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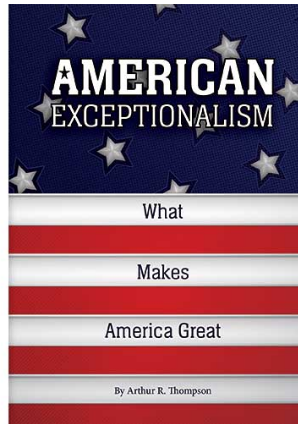
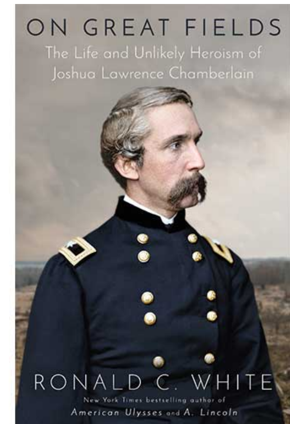
The Review

American Exceptionalism Is the World's Hope





***American Exceptionalism: What Makes America Great*,** by Arthur R. Thompson, Appleton, Wisconsin: Western Islands, 2023, 132 pages, hardcover and paperback. (To order, go to ShopJbs.org.)

Although the term "American Exceptionalism" is used across the political spectrum, it is often misunderstood — even by politicians and political commentators who use the term favorably. One might recall that then-President Barack Obama answered a question about American Exceptionalism by noting that other countries, such as Greece, consider themselves "exceptional" as well. This, of course, implies that there is nothing particularly exceptional about America.

In *American Exceptionalism: What Makes America Great*, former John Birch Society CEO Arthur R. Thompson not only advocates for American Exceptionalism, but explains what it is and why it is so important, not only for citizens of the United States, but for the rest of the world. In fact, Thompson argues that the principal reason that the entire world has not already become completely communist is because of American Exceptionalism.

Thompson also explains what American Exceptionalism is *not*. Many of the detractors of the term consider it arrogant, claiming that it asserts there is something special, or "exceptional," about the American *people.* But, as he makes clear, American Exceptionalism has nothing to do with the people of the United States, as America is composed of people of diverse ethnic and national backgrounds.

American Exceptionalism, he asserts, is not about the people, but rather about the *system of government*, and he argues that this is what "sets us apart as a civilization." The Founders "had the benefit of the study of millennia of history," Thompson writes, "with an emphasis on human nature and the nature of government." Unfortunately, "this system has been subverted by those who desire power," and "politicians get away with unconstitutional acts due to the ignorance of the majority of our citizens."

He offers a solution to this problem, which is for our population to reacquire an understanding of the ideas and ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

How did the Founders — and the people of the United States — develop the ideas we call American Exceptionalism? Thompson mentions the Colonial experience of the frontier, and how the people in the

English Colonies enjoyed the blessings of private property on a scale not known in Europe. This led to an independent-minded population. Even with this unusual blessing, the population of the country still needed education on the benefits of limited government. This required not only *education* on the benefits of limited government, but also *organization.* Organization came though the Sons of Liberty and Committees of Correspondence.

Thompson also cites the importance of the religious revival in Colonial America known as the Great Awakening, which created a conviction in the hearts and minds of the population to do what is right. He credits the Sons of Liberty and the Committees of Correspondence with giving people the *knowledge* to go with their enhanced morality. While the War for Independence is often called the "Revolutionary War," it was not like most revolutions around the world. Those fighting did not want to overthrow local government or change society, "as modern revolutionaries do."

To illustrate this more vividly, Thompson quotes John Adams, who in an 1818 letter wrote, "But what do we mean by the American Revolution? Do we mean the American war? The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. *The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people*;a change in their religious sentiments of the duties and obligations.... This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people, was the real American revolution." (Emphasis added.)

The importance of education and organization is the major theme of the book. Only by becoming educated in political principles and organizing to take effective action can we protect the cause of liberty.

Thompson writes that this is why the Declaration of Independence is not studied as much as it used to be — it clashes with the Marxist support for one-world government. The Declaration says unequivocally that our rights do not come from government, but rather are granted to us by our Creator. This explains, Thompson notes, why there is such a push to eliminate any reference to God from public life. Totalitarians do not want the population to have any loyalty other than to them.

The Declaration of Independence lit a torch of liberty in the world, because America is the only country in the world that declares that rights come from God. "It is the foundation of everything American. And it is the essence of American Exceptionalism." This means, Thompson argues, that "no one can deprive us of our rights legitimately, *not even government.*" (Emphasis in original.)

It is no accident, then, that the movement to abolish slavery began in the Colonies, and the Declaration of Independence was the first step in its elimination.

Closely related to the elimination of slavery is the understanding that private property rights are, as Thompson puts it, "as sacred as the laws of God." He believes this is one reason that the Ten Commandments are so hated. The Eighth Commandment states, "Thou shalt not steal," while the Ninth Commandment condemns the bearing of false witness. Thompson notes that robbing someone of their freedom or property is often the motivation for lying.

The Tenth Commandment, which states "Thou shalt not covet … anything that is thy neighbor's," is a "complete rejection of socialism," Thompson contends. One might add that coveting is the foundation of the campaigns of many left-wing politicians today.

Other aspects of the American system of government make it "exceptional" as well. Thompson argues, "The United States is the only country which has a system of completely independent law enforcement

under the control of local citizens through their elected representatives on their city council." The "defund the police" movement targets *local* law enforcement, not federal agents. Because local control of law enforcement is such an important aspect of maintaining our status as a free people, it is not surprising that those who want to create a socialistic world government hate locally controlled police.

One way that local control is undermined is via federal funding. Such funding will invariably lead to federal control of all law enforcement, after local governments become dependent upon that funding. While there will always be a minority of local police officers who do wrong, federalizing police will simply shift control away from local communities. When Adolf Hitler took over Germany, one of his first moves was to nationalize law enforcement. The Gestapo is not what we want in our country.

In subsequent chapters, Thompson addresses other aspects of American Exceptionalism and how efforts to subvert our republican form of government go back to the early days of the country. He then explains how the 17th Amendment, which provided for the direct, popular election of U.S. senators, rather than election by their respective state legislatures, undermined federalism. No longer do state lawmakers exercise influence over the senators from their state, which reduces the power state governments have to rein in an out-of-control federal government.

Although President Joe Biden made the 2022 midterms about preserving "democracy," and even some conservative commentators mistakenly refer to America as "our democracy," as Thompson notes, the word *democracy* is not mentioned in the U.S. Constitution or any other founding documents, such as the Declaration of Independence.

The full restoration of American Exceptionalism, Thompson concludes, depends upon upgrading moral standards and getting organized — and taking action.

Readers who value limited government and individual liberty should find a place on their shelf for this book.

— Steve Byas

Chamberlain: An Extraordinary Man

On Great Fields: The Life and Unlikely Heroism of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, by Ronald C. White, New York: Random House, 2023, 512 pages, hardcover.

Near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, armies of the Union and the Confederacy had "stumbled into the biggest battle ever to be fought in the western hemisphere," and on the second day of that crucial clash, on July 2, 1863, there was a key moment. The brigade commander had told the colonel leading the Twentieth Maine Regiment that his force had been placed on the left of the Union line, and "You are to hold this ground at all costs!"

The colonel was the fighting college professor from Maine, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain (1828-1914), and the historic locale is, of course, Little Round Top. Maine lumbermen, farmers, shopkeepers, and seamen had been battling against a force largely composed of farmers from Alabama — with each side about 650 miles from their homes as the crow flies (as one Southern historian observed years ago) — fighting as if the battle, or the war itself, depended on their bravery. It may well have.

The men from Maine were running out of ammo, and were looking to their leader for direction. It was a time for heroism — when some extraordinary men realize that this is when you keep your fears to

yourself, but share your courage with others. It was also a time, it turned out, not for defense, but for offense. Here's the author of *On Great Fields: The Life and Unlikely Heroism of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain*, Ronald C. White, at this strategic moment:

> With the outcome of the deadly struggle in doubt, Chamberlain called out: "Bayonet!" After a breathless silence, as if a spark has lit a fire, first a few men on the left wing sprang forward; then a few more on the right wing leaped into the fray. Now shouting, the Maine soldiers plunged down the tree-lined, boulder-strewn slope, surprising the stunned Confederate troops, who either surrendered or ran in defeat.

Summaries have a propensity for transforming order from what was frenzied action. Chamberlain himself recalled later, in print amid his flowery language, the chaos encountered: "The two lines met and broke and mingled in the shock. The cuts of musketry gave way to cuts and thrusts, grapplings and wrestlings. The edges of conflict swayed to and fro, with wild whirlpools and eddies. At that time I saw around me more of the enemy than my own men; gaps opening, swallowing, closing again with sharp convulsive energy."

Recapitulating, White writes, "Outnumbered and out of ammunition, Chamberlain had led the Twentieth Maine to victory. The victory at Little Round Top … would change his life forever."

Decades later, in 1893, Chamberlain received the Medal of Honor for that audacious action at Gettysburg. The medal cites his "daring heroism and great tenacity in holding his position on Little Round Top against repeated assaults, and carrying the advance position on Great Round Top." (Unfortunately, the writer and the publisher erroneously refer to this as the "Congressional Medal of Honor," which is a common mistake.)

Formative Years Set the Stage

The middle of this admirable and generally measured volume — the six chapters designated Part Three, covering Chamberlain's military career — could serve as a sound manuscript by itself. It's certainly the focal point of this study, and likely why most readers will be attracted to it. Making it better is the book's thoroughness and noteworthy, often overlooked, tidbits. White, who earned his Ph.D. at Princeton and is senior fellow of the Trinity Forum in Washington, D.C., succeeds in telling the story of a worthy life.

This includes additional emphases about his subject's formative years, including his Christian faith and scholarship (heavy with the classical past — to include lists of the Bowdoin College curricula over four years), his three years as a student at Bangor Theological Seminary, and Chamberlain's extended life after the Civil War. Also included are Chamberlain's complicated relations with his wife; his presidency of Bowdoin, which was not a bed of roses; and his four terms (one year each) as Maine's governor. These are examined comprehensively, as are other aspects of Chamberlain's career and personal side. Adding such context was White's intention, he acknowledges, as it was with his earlier bestselling biographies about Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant.

Chamberlain has been the subject of biographies before — and this is a laudable addition to that collection — but his name had been fading (as author White does point out) until he was featured in a historical novel (1974), a television documentary (1990), and a popular movie (1993). Respectively,

those were Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels*, which won a Pulitzer Prize; Ken Burns' *The Civil War*; and the movie *Gettysburg*, with Jeff Daniels playing Chamberlain. A statue of Chamberlain in military attire, located at the edge of Bowdoin College (this reviewer is a 1967 Bowdoin graduate), is a relatively recent addition, funded privately and dedicated in 2003; it faces the First Congregational Church in Brunswick, where Chamberlain was a member and where college commencements were long held.

Reading about Chamberlain as a Bowdoin student, professor, and president is — for this reviewer — akin to being caught in a disordered time machine: Some of the professors and college officials who are his contemporaries are, for me, "buildings" named for those personages. Even in the '60s, most of us were aware of some of Chamberlain's history, though not all the fine points. Certainly, we knew of the nearby Stowe House in Brunswick, where Harriet Beecher Stowe began writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; less so of her husband, Calvin Stowe, a professor at the college back in the day. I'm not aware of any who realized that student Chamberlain had been in her "circle" that discussed her work. (Some of my contemporaries, unnamed here, admittedly were more interested that the Stowe House of our era had a pub on the basement floor, where friendly "Benji" didn't check IDs.)

As the book makes clear, Chamberlain was certainly a religious young man. His father wanted him to go to West Point and have a military career; his mother pushed him toward the ministry. Going to Bowdoin first allowed him to put those other choices aside for a while. Actually getting into the school involved, among other efforts, 18 months of dedicated study in his attic (sometimes with a valuable tutor), then a 100-mile sleigh ride from rural Brewer to Brunswick in order to face an entrance examination by a committee of professors who interrogated him on, among other matters, Latin and Greek grammar.

Our protagonist gets humanized, becoming more of a recognizable typical youth to readers of *On Great Fields*, when White describes the student hijinks that resulted in Chamberlain being temporarily suspended from college. Even then, it is telling that the principled youth didn't rat on his fellow miscreants.

Here are a few housekeeping matters. Helping to make the copy more accessible, there are nine detailed, decidedly helpful maps, as well as photographs throughout.

The author notes, while discussing his young subject, that he "liked to refer to the three parts of his name — Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain — as his scriptural, medieval, and modern names, but he introduced himself as Lawrence, the name his parents would call him though his life."

We also learn of his stammering struggles — even as he eventually became fluent in nine languages, becoming a professor of rhetoric and, in his latter life, an accomplished public speaker.

If you are wondering where the volume's title comes from, that too is from Chamberlain, in this case from a dedication speech he made in October of 1889 for the Maine monuments at Little Round Top, in which the former general said, "In great deeds, something abides. On great fields, something stays. Forms change and pass; bodies disappear; but spirits linger, to consecrate ground for the vision-place of souls."

Yet, for decades in the last century, as the author points out, the official guides at Gettysburg and Little Round Top did not even mention Chamberlain's name. That has changed. Little Round Top has become the most visited place at Gettysburg. West Point — which would please Lawrence's father — now sends cadets there to role play at Little Round Top, depicting Chamberlain and other leaders in exercises.

Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain (Library of Congress)

Wounded at Petersburg, Salute After Appomattox

There is considerably more about the war, as one might expect, with everything from minié balls to smallpox among the impending threats. In 1864, at Petersburg, Virginia, Chamberlain's horrendous wounds — including injuries to his hip, bladder, and urethra, decades before antibiotics — seemingly were mortal. Death was at hand. He was so told, solemnly, by at least two examining surgeons.

If you want to get a lump in your throat, check out the letter that Chamberlain, believing that he was dying, wrote to his wife. (The handwritten original, from Chamberlain's order book, is available for viewing at the Hawthorne-Longfellow Library at Bowdoin.) It is personal and moving, as he tells her, among other private remarks, that his mind and heart "are at peace. Jesus Christ is my all-sufficient savior."

Despite surgeries over the years, he never really recovered from those wounds and other subsequent war injuries; infections kept recurring, and he was in pain for the rest of his life. At the time, when informed of the approaching death, Chamberlain's superior officer informed the commander in chief of the Union forces of the situation. As Grant later wrote — while he himself was dying from throat cancer — in his *Personal Memoirs*, Chamberlain "was gallantly leading his brigade at the time, as he had been in the habit of doing in all the engagements in which he had previously been engaged." Grant continued, noting that Chamberlain "had several times been recommended for brigadier-generalcy for gallant and meritorious conduct. On this occasion I promoted him on the spot."

Following Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Chamberlain's actions again were notable. General Chamberlain was designated to command the infantry surrender ceremonies; General John B. Gordon of

Georgia was in charge of the Confederate surrender. Chamberlain, we read, was “determined to mark the surrender in the spirit of the magnanimity Grant had expressed to Lee three days earlier.” The word that the author repeatedly uses about this turn of events is “reconciliation.”

Here’s the setting: As mere yards separated the blue and gray lines, Chamberlain sought to replace the wide rift that had divided them for years. As White explains, Chamberlain wanted to “offer some recognition, not to the Confederacy or the cause for which they fought, but rather to the bravery and courage of the soldiers in ragged uniforms marching toward them.” When the Georgian general

> arrived … Chamberlain, to the sound of a bugle, ordered the command to bring their muskets from ‘order arms’ to ‘shoulder arms’ — the marching salute, with the musket held in the right hand, perpendicular to the shoulder — and saluted his former enemies.
>
> Gordon, surprised by Chamberlain’s salute, wheeled his black horse and touched his sword to his toe. He then signaled his men, rank upon rank, to respond to what he would later call ‘a token of respect.’”

Over the years that followed, Gordon and Chamberlain, erstwhile enemies, became close friends. In his *Reminiscences of the Civil War*, Gordon — who became governor of Georgia and a U.S. senator twice — described Chamberlain as one “of the knightliest soldiers of the Federal army,” also recalling the “token of respect from Americans to Americans, a final and fitting tribute from Northern to Southern chivalry.” The Mainer is said to have “wept bitterly” when he heard of Gordon’s death in 1904.

Our era, sadly, is not an age of chivalry. Even as we read our copy of *On Great Fields*, a century-old Confederate memorial was being removed from Arlington National Cemetery in northern Virginia (see “Arlington Monument Removal Part of America’s ‘Cultural Revolution’.”). So much for reconciliation. About the same time, in Georgia, as reported in the military publication *Task & Purpose*, Fort Gordon — which was opened just before the Pearl Harbor attack and is now home to the Army’s Cyber Command and Signal Corps — was redesignated. It became the last of nine U.S. Army posts stripped of their identities because their names were those of Confederate Army officers.

Twelve Dramatic Days in Augusta

One of the more intriguing chapters of this book covers a period when Chamberlain had finished his gubernatorial terms in Maine and concluded his years as president of Bowdoin. In “Twelve Days in 1880,” White recalls when Chamberlain (who was a Republican) served as a (largely ceremonial) head of the state militia in Maine. The episode was complicated, so here’s a precis: State politics (potentially affecting national politics) became a “three-cornered fight,” in Chamberlain’s words. In short, the then-Democratic governor allied with a third party called the Greenbacks (which backed paper money as the way to prosperity), forming the “Fusion” party.

In the fall of 1879, the Republican nominee for governor seemed to have won easily, with a plurality over the other two parties, though falling short of a majority by 840 votes. According to the state constitution, that meant the election would go to the House. Even though the Republicans had majorities in both the House and Senate, their opponents had another plan — which became known as the “Great Count-Down.” The incumbent Democratic governor and his “seven-man Fusionist executive council immediately began to disqualify ballots on various technicalities.”

Violence and a potential coup loomed. Chamberlain was called in, and he became, in essence, the military governor. In his position, his life seemed to be in real danger, and he switched his sleeping places nightly, seeking to thwart a rumored kidnapping. There is also a dramatic episode depicting Chamberlain physically standing down an angry crowd in the rotunda of the state Capitol, literally daring them to kill him. The incident reads as fiction — but it isn't.

Twelve days later, the state Supreme Court settled the matter in the Republicans' favor. In a letter to his wife, Chamberlain called this incident "another Round Top."

Wouldn't this make an intriguing PBS documentary? Some might charge Ronald White with hyperbole. Read his narrative and the evidence he presents, and judge for yourself.

If nothing else, by the time the reader closes this volume, he should be convinced that Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain left the world a better place.

— William P. Hoar

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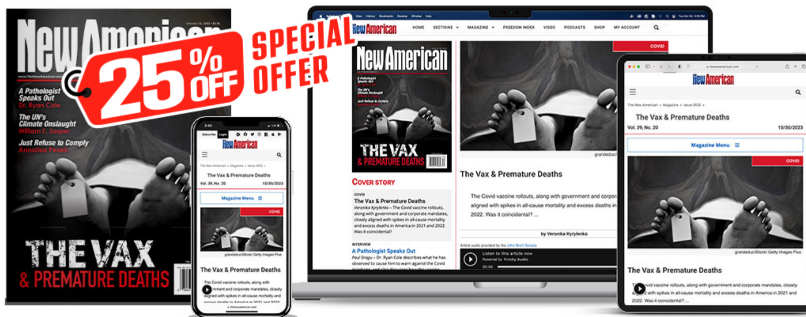

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