



The New Nikon D3100 with Guide Mode

SEE IT IN ACTION ▶

14.2
MEGAPixels

GUIDE
MODE

HD
1080p



Powered by

Click to Print

SAVE THIS | EMAIL THIS | Close

America's place in the world could play part in 2012 elections

By Susan Page, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — It might as well be the national anthem: America the Exceptional.

From the days of the Revolution to the moon landing two centuries later, the idea that the [United States](#) is different from and better than anyplace else on Earth has rallied its citizens and propelled its aspirations. Eighty percent of Americans in a USA TODAY/Gallup Poll say they believe the country has a unique character and unrivaled standing — a higher degree of national unanimity than on any current policy issue.

Now that historic trope is being wielded as a modern political weapon. [Republicans](#), including a string of prospective presidential contenders, have taken their objections to President [Obama](#)'s policies to a provocative and controversial level. Over [White House](#) objections, they're accusing him of not embracing the concept of American exceptionalism, saying he is pursuing an agenda on health care, the economy and foreign affairs that is at odds with fundamentals that distinguish the United States.

Obama "has clarified and personified secular socialization and a European view," says former House speaker [Newt Gingrich](#), who is weighing a presidential bid in 2012. Obama, he says, made "disastrous" comments on the subject during his first trip overseas as president in an exchange that has become a cause celebre among conservatives.

Gingrich predicts the debate over protecting American exceptionalism will be "one of the two or three deciding issues of 2012."

At a news conference in Strasbourg, France, in April 2009, a British reporter had asked the new president whether he subscribed to the idea that the United States is uniquely qualified to lead the world. "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism," Obama had replied.

That comment — which White House officials say critics have twisted and pulled out of context — led [Gingrich](#), former Alaska governor [Sarah Palin](#) and other prominent Republicans to question whether Obama believes that the USA has, by virtue of its heritage, a distinct and extraordinary role in world affairs.

"When President Obama insists that all countries are exceptional, he's saying that none is, least of all the country he leads," [Palin](#) says.

Obama's defenders reject the critique as a ridiculous and intentional misinterpretation.

The president cites his own election — the first African-American president, born to modest family circumstances — as proof of the opportunity and possibility that underlie the American dream. That was a theme of the speech at the [Democratic National Convention](#) in 2004 that launched him onto the national stage.

"Anyone who has watched [this president](#) over time knows how deeply he values and appreciates American exceptionalism," says [David Axelrod](#), one of the president's closest advisers. "Precisely because of his experience, he is a testifier to American exceptionalism. ... This is at the core of who he is."

Rep. [Joseph Crowley](#), a [New York](#) Democrat whose district in Queens and the Bronx is one of the most ethnically diverse in Congress, agrees. "My father always told me, 'This is the greatest country in the world' ... and my constituents think the election of President Obama is the culmination of what my father talked about," Crowley says. "His election in his own right is an example of how wonderful this country is."

For some, there is another agenda in the dispute, says Donald Pease, a Dartmouth professor and author of *The New American Exceptionalism*.

"What Republicans are doing by saying (Obama) doesn't believe in American exceptionalism ... is a safe way of saying he's un-American," Pease says.

It may be a way of questioning the president's core, Pease says — the way fringe critics do by making false allegations that Obama wasn't born in the United States or that he is a Muslim. He likens it to the loyalty charges hurled against some public figures during the post-World War II Red Scare.

What do presidents believe?

The accusation by Obama's critics has gained some ground among the public.

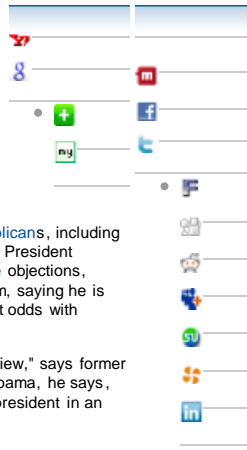
Nearly 4 in 10 Americans in the USA TODAY poll doubt Obama believes the United States has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world. That's double the percentage who feel that way about former president [Bill Clinton](#) and quadruple the number who say it of [Ronald Reagan](#).

By 9 to 1, those surveyed say [Reagan](#) believed in American exceptionalism. By 3 to 2, they say Obama believes in American exceptionalism.

That relatively close divide looms as a political vulnerability. For many voters, the notion of America as nation of divine provenance resonates.

POSSIBLE POLITICAL REBOUND: [Obama sets up as new Comeback Kid](#)

INTERACTIVE: [Track presidential approval ratings back to Truman](#)



"I always have this conversation with friends of mine. They say, 'America is this or that, why would you join the military and go fight for it?' " says Debra Butler, 37, a counselor and mother of two from Upper Marlboro, Md., who was among those surveyed. "I'm like, 'Why are you here, then? Where else would you go?' They can never answer. They know there's something about here that makes people want to come here. This is where people want to come."

Butler believes Obama agrees with all that. She assumes that he mutes his public comments on the subject in an effort to smooth international relationships. "I think he's just looking at ways to get along better with other countries," she says. "He's trying to build some better foreign view of America."

Obama's critics aren't so sure, a suspicion that has become a unifying refrain for his detractors. Two-thirds of those who disapprove of how Obama is doing as president say he doesn't believe in American exceptionalism.

"I don't believe he does because of his apparently overriding goal of government-knows-best," says Donald Coney, 66, a retired contract negotiator from Haymarket, Va., who was polled. America is all about "individuals taking care of themselves as opposed to somebody else, the government, imposing standards and its will on people."

Some opponents of the new health care law argue its mandate requiring every American to buy health insurance exceeds the powers of the federal government — a position that U.S. District Judge [Henry Hudson](#) endorsed last week when he ruled part of the law unconstitutional. Two other judges have upheld the law, however, and the issue is almost certainly headed to the Supreme Court.

In her new book *America By Heart*, Palin describes the health care bill, federal bailouts and Obama's speeches on the world stage as antithetical to the nation's tradition of free markets and individual responsibility. Former [Massachusetts](#) governor Mitt Romney, another prospective Republican presidential contender, takes a similar tack in his book *No Apology: The Case for American Greatness*.

Sen.-elect [Marco Rubio](#), a rising GOP star, based his come-from-behind victory in Florida last month in part on a message that America's unique character — one that drew his parents from Cuba — was under siege.

Axelrod says critics are twisting Obama's words at the news conference in a "mind-boggling" way, taking them out of context and failing to consider the setting. "You have to look at what comes after, and put it in the context of what he's said in his life and career," he says. "To me, he was being polite and showing appropriate humility as one world leader talking about his country."

The reporter prefaced his question to Obama by mentioning "your evident enthusiasm for multilateral frameworks." In contrast to his brash-talking predecessor, [George W. Bush](#), Obama on the world stage has taken a more consultative and diplomatic tone, one that has been bashed by Romney and others as reflecting weakness or apology.

In his answer, Obama noted the United States' economic heft and military might.

"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," he said. "Now, the fact that I am very proud of my country and I think that we've got a whole lot to offer the world does not lessen my interest in recognizing the value and wonderful qualities of other countries, or recognizing that we're not always going to be right, or that other people may have good ideas, or that in order for us to work collectively, all parties have to compromise — and that includes us."

[James Wilson](#), a conservative thinker and co-editor of *Understanding America: The Anatomy of an Exceptional Nation*, says Obama "suffers from a tin ear on this subject." Believers in American exceptionalism contend the USA is in a league apart from other nations, not just the most powerful among them.

They note that the United States was formed around the creed of liberty, not by conquest or bloodline. Reverence for the nation's founding and its Constitution has long motivated Americans, including troops deployed in battle who say they are fighting to defend freedom.

"By 'freedom' they mean something that embraces the United States," Wilson says. "Somehow American destiny is linked to these actions. They're linked in ways the average American couldn't reasonably explain that there is something unique about this country."

Searching for bedrock

The focus on American exceptionalism is being stoked by some of the same forces that have fueled the Tea Party movement.

After the economic crisis hit with full force in 2008, emergency measures by the [Bush](#) and Obama administrations — rescuing Wall Street, taking over [General Motors](#), pumping billions of dollars of stimulus spending into the economy — shifted the relationship between citizens and their government, Pease says. Some believe those steps isolated the role of the government in a free-market system.

The defense of American exceptionalism provides a "bedrock" for those who are trying to regain their footing during uncertain times, Pease says.

Gingrich says his defense of the country's exceptionalism gets a huge audience response in speeches across the country. Rep. [Mike Pence](#), an Indiana Republican who also is considering a presidential run, titled his speech to the Detroit Economic Club a few weeks ago "Restoring American Exceptionalism."

"My sense is that the anxiety that many Americans feel today about our economy and the extraordinary weight of deficits and debt that are being piled on future generations have gotten people thinking about what is the wellspring of American exceptionalism," Pence says. "I think they understand it is the ideals of the American founding and the practice and principles of economic freedom."

In a barb directed at the Obama administration, Pence adds, "There is a sense that many leaders in Washington, D.C., see their role as managing American decline, and the Americans have no interest in American decline."

That's not Obama's viewpoint, Axelrod says, with a barb of his own: "The difference is he believes American exceptionalism is a trust that you have to continually renew, generation after generation, and not merely a slogan."

There is widespread concern about whether the country's distinctive character is being eroded. In the USA TODAY survey, more than three of four of those who believe in American exceptionalism warn it is at risk.

"We're just falling behind," says Joseph Ficarra, 54, a flooring contractor in Brooklyn, N.Y., blaming in part a government that takes too long to respond to problems. "Countries like China and some of the Third World countries are moving up on us. Their students are better; they study harder; they have less red tape."

Even so, the attitudes that distinguish Americans from the rest of the world haven't changed, says [Andrew Kohut](#), director of the Global Attitudes Project at the non-partisan Pew Research Center. As a group, Americans are more religious, more optimistic and more nationalistic than citizens from elsewhere, and they have a much stronger faith in the power of the individual to shape his or her own life.

"We tend to think our way of doing things is better than other countries' way of doing things," Kohut says. "The American way."

|

Find this article at:

http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2010-12-21-1Aexceptional21_CV_N.htm

 **Click to Print**

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright 2009 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.