

The Atlantic
<http://www.theatlantic.com>

November 2007, page 19

The American Idea
<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200711/essays>

“Unexceptionalism”

Anne-Marie Slaughter

The American idea is the idea of a nation founded on a set of universal values--self-evident truths--that are ascribed to all human beings by virtue of their common humanity. It is the idea of a nation whose destiny was to demonstrate to the peoples of all nations that a government based on these values could in fact succeed. In Daniel Webster's words, on the laying of the cornerstone of the Bunker Hill monument in 1825, America had shown "that with wisdom and knowledge men may govern themselves."

The greatest challenge to this idea today is precisely that the world perceives it as American. The values that our Founders cherished as the universal inheritance of the Enlightenment are increasingly identified as American values--or worse still, as not real values at all, but simply a rhetorical blind for the advance of American power. Perennial claims of American exceptionalism hardly help--how can these values be universal if the United States continually insists that we are exceptional for embracing them?

The only way to save the American idea is to share it. Our Founders did not see America as exceptional, other than as exceptionally blessed. We were blessed to be the first nation to steer a successful course between, in James Madison's view, the extremes of tyranny and direct democracy, but we would fail in our destiny if we proved to be the only such nation. Today we are but one facet of a many-faceted global experiment--a status we should embrace as the hallmark of our initial success.

The American idea was a great idea because it rested on an essential and revolutionary notion of the universality of the human condition. It is still great today and now genuinely global. But as the people who have done so much to nurture this idea, we face a paradox. To see it continue to flourish, we have to accept that it is no longer exclusively--or exceptionally--ours.

Anne-Marie Slaughter, the Bert G. Kerstetter '66 University Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton, is the dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. Her most recent book is *The Idea That Is America: Keeping Faith With our Values in a Dangerous World*.