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The End of the American Century

It's time to practice Jeffersonian libertarianism at home and abroad

[Terry Michael](#) | February 16, 2011

Though its first decade began with a security nightmare in lower Manhattan and ended with an economic collapse blocks away on Wall Street, the 21st century can still bring greater peace, prosperity, and individual liberty if American libertarians seize this moment in history. We must echo President Dwight Eisenhower's "military industrial complex" warnings in his January 17, 1961 [farewell address](#) and we must counter the "American Century" conceit still plaguing us from Henry R. Luce's *Life* magazine editorial of [February 17, 1941](#), the 70th anniversary of which is now upon us.

The contrast between Eisenhower's historically informed wisdom and Luce's jingoistic missionary zeal offer an opportunity for serious discourse beyond the empty choices presented by bloated government liberals and big government conservatives. Both "sides" pretend they want to downsize the fat federal beast, just

as they both sell interventionist foreign policy with flag-waving “support the troops” propaganda.

More alike than not, Democrats and Republicans serve the narrow interests of the “government affairs representatives” who infest Washington’s K Street lobbying firms. They pander to both the procurers of middle- and elderly-class entitlements and to the rent seekers from scare-mongering national security industries, who profiteer from a permanent state of empire-building and elective warfare.

Unfortunately, it has now become mantra for 2012 Republican nominee wannabes to drop a Luce-style reference to “American exceptionalism” into every nascent campaign speech, op-ed, and FOX News cable-babble. They're attempting to create a GOP theme to counter the second-term ambitions of what the populist, nativist right considers a “less-than-American” president, Barack Obama, who made the mistake of saying in an April 2010 press conference outside the U.S. that, "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism."

Obama qualified that remark to assure his worldwide audience that he, too, worships at the altar of the High Church of American Exceptionalism, but it was too little, too late. The neo-con artists, think tank directors, and weekly journal editors who live for an endless state of war seized on Obama’s words. They went on the attack to please their oil and defense-contractor friends, in service to the interests of the religiously-defined nation-state of Israel, and supported by the Rapturist hallucinations of certain domestic Christian fundamentalists eager to ascend into the clouds to meet Jesus via their self-fulfilling prophecies about Armageddon in the Holy Land.

Those of us blessed with the classical liberal meme stream inherited from the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason can do the human race a favor by using the Eisenhower and Luce anniversaries as a teaching moment. We can illuminate just how much liberty has been lost due to today’s permanent state of warfare, which not only Eisenhower in 1961, but James Madison two centuries earlier, warned against. We can define how Luce’s pre-war jingoistic “American Century” proclamation, in his immodestly named *Life* magazine, contributed to a post-war

sense of New World entitlement. Luce's conceit encouraged Americans to think of ourselves as God's policemen to the world, and to obsess about *our right* not only to whatever our rapidly expanding middle-class incomes could buy, but also to what politicians could hand out via federal, state, and local taxes—and a massive deficit-spending spree.

“American exceptionalism” is a slogan used in many ways. With modesty, it describes an exemplar nation, setting an example for indigenous movements for liberal democracy and free markets (perhaps even in Egypt and Iran right now). But more often, it is employed by warmongers and nation builders to justify the projection of American hard power. This approach has been sorely abused by many presidents, including Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, George W. Bush, and—sorrowfully, for me—Barack Obama, who now echoes President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's anointment of America as “the indispensable nation.”

As we witness the rise of great middle classes around the globe, empowered by the democratization of information, finance, and technology, America is at a stage of history when we should disenthral ourselves from the notion we are at the center of human existence. We have become the problem in so many places because of our over-bearing presence. We need to step back and put the individual, not our nation-state, at the center of the universe.

Executive director of the Washington Center for Politics & Journalism, Terry Michael's writing is collected at his “thoughts from a libertarian Democrat” personal web site, www.terrymichael.net.