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GOD'S VOICE TO FOREIGN HORDES: America Is Number One!

God Smiles on the U.S. of A.

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The United States has done it again! This time Senator Joseph Lieberman was our spokesperson, joining the legion of prominent Americans who have announced to the world that in the eyes of God, we're best. "Chosen by God and commissioned by history to be a model to the world," is how he put it.

Lieberman follows in a hallowed American tradition, and, I'm afraid, offensive as it is abroad, the world will just have to put up with it. It's in our bones; we get it with mother's milk. And so it has been for centuries. The first recorded instance occurred when John Winthrop told his followers that "Wee shall be as a Ciity upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us." That was in 1630; we wouldn't be a nation for some 150 years, and Winthrop was still on the high seas; he had not yet had a glimpse of America.

I have lived in four countries, besides the United States, and visited many more, but I have never encountered a society as self-congratulatory as ours. We constantly remind ourselves and anyone else who is listening that our country is the leader of the free world, the greatest nation on earth, and even the founder of democracy (with no nod to Athens). Furthermore, from boasting at home to sermonizing abroad is a very easy step.

Commentators frequently complain that Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, for example, preaches and scolds too much, targeting friends and enemies alike. "She lectures to the world," said Peter Krogh, former dean of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, who once said of Clinton's diplomats that, "Everywhere these officials go, they instruct."

But when you possess the truth of the Lord, that is your duty. Yes, of course, that responsibility has often gone hand in hand with national advantage. Surely, the prime example of that was "manifest destiny," which we all heard about in school, at least we did in my day. Manifest Destiny provided Americans with a divine license to spread their nation across the North American continent regardless of who was in the way (principally Mexicans and Native Americans, as it happened).

Journalist John L. O'Sullivan coined the phrase in 1845, saying we had a manifest destiny "to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free

development of our yearly multiplying millions." That notion was not unique with O'Sullivan; writers and politicians expressed it constantly in those days.

But to be fair, our self-congratulation and the preaching to foreigners that accompanies it usually are not quite so self-serving. For example, we are sincere and idealistic when we lecture the Chinese about democracy. And, I admit, I think China would be a better place with a democratic government.

Still, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger surely had a good point when he told a student audience, "The Chinese ... have the longest uninterrupted history of any nation in the world -- almost 5,000 years. ... They staggered through 4,800 years ... without significant advice from the United States."

Furthermore, as Kissinger well knows, rhetoric can matter. It can ease or irritate relations, and does anyone want a head-butting contest with China? We had one during the Korean War. It was brutal, and, when we triggered Chinese intervention by approaching China's border, it was futile.

Our closest friends, on the other hand, have long since learned to grin and bear our sanctimony. The British, for example, had already begun to take it with a grain of salt back in the nineteenth century, although occasionally it becomes too much even for them. During World War II, for instance, when colonialism was a highly sensitive topic between the two allies, the British endured endless American lectures with saintly patience because they desperately needed U.S. military assistance. Once, however, in 1945, when FDR chided Colonial Secretary Oliver Stanley because in the 1840s Great Britain "did not acquire [Hong Kong] by purchase," British restraint collapsed. Stanley, who seems to have heard about manifest destiny, replied, "Let me see, Mr. President, that was about the time of the Mexican War, wasn't it?"

I suggest a new administration thank members of the international community for putting up with centuries of American boasts and homilies. Meanwhile, any American who feels slightly embarrassed by this proclivity can say only this to them: given our preponderant power and influence, it's not going away anytime soon, so please focus on the many great qualities of our country and try to ignore our braggadocio.

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