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Palin's American Exception

By ROGER COHEN

Sarah Palin loves the word “exceptional.” At a rally in Nevada the other day, the Republican vice-presidential candidate said: “We are an exceptional nation.” Then she declared: “America is an exceptional country.” In case any one missed that, she added: “You are all exceptional Americans.”

I have to hand it to Palin, she may be onto something in her batty way: the election is very much about American exceptionalism.

This is the idea, around since the founding fathers, and elaborated on by Alexis de Tocqueville, that the United States is a nation unlike any other with a special mission to build the “city upon a hill” that will serve as liberty’s beacon for mankind.

But exceptionalism has taken an ugly twist of late. It’s become the angry refuge of the America that wants to deny the real state of the world.

From an inspirational notion, however flawed in execution, that has buttressed the global spread of liberty, American exceptionalism has morphed into the fortress of those who see themselves threatened by “one-worlders” (read Barack Obama) and who believe it’s more important to know how to dress moose than find Mumbai.

That’s Palinism, a philosophy delivered without a passport and with a view (on a clear day) of Russia.

Behind Palinism lies anger. It’s been growing as America’s relative decline has become more manifest in falling incomes, imploding markets, massive debt and rising new centers of wealth and power from Shanghai to Dubai.

The damn-the-world, God-chose-us rage of that America has sharpened as U.S. exceptionalism has become harder to square with the 21st-century world’s interconnectedness. How exceptional can you be when every major problem you face, from terrorism to nuclear proliferation to gas prices, requires joint action?

Very exceptional, insists Palin, and so does John McCain by choosing her. (He has said: “I do believe in American exceptionalism. We are the only nation I know that really is deeply concerned about adhering to the principle that all of us are created equal.”)

America is distinct. Its habits and attitudes with respect to religion, patriotism, voting and the

death penalty, for example, differ from much of the rest of the developed world. It is more ideological than other countries, believing still in its manifest destiny. At its noblest, it inspires still.

But, let's face it, from Baghdad to Bear Stearns the last eight years have been a lesson in the price of exceptionalism run amok.

To persist with a philosophy grounded in America's separateness, rather than its connectedness, would be devastating at a time when the country faces two wars, a financial collapse unseen since 1929, commodity inflation, a huge transfer of resources to the Middle East, and the imperative to develop new sources of energy.

Enough is enough.

The basic shift from the cold war to the new world is from MAD (mutual assured destruction) to MAC (mutual assured connectedness). Technology trumps politics. Still, Bush and Cheney have demonstrated that politics still matter.

Which brings us to the first debate — still scheduled for Friday — between Obama and McCain on foreign policy. It will pit the former's universalism against the latter's exceptionalism.

I'm going to try to make this simple. On the Democratic side you have a guy whose campaign has been based on the Internet, who believes America may have something to learn from other countries (like universal health care) and who's unafraid in 2008 to say he's a "proud citizen of the United States and a fellow citizen of the world."

On the Republican side, you have a guy who, in 2008, is just discovering the Net and Google and whose No. 2 is a woman who got a passport last year and believes she understands Russia because Alaska is closer to Siberia than Alabama.

If I were Obama, I'd put it this way: "Senator McCain, the world you claim to understand is the world of yesterday. A new century demands new thinking. Our country cannot be made fundamentally secure by a man who thought our economy was fundamentally sound."

American exceptionalism, taken to extremes, leaves you without the allies you need (Iraq), without the influence you want (Iran) and without any notion of risk (Wall Street). The only exceptionalism that resonates, as Obama put it to me last year, is one "based on our Constitution, our principles, our values and our ideals."

In a superb recent piece on the declining global influence of the Supreme Court, my colleague Adam Liptak quoted an article by Steven Calabresi, a law professor at Northwestern: "Like it or not, Americans really are a special people with a special ideology that sets us apart from all other peoples."

Palinism has its intellectual roots. But it's dangerous for a country in need of realism not rage. I'm sure Henry Kissinger tried to instill Realpolitik in the governor of Alaska this week, but the angry exceptionalism that is Palinism is not in the reason game.

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