embrace the notion of exceptionalism.

Romney doesn’t take issue with the particulars of the president’s apologies. He and many conservatives are against any apology. Period. And, that blind faith in personal and national infallibility is what I find troubling.

Those who question American exceptionalism often argue the U.S. is no longer supreme on the global stage. But, while you can make the case our standard of living, quality of life, or education system are not always second to none, that’s not the point. I don’t reject American exceptionalism because it’s not true; I oppose it because it’s not healthy for America.

In my 30-year business career, I’ve enjoyed extensive leadership train-

ing from some of the world’s best programs. Never — not once — have I been taught that effective leadership springs from infallibility. Clinging to the need to be right is a blind spot from which much damage is done.

We needn’t get philosophical; keep it simple. If you played high school or college sports: was the most exceptional athlete the one who told you how great he or she was? Or, was it the person in the gym, on the field, or in the weight room — always working harder, never satisfied with good enough, improving every day? Greatness isn’t something we declare; it’s a status we earn and retain by recognizing and addressing our shortcomings.

Among individuals and between nations, leading on the world stage is about relationships. Does it produce good results in your own life when you approach family, friends, or colleagues, with the attitude you are always right and they are inferior? Capabilities and confidence are key ingredients of effective leadership, but humility and inclusion are also indispensable.

American history is filled with greatness, but don’t confuse excellence with perfection. It’s a quaint view to see our founding as the inspired act of supremely wise men touched by a divine hand. And, in

that moment, perhaps it was. But, as profound as those events were in the course of human history, ours was not an immaculate conception. The lofty words of our Declaration of Independence and Constitution were crafted by imperfect men who shackled fellow human beings in the brutal bonds of slavery. It would take another 87 years and 700,000 lives lost in needless, bloody conflict to break those bonds. American women endured 144 years and many failed attempts before finally earning the right to vote. Our special character doesn’t come from never being wrong; it’s achieved by not quitting until we get it right.

We can’t change the past. But, we can also never truly leave it if we refuse to learn the lessons of our mistakes as well as our triumphs.

The American story is filled with exceptional accomplishments. But continued greatness is not a perpetual birthright granted across generations for eternity. It is something we earn each day by measuring ourselves against the most important yardstick of all: the awareness of how much better we can be.

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