A Distinctive Role?

Weigh evidence and limits in claims about American exceptionalism

USG.C.6.5 "Describe the concept of American exceptionalism and examine arguments that the United States of America has played a distinctive role in promoting political liberty, economic development, and innovation."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one detail each about political liberty, economic development, and innovation. Circle two details that complicate a claim that the U.S. role was entirely unique or consistently positive.

What Makes a Role Distinctive?

1. American exceptionalism is the idea that the United States has a distinctive place in world history. Some supporters point to the Constitution's limits on government and the Bill of Rights' protections for speech and religion. They argue that these principles offered a model for political liberty beyond U.S. borders. Yet a model is not the same as a perfect record. Slavery denied freedom to millions, and Black Americans faced voting barriers for decades after emancipation. Other countries also developed protections for rights. To evaluate exceptionalism, ask what the United States did, who benefited, and how its record compares with others.

2. After World War II, much of Europe faced damaged factories, shortages, and disrupted trade. Through the Marshall Plan, the United States provided roughly $13 billion in aid from 1948 to 1952 to help Western European countries recover. Supporters cite this effort as evidence of a distinctive U.S. role in economic development: American resources helped rebuild economies beyond its own borders. But recovery also depended on European workers and governments, and the aid served U.S. interests in stable trading partners and resistance to Soviet influence. The program shows substantial impact, not proof that one country alone created prosperity.

3. Innovation offers another test of the claim. Beginning in the late 1960s, U.S. government funding helped create ARPANET, an early network that contributed to the development of the internet. Universities and businesses later built tools that brought networked communication into everyday life. Supporters see a distinctive mix of public research and private enterprise. Still, researchers in many countries helped develop the internet, and innovation does not automatically expand political liberty. During the Cold War, the United States also backed some authoritarian governments to oppose communism. A fair judgment weighs influence on liberty, growth, and invention against limits and competing contributions.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How could the Constitution and Bill of Rights support an argument about a distinctive U.S. role in political liberty? What detail limits that argument?

2. Why might supporters cite the Marshall Plan as evidence of a distinctive U.S. role in economic development? Why does the passage caution against giving the United States sole credit?

3. What role did the United States play in the development of the internet, and what detail challenges a claim that it acted alone?

4. Why does the passage suggest that innovation alone cannot prove the United States consistently promoted political liberty?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a short verdict on whether a distinctive role should mean acting alone or making an important contribution. Use two examples from different areas in the passage and one limitation, then explain how your definition shapes your verdict.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · USG.C.6.5

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one detail each about political liberty, economic development, and innovation. Circle two details that complicate a claim that the U.S. role was entirely unique or consistently positive. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How could the Constitution and Bill of Rights support an argument about a distinctive U.S. role in political liberty? What detail limits that argument?	**Supporters argue that their limits on government and protections for rights offered a model beyond U.S. borders. Slavery and later voting barriers for Black Americans show that the United States did not consistently protect liberty at home.**
2	Why might supporters cite the Marshall Plan as evidence of a distinctive U.S. role in economic development? Why does the passage caution against giving the United States sole credit?	**U.S. aid helped Western European countries rebuild their economies. Recovery also depended on European workers and governments.**
3	What role did the United States play in the development of the internet, and what detail challenges a claim that it acted alone?	**U.S. government funding helped create ARPANET, and U.S. universities and businesses developed later tools. Researchers in many countries also helped develop the internet.**
4	Why does the passage suggest that innovation alone cannot prove the United States consistently promoted political liberty?	**Innovation does not automatically expand liberty. During the Cold War, the United States backed some authoritarian governments.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I think a distinctive role means making an important contribution, not acting alone. The Marshall Plan used U.S. aid to support Western Europe's recovery, even though Europeans did the rebuilding. U.S. funding also helped start ARPANET, but researchers from many countries helped develop the internet. These examples show influence across borders rather than exclusive credit. My verdict is that the United States played a distinctive role in economic development and innovation, but that role does not make every U.S. policy a defense of liberty. Its Cold War support for some authoritarian governments limits a claim that its influence was consistently liberating.

Accept either definition of distinctive if the verdict follows from it. Strong responses use accurate evidence from two different areas and address a limitation without treating it as proof that the U.S. made no contribution.