A Double-Edged Sword

Use & Abuse of American Exceptionalism

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Abstract

This dissertation scrutinizes how American Exceptionalism evolved from a collection of Christian and English legends around 1776 into today’s well-organized narrative central to Americans’ self-perception and political discourse. It is based upon an extensive qualitative study of primary sources and focuses on how U.S. presidents have used the concept to further their agendas following the 1898 Spanish-American War. Specifically, this thesis shows that the use of exceptionalist themes has increased over time. It has become critical as a justification for an active foreign policy, particularly in times of war when it is used to enhance national unity abroad and further reform domestic policy reforms at home. Thanks to social and cultural changes that began in the 1970s, the concept’s effectiveness in the latter realm has diminished. Moreover, as Democrats, for ideological reasons, have distanced themselves from some of the concept’s themes, it has become ever more associated with the Republican Party, which has remained loyal to its notions. The concept is thus today as much a matter of political dispute as of national unity. Finally, this thesis probes how American Exceptionalism has been echoed in popular culture and official U.S. propaganda, especially during the Cold War.
This dissertation by Anders W. Edvardsson fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Politics approved by John K. White, as Director, and by Claes G. Ryn and Matthew N. Green as Readers.

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Anders W. Edvardsson, Ph.D.

Director: John K. White, Professor

To Jen, Gracie & Sweetpea

Without you, life has no meaning!
Objects of the most stupendous magnitude, and measure in which the lives and liberties of millions yet unborn are intimately interested, are now before us. We are in the very midst of a revolution the most complete, unexpected and remarkable of any in the history of nations.

JOHN ADAMS (1776)
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Introduction

At the outset of his 2018 campaign for re-nomination as the Democratic Governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo aimed President Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” by saying: “We’re not going to make America great again. It was never that great.”¹ Instant reactions came from both the left and the right. Cuomo’s primary opponent, Cynthia Nixon, accused him of failing to sound like a real Progressive while his Republican challenger, Marcus Molinaro, bought him a one-way bus ticket to Canada.² Moreover, since Cuomo’s name had been floated for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination, Trump fired off a tweet urging him to run: “Please do it. Please.”³ A poll conducted a few days later also showed that, even if Cuomo swiftly walked back on his comment, nearly seven of ten likely U.S. voters

² Ibid.
disagreed with his statement. Apparently, the Governor’s off-the-cuff remark had hit a nerve in the American psyche. Thus, to understand the reactions to his gaffe, we must look back in time.

**THESIS STATEMENT**

Birthed in the late 18th century as a politically decentralized country with a *laissez-faire* economy and an isolationist foreign policy, the United States of America changed fundamentally during the 1800s. In the 1890s, after a century of rapid territorial expansion followed by swift industrialization, the U.S. emerged as a world power at the same time as the U.S. Government began to expand its domestic authority. However, it was not until the New Deal and World War II almost half a century later that America would enter a genuinely new phase of its political, economic, and intellectual history. Then it started to develop a European-like welfare state and assumed the role of “superpower” and political, military, ideological, and moral leader of the West in its struggle against communism.

Parallel to this development, American Exceptionalism evolved from its still subtle 19th-century form into a clear and consistent ideology that strongly fashioned Americans’ self-perception. This is indicated by factors such as presidents increasingly using the term “America” when talking about the nation after 1900, and that “invocations of American exceptionalism have appeared in a full 67 percent of all major presidential speeches to the

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American public since 1933.” Signs that this development gained further momentum can be found in scholarly works following World War II. These include political scientist Louis Hartz’s *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955), which argued that the U.S. was inherently different from other countries because of the conspicuous absence of ideologies other than Classical Liberalism. Journalist Max Lerner’s *America as a Civilization* (1957) is another. He stated that “the great themes of the Renaissance and the Reformation are fulfilled in the American as the archetypal modern man.” Thus, a more mature form of American Exceptionalism was reflected in these and other works from around that same time. They particularly emphasized the idea that the U.S. had a historic role to play in the form of a duty to reshape the world in its image.

Accordingly, many scholars have dealt with American Exceptionalism’s origin and its influence on U.S. foreign policy. However, less has been said about how this development has affected domestic politics. Therefore, the main goal of this dissertation is to expand our knowledge in this area. Specifically, my theory is that American Exceptionalism after the Spanish-American War in 1898 has inflated American’s self-image not only in foreign but domestic policies as well and that these growths have augmented each other. This thesis will, therefore, present analyses of both areas and the dynamic between them. It will also show how right- and left-wing politicians alike, in different ways and areas and for varying reasons, during the same period used exceptionalism to expand the federal government into what sociologist Robert Nisbet branded a “warfare-welfare state.”

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To prove these hypotheses, I will present an analysis built around quotes from historical actors showcasing their intentional use of American Exceptionalism to achieve political gains. This study’s primary objective is U.S. Presidents’ use of exceptionalism to communicate with the American people. The reason for this is that they, as philosopher Michael Novak once wrote, are the nation’s king “in the sense of symbolic, decisive focal point of [its] power and destiny,” and its “prophet in the sense of chief interpreter of our national self-understanding, establishing the terms of national discourse.” Hence, the president “is the people, not in a sense that subsumes them under him (L’État, c’est moi) but in the sense that he is their agent, their spokesman, their image of themselves.”

Moreover, Novak claims the president is not only America’s sole national political figure but its highest “priest in the sense of incarnating our self-image, our values, our aspirations, and expressing these through every action he selects, every action he avoids.” Or, as political scientist Walter Dean Burnham calls him, the “pontifex maximus” of America’s civil religion.

10 In doing so, this thesis follows the traditional “top-down” perspective of American Exceptionalism studies established by Bellah. It should, however, be mentioned that a new field of study in the form of “bottom-up” studies inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson is today producing valuable new insights. See Andrea Terry, “Civil Religion as Communal Democratic Sentiment,” in Edwards & Valenzano, Rhetoric of American Civil Religion (ed.), 41-54. Furthermore, since this thesis aspires to analyze the use of American Exceptionalist rhetoric in public discourse, private conversations, letters, and other non-public materials have been omitted. Also, even if there is some discrepancy between private opinions and public statements, there generally seems to be a good correspondence between historical agents’ private and public comments. For example, one Cold War scholar concludes that “new archival material reveals that public discourse did not depart a great deal from private conversations.” Quote from Melvyn P. Leffler, For the Soul of Mankind (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 8. The high degree of correspondence between private and public opinions regarding modern U.S. foreign policy can also be studied in Stephen Sestanovich, Maximalist: America In the World From Truman to Obama (New York: Vintage Books, 2014). See also Siobhán McEvoy-Levy, American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy: Public Diplomacy at the End of the Cold War (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 8f. Also, see James Davison Hunter, Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define
Because of this, presidents from George Washington to Donald Trump forward have played an unchallenged role as the nation’s leader and, since the turn of the last century, the primary shaper of political discourse, often using the exceptionalist argument.

Besides U.S. Presidents, some defeated presidential candidates, vice presidents, cabinet members, members of Congress, media personalities, and a few others will be scrutinized. These secondary actors have been selected because of their historical prominence and/or notable use of exceptionalist language. To show the broader importance of American Exceptionalism, this thesis will intermittently also examine how the concept has affected U.S. popular culture and the U.S. Governments national and international propaganda during both war and peacetime conditions. A particular interest will be put on such propaganda during the Cold War, which is a unique period when the nation’s ideological character was juxta pointed directly toward the ditto of the Soviet Union.

**Sources, Definitions & Limitations**

To increase the stringency of the analysis and avoid selection bias, this study will focus on, but not be limited to, recurring sources that reveal worldviews and ideological inclinations reaching large audiences. These include presidents Acceptance Speeches, Inaugural Addresses, State of the Union Addresses, Farewell Addresses, and vital policy speeches. Occasionally, policy papers and other sources have also been used, but only sparingly since they usually are just read by experts, journalists, and other “insiders.” Moreover, to identify significant secondary actors,

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widely read books and editorials have been my primary sources. and to construe as informative a narrative as possible, plenty of secondary sources have been consulted.

Furthermore, because the lexical meaning of “exceptional” as unusual and extraordinary makes it sensitive, the term American Exceptionalism needs to be clarified. Although the word does not formally convey the connotation better, identifying a people and its society as outstanding does indicate a potentially chauvinist perception, especially if the country, like the contemporary U.S., already occupies a prime political, military, economic, and cultural position in the world. Indeed, the term indicated superiority from its first known use by a London newspaper in the 1860s, and the concept could “only have arisen by comparing this country with other societies.”16 Key is also that the “stories that nations like to tell about themselves are revealing to a degree that goes beyond the facts involved.”17 In other words, myths often trump facts, even when known to be fabricated. Thus, the term American Exceptionalism will in the following be used generically in the meaning of the U.S. being different and better

As well, to offer a more operationally advanced vocabulary, the following distinctions between actors’ varieties of American Exceptionalism will be made: inclusive versus exclusive and active versus passive. Specifically, inclusive will mean forms of exceptionalism that have confidence that the U.S. can transplant its political, social, cultural, and economic distinctiveness to other countries, while exclusive variants denote an America that is so unique that other nations cannot successfully copy its societal model. Likewise, while active will mean a form of exceptionalism emphasizing divine, moral, or other kinds of duty to spread American ideals,

16 Lipset, American Exceptionalism, 18. For a more detailed account concerning alternative definitions of “exceptionalism” and related questions, see Justin B. Litke, Twilight of the Republic: Empire and Exceptionalism in the American Political Tradition (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 5-18.
values, and institutions abroad, passive variants consider the U.S. a model for other countries to follow, but only if they choose to do so.

For the sake of academic transparency, it shall further be noted that scholars define American Exceptionalism in three distinctive ways. First, the term is used to explain U.S. history as different from all other nations. Second, it functions as a depiction of the idea that the U.S. has a mission to transform the world into its image. Third, the concept is used to argue that the unique history, nature, and mission of America makes it superior to other nations. Hence, all three definitions are of interest in this setting, and American Exceptionalism will thus be treated as the leitmotif of a “telos where the Unites States continues to progress, ever attempting to create a ‘more perfect union’ and never succumbing to the forces of decay.”18 Also, even though the term did not come into public use before the 1990s, this work will use American Exceptionalism as an umbrella term for sentiments stretching as far back as the 1600s.

Another challenge when dealing with American Exceptionalism is distinguishing between “normal” nationalistic themes, slogans, and arguments from those that reflect the specific concept. This is often an overwhelming problem since many of its notions are identical to U.S. nationalism at large. Nonetheless, attempts to make this distinction clear have been made, and I have chosen to use the following broad but robust definition:

[L]anguage referring to the U.S. as having a mission, leading the world, being a vital nation, having unique ideals, liberating other countries, and inspiring people [and] references to being on the right side of history and fighting for the right ideals.19

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Also, to minimize the risk for over-and/or misinterpretation, I have generally omitted debatable or indistinct examples of exceptionalist language when identifying quotes. (Hence, just to be clear, exceptionalist rhetoric has at all times certainly been more common than indicated by this analysis.) On the other hand, after World War II particularly, exceptionalist themes have blended into broader terms like “liberty,” “democracy,” “human rights,” and “capitalism.” To grasp the full impact of American Exceptionalism, I have therefore included such varieties when able to identify them with reasonable certainty, such as FDR’s phrase “the great arsenal of democracy.”

A related challenge has been to discriminate between exceptionalist and religious talk. For instance, was Harry Truman’s habit of calling America “God’s country” an expression of his exceptionalist beliefs or Christian faith? Since the answer, of course, is both, this problem can only be dealt with in the same tentative manner as nationalist expressions, and I have done everything to strike a sensible balance.

To move on, since perceptions such as worldviews frequently appear in this thesis, the underlying term imagination needs explanation. In essence, it is the human brain’s faculty that forms ideas, images, and concepts either not present to or received by our senses like freedom, evil, and magnificence. Thus, it should not be confused with the intellect, which is people’s ability to create full-scale abstractions like ideologies similar to Marxist-Leninism and American Exceptionalism. As well, as shown by Professor Claes G. Ryn, since imagination is “an active, visionary power, giving a fundamental, if non-ideational, coherence to life” that “constitutes an overall sense, concrete and experiential, of what life is like,” it follows that:

Such intuition precedes thought in the sense of systematic reflection, ideas and definitions. Before we can reflect, there must be imaginative wholes upon which to reflect. Whenever we set forth an idea or a definition, to say nothing of an entire
ideology, intuitively integrated experience of life steers the effort, giving us a sense of proportion, structure and possibility.\textsuperscript{20}

In other words, since the imagination precedes and coxswains the intellect, it regularly (unconsciously) affects people’s worldviews and political, philosophical, and other outlooks. Most importantly, if a person’s imagination – like most of America’s Founding Fathers – is tempered by a desire to focus on what is realistic to achieve, rather than fixating on what is desirable to have, one’s thoughts tend to be moderate (or in the language of classical scholar Irving Babbitt, “moral,” or social theorist Thomas Sowell, “constrained”).\textsuperscript{21} Contrariwise, if his or her imagination – as in a Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a Vladimir Lenin, or an Adolph Hitler – is leaning toward idealistic or “romantic” thinking, it tends to produce thoughts, lines of reasoning, and visions detached from physical, economic, and other constraints.\textsuperscript{22} Thus, people with such imaginations are prone to “daydreaming” (and every so often violence to achieve their goals).

Ryn underscores the pivotal effect of this phenomenon upon history. Initially, the Western intellectual tradition was based on ideals, e.g., Aristotle’s and Christian moral dogma that produced “modest expectations of life.” From the 1600s, however, this was gradually replaced by a thought system creating a “modern man [whose] demeanor is different from that of premodern man” that think that “the disappearance of old superstitions and a full application of the methods of experimental science [would lead to a] vastly improved human existence.”\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{23} Ryn, “Imaginative Origins of Modernity.”
Thus, modern man’s belief in human potential to create an infinitely better world was not primarily to become based upon what can be achieved through science and reason, but on unbounded, idyllic imaginations. Ryn explains:

The most fundamental longing, discernible behind scientism itself, was for a basic transformation of human existence, for a great liberation, expansion and deepening, making life infinitely more satisfying. Rousseau is but an early and prominent example of one who believed that classical and Christian civilization was based on a profound misconception and who also believed that the resulting oppression can be ended and that mankind can achieve a new, superior existence.\(^{24}\)

Hence, as the spirits of progress, growth, and liberation were released and created the dynamic, forward thrust forming the modern world, they began to undercut the pre-modern era’s intellectual checks and balances on the imagination. So, in the 1700s, when inflated by Enlightenment thinking, people’s expectations began to expand into worldviews that are extreme and potentially dangerous. Eventually, this development reached its apex with – and its dangers is best proved by – “Scientific Marxism” – which promise of a classless and materially unlimited future produced some of the most brutal regimes in human history, including Stalin’s Soviet Union and Mao Zedong’s China. Though, similar absolutistic mindsets also mark more congenial theories, including some forms of American Exceptionalism that presage not only that the U.S. but the world can be perfected.\(^{25}\)

Furthermore, in this thesis, *memes* will denote single concepts as well as clusters of ideas, symbols, and practices spreading within a society. These are to be understood as cultural equivalents to genes in that they self-replicate, mutate, and respond to selective pressures as they move from one mind to another through writing, speech, gestures, and other imitable

\(^{24}\) Ibid.  
phenomena. One example of an evolving meme central to American Exceptionalism is equality, which almost unanimously was understood as equality of opportunity for a long time in the U.S. However, over time, demands for more equality and higher subsistence levels have reached a point where the meme today, for some, connotes egalitarianism levels prevalent in countries like Sweden. (Just to clarify: some have branded this development a striving toward “equal freedom,” but to minimize the risk for confusion, I will in the following refer to this open-ended “beyond equality-of-opportunity” simply as more equality, etc.)

Two more small but important clarifications need to be made. First, the term “America” is in this thesis used to refer to the U.S. and “Americans” to its citizens, while Canadians, Mexicans, and others who may also bear claim to these terms will be entitled according to their countries’ names. Second, since American Exceptionalism is “an efficient tool for promoting shared identity [but also] to encourage exclusion, intolerance, and even inhumanity,” the concept is – as Lipset so eloquent labelled it – a double-edged sword that can be both used and abused. For example, was President George W. Bush’s exceptionalist rhetoric aimed to convince the American people to support the invasion of Iraq in 2003 use or abuse? Because of this, before the Conclusion chapter, I have sought to offer plenty of examples and analysis but attempted to leave moral judgments to the reader.

27 See Sean Wilentz, The Politicians & The Egalitarians: The Hidden History of American Politics (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016), passim. A more detailed discussion about the two archetypes of this notion – equality of opportunity and equality of outcome – will be offered in Chapter 1.
28 Sven R. Larson, The Rise of Big Government: How Egalitarianism Conquered America (London: Routledge, 2018), passim. Since 2016, a growing number of Democrats have started to present themselves as “democratic socialists” and proposed policies identical with European far-left parties like the Swedish Vänsterpartiet and German Die Linke. If this is a temporary occurrence or the beginning of a permanent shift is still too early to say.
30 Beasley, You, the People, 5.
Finally, since the subject is broad and the literature on the topic extensive, it shall be stated that this thesis does not aspire to present an all-inclusive historiography of American Exceptionalism. Specifically, discussions about the concept’s origin and early expressions will be concise, giving readers only a necessary historical familiarity with the concept and its central notions (Chapter 1). Several significant personalities and occurrences from 1898 to the 1970s will then be explored in some detail since it was during this period that modern American Exceptionalism and today’s political realities took form (Chapters 2-6). After that, special attention will be paid to Ronald Reagan’s paradigmatic role (Chapter 6) before the analysis turns to a closer look at contemporary presidents’ use of the concept (Chapter 7). Though, before opening this analysis, a few words need to be said about critics of American Exceptionalism.

CRITICS OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Detractors of American Exceptionalism have existed from the start, and a most prominent early one was Founding Father John Adams, who said, “We may boast that we are the chosen people; we may even thank God that we are not like other men; but, after all, it will be but flattery, and the delusion, the self-deceit of the Pharisee.”31 Nowadays, opponents abound, but, depending on ideological inclinations, their critiques differ widely. For example, left-wing intellectuals similar to Howard Zinn, Gore Vidal, and Noam Chomsky argue that U.S. history is so morally flawed because of issues like the treatment of American Indians and slavery that the country cannot be deemed “exceptional” in any positive meaning of the word. If anything, they allegedly tend to consider the U.S. and the American experience to be exceptionally bad.

31 Quote from Garrison, Empire of Ideals, 78.
Another group of critics is more diverse. Its members tend to think supporters of American Exceptionalism in its modern active-inclusive form overrate the U.S.’s power, are too optimistic about the possibilities to spread American values and institutions abroad, or harbor devious goals. For example, paleoconservative\(^\text{32}\) Patrick Buchanan charges neoconservative Paul Wolfowitz with striving for an “American empire by which the United States would use force to block the rise of all regional powers,” and that his writing “drips with the arrogance of power and hubris.”\(^\text{33}\) Another voice belongs to beforementioned Claes G. Ryn. As a scholar specializing in political theory, he identifies exceptionalist thinking as an essential part of the U.S.’s intellectual history, but also as a full-fledged “ideology of empire” that includes,

> [...] perspectives on human nature, society, and politics, and it sets forth distinctive conceptions of its central ideas, notably what it calls ‘democracy,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘equality,’ and ‘capitalism.’ It regards America as founded on universal principles and assigns to the United States the role of supervising the remaking of the world.\(^\text{34}\)

Between these extremes, there is a spectrum of other critics. For example, Godfrey Hodgson is a British admirer of America who believes the country has many exceptional qualities even if its history is not as unique as many believe. He began to take note of “an unpleasantly Prussian tone” regarding the U.S.’s role in the world among people like William (Bill) Kristol during the Reagan years and argues they have twisted historical truths and circumstances to such a degree that their form of exceptionalism must be equated with the traditional “European worship of the nation state.”\(^\text{35}\) A similar critique is delivered by American


political scientist Justin B. Litke, who argues that an “imperial cast of mind [today] holds great sway on both sides of the political aisle and in vertically all corners of society.”

Further underscoring the contentious nature of American Exceptionalism is that the so-called “transnational turn” during the 1990s made inroads in American Studies, questioning the field’s traditional nation-state focus. However, like most attempts to break with traditional state-focused history, it tends to be unnecessarily negative and/or simply turns into international history writing. Also, theories and methods used to prove points and arguments of this sort are usually not of good quality since, it must be argued, efforts to prove that the U.S. is not in any vital way different from other, e.g., European or Asian countries, or that it can be deemed as malicious as, for example, the Soviet Union is to start with not very convincing. For that reason, even though American Exceptionalism critics often raise valid questions worthy of study, this dissertation will generally leave their reflections aside.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that anti-Americanism – which today in various forms colors many academic, journalistic, and other environments – is not necessarily the same as taking a negative stand on American Exceptionalism. On the contrary, anti-Americanists have been active in Europe and other parts of the world since the 18th century and have regularly upheld unique American political, cultural, and other traits as warnings. For example, in 1832, novelist Frances Trollope wrote in disgust about everything from slavery to American table manners, and European royalists and aristocrats long loathed the U.S.’ republican form of government. More recently, anti-Americanism became significant during the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and after September 11, 2001, when the U.S.’ global role and power reached its

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37 For example, see Winfried Fluck, Donald E. Pease & John Carlos Rowe (ed.), *Re-framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2011).
apex, and some accused her of aiming for world domination. However, since anti-Americanism is also a particular field of study, it too has for the most part been omitted from this study.\(^{38}\)

\(^{38}\) For an introduction to this field of study, see Paul Hollander (ed.), *Understanding Anti-Americanism: Its Origins and Impact at Home and Abroad* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2004).
Ever since Christopher Columbus set foot in the New World in 1492, narratives about the Americas and its peoples as a *Mundus Novus* (New World) have evolved through complex sets of interactions, clashes, and feedback loops between natives, colonizers, and outsiders, as well as in response to geographical, historical, and other circumstances. Together, these components have formed a patchwork of images and identities stretching from Ellesmere Island to Cape Horn. For instance, while the Spanish influence is paramount in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico, the Indigenous peoples’ heritage remains apparent in Paraguay and Peru. Accordingly, ideas, traditions, and institutions marking today’s U.S. political, economic, social, cultural, and other realities, as well as its citizen’s basic self-image, mainly stem from the British Isles and England in particular. Since 1776, this heritage has become vital for the formulation of American nationalism, its civil religion, and the explicit concept of American Exceptionalism.
Long before America became a country, people have asked if it is different from other nations and, if so, what sets it apart. Explanations vary from geographical conditions to political, religious, and other specifics. Many of these accounts offer valid points and are complementary rather than exclusive. For example, there is no paradox in stating that American’s self-perception has been affected by both the country’s British heritage and the fact that it was protected from foreign attacks by oceans until the invention of intercontinental missiles in the 1950s. Also, the form of exceptionalist thinking this has created is an integrated part of U.S. nationalism and closely related to the broader ideology of Americanism. However, since the difference between these concepts is indistinct, they will here often be used synonymously.39

Furthermore, like related concepts in other countries, American Exceptionalism offers citizens “a certain sort of language with which to maintain and perpetuate themselves,”40 and it matters “because it generates powerful assumptions in citizens’ minds about their national identity.”41 Still, many scholars assert that U.S. nationalism is different from, and has always held a strong position compared to European nationalism. The reason for this is that America has certain historical qualities, such as the lack of a feudal system, while at the same time ethnic

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39 For theories concerning the origin of American Exceptionalism, see Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, 23ff; Charles Lockhart, *The Roots of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 1-25; Charles Murray, *American Exceptionalism: An Experiment in History* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2013), 1-38. The term Americanism has two formal meanings. First, it refers to the defining characteristics of the U.S. like self-government, freedom of speech, and belief in progress. Second, it signifies loyalty to these ideals. Also, since Americanism, unlike most other forms of nationalism is not rooted in shared ethnic and culture origins and experiences, it is believed to have a universal appeal that sets it aside from other forms of nationalisms. For theories, etc., related to the concept of nationalism, see Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001; 2nd ed. 2010).


nationalism has not been an option for an “imagined” multiethnic nation. Specifically, this has made non-ethnic notions crucial to Americans’ self-perception and ideas, values, and the nation itself, rather than its people, stand for the sacrosanct. Thus, exceptionalist sentiments helped turn the U.S. into what philosopher G.K. Chesterton called “a nation with the soul of a church,” and American nationalism, including its exceptionalist property, has therefore turned out to be more durable than others.

However, the above comparison is partially flawed because European forms of nationalism generally are introverted thought systems hailing and defining one’s own nation’s virtues by subtly – or not so subtly – stressing other people and countries’ vices. By contrast, American nationalism only partly does this. Indeed, some variants of exceptionalism have implied negative views of other peoples and countries, such as their being culturally unable or racially incapable of fitting into or replicating the U.S. experiment. Still, all-dominating public discourses in the U.S after World War II have assumed that all other countries can transform, partly or wholly, into America-like emulations. Consequently, the form of exceptionalism primarily dealt with in this thesis will represent a more optimistic “open” form of collective awareness than “normal” nationalism.

Furthermore, because American Exceptionalist notions such as freedom, equality, and democracy are alleged to have a broader – in fact, global – potential than particulars central to Volk-bound forms of nationalism such as race, language, and cultural specifics, the concept has an intrinsic messianic (i.e., idealistic and crusading) modicum. While this potential can be

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44 Quote from Novak, *Choosing Our King*, 105.
questioned from cultural and other perspectives, this “evangelical” trait stems from American Exceptionalism’s religious roots, which are so strong that “patriotism equals spirituality because [its] assumption is that America is God’s country. Anyone who stands with America is, therefore, holy, good, and just. Anyone who stands against America is scandalous, immoral – perhaps even demonic.”\(^45\) Hence, a subsequent idea is that “[i]f America failed, then the cosmos itself – the laws of history, nature, and the mind – had failed as well. Millennium or doomsday, American heaven or universal hell.”\(^46\)

For historical comparison, it should be noted that this kind of “universal nationalism” is rare. With a partial exception of the Assyrians, early states in the Old World seem to have never systematically imposed their social, cultural, and other traits upon neighbors with the intent of “improving” them for their own good. Neither did the Greeks, except for Alexander the Great to some extent, despite (or because of) holding a narrow-minded view of other peoples’ “barbaric” qualities. Consequently, the first to consistently assimilate other people were the Romans, who took great pride in spreading their civilization to conquered areas.\(^47\) And as pointed out by one historian, there exist many interesting similarities between the self-image of Rome and America:

Throughout the *Aeneid*, Virgil reinforces Rome’s historical mission. Father Jupiter himself had appointed Rome to found a universal, everlasting kingdom of peace, justice, and righteousness, leading history to its final destination, a new Age of Saturn in which the temple of war would be shut and law and order prevail throughout the inhabited world.\(^48\)

From the mid-600s AD, the advent of Islam then marks the beginning of an era of religiously-focused civilizations that aggressively diffuse their societal particularities through a combination of war, administration, and religious mission. This expansion of Islam was followed by the spread of Orthodox Christianity by the Byzantine Empire in Eastern Europe and Catholicism by the Carolingian Empire in Western, Central, and Northern Europe. Later, from c. 1500, Spain, Portugal, and others began to spread Christianity throughout Africa, Asia, and the Americas, while other countries, e.g., Austria and Sweden, in the 1600s, used their theological brands as motives for imperial bids within Europe. Common denominators for these countries were a messianic fervor of their leadership and preparedness to carry out, if necessary, atrocities against other cultures and local peoples to achieve conversions into their own political, religious, and other ways of life.

This approach carried over into the era of “modern” European colonialism in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. However, beginning in the 1700s, religion once again took a backseat role since the colonialism of the U.K., France, and others were more political, military, cultural, and economical than religious.49 This return of Roman-like imperialism, with its emphasis on “civilizing” subjugated areas, is of great importance for understanding the origin, nature, and function of American Exceptionalism (until the turn of the 20th century, after which, as we will see, a crucial shift took place). Hence, American Exceptionalism is marked by a universal ethos similar to that of the French Revolution and British Imperialism ideologies, which, besides assimilation, do not raise formal boundaries for people joining their spheres. That is to say, American Exceptionalism shares its French and British equals nature as a type of civil religion.50

As fallouts from each country’s historical circumstances, early forms of European nationalism and the civil religions buttressing them came to vary widely in content, nature, and standing. Already in the 1200s AD, Germany and France began to develop competing notions about being the rightful heir to the Roman Empire, thus having the right to rule Europe (and the world).\textsuperscript{51} And in the 1600s, Swedish scientist Olof Rudbeck spent years “proving” not only that his country, as the former Atlantis, was the cradle of civilization, but Swedish the language of Adam and Eve from which both Hebrew and Latin had evolved.\textsuperscript{52} However, it was not until the late 1700s that modern forms of nationalism and civil religions started to replace older self-images based on dynastic, religious, and feudal loyalties holding countries and their peoples together.\textsuperscript{53}

Contributing to this development was French philosopher Jean-Jacque Rousseau (1712-1778) by coinining the term “civil religion” as a marker for what he considered a necessary moral, dogmatic, and spiritual unity underpinning modern societies in which people no longer believed in a divine impetus for the political order.\textsuperscript{54} Hence, the term both underscores and corresponds with modern nationalism as a conceptual half-way-house of secular and semi-spiritual beliefs about the superiority of one’s country, its people, and the need for affection, obedience, and self-sacrifice for the greater good of the Nation.

Furthermore, two circumstances fashioning the American version of civil religion is worth special attention. The first is that England in the 18th century developed a mixed constitution wherein powers were shared between King, Parliament, and independent courts. The second is that the breakaway from the U.K. for that reason offered a window of opportunity for “radical innovation and experimentation with respect to both self and society.”

Subsequently, beginning with the Articles of Confederation in 1781, Americans could undertake two revolutionary experiments: to create a national government without an executive branch and attempt to run a nation without a state church and an officially sanctioned religion.

The first of these endeavors was swiftly abandoned with the adoption of the U.S. Constitution and the creation of the U.S. Presidency in 1789. Besides practical considerations, one reason for this was that the tradition-laden masses of Europeans making up the original citizenry required a father figure who was above politics, standing on their side against societal elites. The presidency, therefore, took upon itself much of the style and functions of a monarch. For example, the limited domestic but extensive foreign policy powers reflected the power division between King and Parliament in the U.K. George Washington (1732-1799) also fashioned the Inauguration Ceremony, the State of the Union Address, and the Cabinet upon British traditions and, like European sovereigns, gave dinners for dignitaries, tea parties for commoners, greeted the public twice a week, and the like. And even though Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) scaled back this “royal presidency,” his successors have in turn gained even more king-like roles, including Chief Legislator and Voice of the People.

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56 For example, the Russian tzar was called “little father” by the country’s peasant population and Swedish kings were generally seen as an ally against herrar (aristocrats, tax collectors, and other officials).
In contrast, the second experiment endured and had far-reaching consequences. The absence of an official religion necessitated a civil religion that could “fill the vacuum where in many cultures a church would be.” And since this gives the president a near-mythical quality as the nation’s worldly and spiritual leader, it is his role as pontifex maximus of U.S. civil religion that over time, I argue, has made possible a considerably more powerful executive than initially intended. This “extended executive” long lay dormant since early occupants of the office were held back by the country’s “unwritten constitution” of habits, traditions, and ideological expectations. However, as soon as circumstances such as the Civil War, the Great Depression, the World Wars, and the Cold War allowed presidents to expand their powers, they did. And as the political spirit changed permanently in the 20th century, they did so enduringly. As a result, American Exceptionalism is, to no small degree, presidential history and will be so treated in this thesis. However, first, some further background elaboration is required.

Novus Ordo Seclorum

Although America’s Anglo-Saxon – and beyond that, broader European – element to this day remains important, the country’s beginning and evolution of political, social, and cultural natures turned out very different from those Occidental nations to which it can trace its roots. As a scholar wrote in 1944: “The American Creed is not merely [...] the implicit background of the nation’s political and judicial order as it functions.” Specifically, the position as splinter

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58 Novak, Choosing Our King, 107.


colonies with a diverse population forced the Founding Fathers to develop “a national polity that insure[d] the primacy of the practical, rejecting the flight toward abstraction and uncertainty in favor of a realization that men are not angels.” Put differently, since citizens need “a story to live out, a drama to take part in, villains to oppose, a tradition of heroism and idealism to carry forward,” Americans needed a substitute for European countries’ national identification based on bloodlines and borders.

As hinted, the logical, if not only, choice for this was Christianity, and the pious core of Americans’ self-identification is apparent since nearly all exceptionalist themes have Christian models. These include an Exodus (to a promised land); a Genesis (the American Revolution); a Moses-like founder (George Washington); prophets (Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine); a Jesus-figure (Abraham Lincoln); apostles (John Adams, Benjamin Franklin); martyrs (John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr.); a Devil (Benedict Arnold); sacred places (Gettysburg, Arlington Cemetery); places for pilgrimage (Mount Vernon, Mount Rushmore); sanctified holidays (July 4, Memorial Day); and holy scriptures (The Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution; both enshrined in altar-like displays in the National Archives). Also, Washington, D.C., can be seen as a Jerusalem with “political temples” such as the Capitol, the White House, the Supreme Court Building, and smaller shrines like the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials dedicated to national heroes.

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3 Novak, *Choosing Our King*, 67.

4 The exact form and composition of American civil religion has been debated since the original theory about the unique characteristics of American civil religion was pointed out by sociologist Robert Bellah in “Civil Religion in America,” *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1967). Since then, a number of scholars have analyzed the content, meaning, and development of the U.S. civil religion. For example, see Gardella, *American Civil Religion*, 6; Novak, *Choosing Our King*, 105-110; Theon E. Hill, “The Exodus: The Textual Heart of American Civil Religion,” in Jason A. Edwards & Joseph M Valenzano III (ed.), *Rhetoric of American Civil*
Hence, the story about the U.S., like France after their revolution, did not become an entirely secular story but one that “placed popular sovereignty and public authority with a religious framework and world view.” On the contrary, memes about America as a blessed country, its inhabitants being “new Israelites,” and the U.S. being a nation designated by God for higher purposes still directly reflects Biblical themes, a 12th-century Arthurian tale about Roman Britain as the place Joseph of Arimathea chose to hide the Holy Grail, and rhetoric from the Tudor Era about England being God’s “elect nation.” Two more religious ideas with significant consequences for American Exceptionalism are the Puritans’ belief in predestination and their view of North America as “a fresh start for humanity [...] a ‘separated’ nation [...] continually rising and never in danger of falling (like other nations).”

Naturally, secular ideas also formed Americans’ self-perception. From England, they inherited principles like Common Law, the “British freedom” tradition, and specifics such as societal elites having relatively few political and other privileges, the balance of power between King and Parliament, and the early formation of groups (i.e., political parties) using the latter institution as an arena for public policy broadcasting. However, most academics deem religion primary, and many of them identify the Puritan heritage as especially important for American

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7 Wilsey, American Exceptionalism, 146-163.

Exceptionalism, especially when it comes to spiritually engrained traits like work ethic, industriousness, honesty, and importance of marriage, family, and community. Below, we will therefore track historian John D. Wilsey’s evaluation of the concept’s origin, content, and history by examining his five “root systems,” of which the first are solely religious and the other also strongly tinted by religious beliefs.

**REMOVING ROOTS**

The Puritans’ detailed impact upon cultural and other developments in America is disputed, but it is safe to claim that they were essential for the formation of American Exceptionalism. Their ideas spread through a massive amount of “sermons, books, pamphlets, newspapers, letters and so on […] from New England to the middle and southern as well as to the western hinterlands.” Because of this, the Puritans’ worldview offered a “scaffolding around which American self-identification was constructed,” and Wilsey quotes one scholar who argues that they were directly responsible for the “emerging sense of American nationhood.” Also, the Puritan “errand into the wilderness” is the origin of what would be known as the American Dream, and their communitarian lifestyle created basic societal patterns that remain important to this day; like the habit of socializing sin because people believe society to be libeled by individual mistakes.

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11 Ibid, 40.


Wilsey also refers to several other Puritan characteristics as significant. First, he discusses the Biblical notion of a *covenant* “between the children of Israel and Yahweh, mediated by the law of Moses” that put an outstanding obligation upon “God’s covenantal people […] to obey his commandments and walk faithfully in his ways.”\(^{15}\) In its Puritan and later exceptionalist varieties, this meme evolved into a belief that God made a new pact with the American people, granting it a special mission in human history in return for extraordinary piousness.\(^{16}\) Also, as noted by others, this heritage underlies a narrow, but durable, strand of extremism that occasionally shines through in U.S. history as both religious and political fundamentalism; e.g., in the forms of Millennialism, Prohibition, and intolerance of outliers and dissenters such as witches, Communists, and critics of the country’s foreign policy.\(^{17}\)

Second, Wilsey notes that the Christian tradition of *typology* further bolstered this form of thinking. This doctrine contends that events and persons in the Old Testament can be perceived as precursors to Christ’s revelation in the New Testament. For instance, Jonah can be viewed as a forbearer of Christ since he appears to rise from death after three days in the fish’s belly. This tradition ran so strong among the Puritans that they applied it to secular history. In so doing, they began American’s tradition of equating the Old World with Egypt and viewed themselves as His new chosen people brought to the New World (Canaan) to play a crucial role in human history, a belief that became a key component of American Exceptionalism.\(^{18}\)

Third, Wilsey identifies *millennialism* as an essential characteristic. It is the belief that history is moving in a particular direction, toward the end times, and God uses humans to lay

\(^{15}\) Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism*, 41.
\(^{16}\) Ibid, 97f.
\(^{18}\) Ibid, 43. See also O’Brien, *God Land*, 25ff.
“the groundwork for the millennial kingdom, through obedience, spreading the gospel to the furthest parts of the earth, and establishing the Christian ethical ideal through the expansion of Christian civilization.” Since traditional Augustinian Christianity had offered no real hope for a better life in this world, in the 1600s, this was a new and stirring concept that created confidence in human action and a belief in the possibility of great, if not infinite, earthly progress. This is also the origin of the progress-focused “Whig view of history,” which for Americans means they can regard events like the American Revolution as part of “a logical historical upward trend” driven by their own actions. As well, millennialism adds a motivating feeling of urgency to Protestant societies and arguably so especially the American one, which is already energetic and forward-looking for other reasons.

In the U.S., millennialism should too be placed in relation to the Puritan’s striving for perfectionism. This belief has created periods of Christian fundamentalism and complete confidence that it is not only possible but necessary to make the American people and their society flawless before the Second Coming can happen. This idea also played an early political role by fostering the widely shared belief that the Constitution is a unique tool for organizing a perfect society. This belief promptly became so rigid that Thomas Jefferson – who believed that

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20 This established view has lately been challenged by Rodney Stark, whom in *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2005) argues that pre-Reformation Christianity regionally (e.g., Italy, England, Flanders) allowed and supported a Capitalist culture.
22 Ibid, 48.
“laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind”24 – grumbled in 1816 that “[s]ome men look at Constitutions with sanctimonious reverence, & deem them, like the ark of the covenant, too sacred to be touched.”25 Since then, therefore, perfectionist thinking has underscored American political movements from Abolitionism to Prohibition, to Progressivism, to the Great Society, to neoconservatism, whose adherents’ ambitions often know – or, at least, respect – no boundaries.26 As one historian writes about Americans: “If moral fervor stirs our better angels, moral fever spurs our demons.”27

Fourth, Wilsey identifies an exegetical root to American Exceptionalism. With this, he means the high degree to which colonists and later generations have used sermons and jeremiads – stories “of sin, repentance, renewal, and national chosenness”28 – to merge religious and worldly themes.29 This habit works as a bridge between Wilsey’s religious and worldly characteristics, and he argues that it once was indispensable for “the notion that America is normatively exceptional set apart by God for a special identity and purpose.”30 Examples of the tendency to dress up national dreams, ambitions, and wishes in religious discourse can be found in many places, from politicians’ speeches ending with “God bless America,” via dollar bills titled “In God We Trust,” to Ronald Reagan’s words about the country as “a tall, proud city built

26 For example, teetotalers’ belief in that the outlawing liquor would resolve societal ills from domestic abuse to unemployment made them attack not only abuse but all use of alcohol, while Neoconservatives belief that American commando over international affairs will make – if allowing ourselves to make hasty use of a phrase from later in this thesis – the world safe for democracy. See Ellis, American Political Cultures, 16ff; Tuveson, Redeemer Nation, viii, 91-136.
27 Morone, Hellfire Nation, 3.
29 Ibid, 41ff.
30 Wilsey, American Exceptionalism, 53; Morone, Hellfire Nation, 41ff.
on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity.”

To close this section, Wilsey’s analysis of the importance of religion for American Exceptionalism can be exemplified by recapping American history’s Puritan happening par excellence. The Massachusetts Bay Colony’s leading figure John Winthrop’s (1587/88-1649) oration on the Arbella in 1630 specifically reflects them all:

Wee shall finde that the God of Israell is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when hee shall make us a prayse and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, “the Lord make it like that of New England.” For wee must consider that wee shall be as a citty upon a hill. The eies of all people are upon us. Soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our God in this worke wee have undertaken, and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.

POLITICAL ROOTS

The fifth cluster identified by Wilsey is American Exceptionalism’s political roots, which he deems secondary in importance. However, even if there are good arguments for not considering them as ultimate as the theological ones, their proximate importance is at least as central. As already noted, the English “freedom tradition” was particularly important for the development of numerous hallmarks of American politics, society, and culture. As well, even if this analysis will

33 Belonging to the “theological school” of American Exceptionalism, Wilsey deem political roots to be subordinate to what he calls “the taproot” of theology (48). However, other scholars judge them to be at least on par in importance. For example, see James W. Ceaser, “The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism,” American Political Thought: A Journal of Ideas, Institutions, and Culture 1 (Spring 2012).
not push further back than 17th century England, it should for both accuracy and respect for the Founding Fathers’ obsession with Greek and Roman history be noted that many of the political ideas and themes they expressed, as the religious ones, are truly ancient.

The political heritage paramount for American development became distinct during the English Civil War period of 1640-1660. In this conflict, unfolding parallel to the creation of the country’s first significant settlements in North America, the struggle for supremacy between King and Parliament that had been waxing and waning since the Norman Invasion of AD 1066 came to an end. The decapitation of Charles I (1600-1649) therefore stands out as a powerful historical event, symbolizing that what fell was not only the King’s head but the whole notion that monarchs and their governments hold infinite power over their subjects by divine approval. That the tide began to move permanently from autocratic towards more popular forms of political control is also seen in the short experiment of republican rule under Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) following Charles’ execution.

These events were pivotal for American independence and inspired the Founding Fathers, among other things, to introduce a system of checks and balances and limit the powers of the executive branch (in the domestic realm especially). These ideas, typical for the founding period, but nowadays – as will be shown later – abandoned by many has over time reinforced the notion of the U.S. as a unique country where political power is not arbitrarily held, swayed, or abused. Or, as Abraham Lincoln phrased it in 1863, America is a country with a government “of the

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34 The traditional dating for the English Civil War is 1642–1651. However, as Blair Worden show in The English Civil Wars 1640-1660 (London: Orion Books, 2009), to consider happenings and trends in this broader timespan profoundly deepens our understanding of the period and its importance.
36 Ibid, 103-144.
people, by the people, for the people.”

Furthermore, the movement in England from the mid-1600s away from a divine *raison d’être* for government raised the question about the relationship between God, politics, and humans, which, in the American context, is so vital it deserves a specific headline.

**CHURCH, STATE & LOCKE**

In the West, political and religious powers since the late Roman Empire had been formally separated but lived in the form of reciprocal symbiosis. Also, since the Peace of Augsburg (1555), Europe had been governed according to the principle *cuius regio, eius religio,* meaning that the King’s religion automatically became his subjects’ religion. Thus, in 1688, when the English Parliament to secure the supremacy of the Anglican Church, deposed Catholic King James II (1633-1701) in favor of Protestant William of Orange-Nassau (1650-1702), it crudely, in an inverse way, followed tradition by choosing a King who shared the country’s religion. Still, this Glorious Revolution’s most important result would be a document thrusting English history into a new direction that became of utter importance to the future U.S.

The English Bill of Rights (1689), by protecting individual rights and liberties rather than aristocratic and other groups’ privileges, codified a modern form of individuality exceeding the most aspiring ancient precedents. By focusing on where political authority originates – from

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38 “Whose realm, his religion.”

above, from Heaven, or from below, from the People? – it laid the groundwork for democratic development. This question related directly to more rounded contemporary ideological efforts commenced by John Locke (1632-1704), whose magnum opus, *Two Treatises of Government*, was published in the same year as the Glorious Revolution. This latter fact indicates that his work should be seen as symbolic rather than an inspiration for the vagaries of the time. Still, like Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1776) a century later, Locke helped bolster ideas that were already moving intensely through English society on both sides of the Atlantic.

More precisely, in the 1700s, Locke’s writing became an important part of the intellectual tide directing Western politics away from the medieval order of divine authority, absolute monarchy, and a patriarchal socio-economic organization. And by contributing to the Whig Party’s dominance in British politics, he helped secure a fundamental transformation of political discourse in America. Amongst others, Whig ideas intrigued Thomas Jefferson. He took Locke’s words about, “In the beginning all the world was America,” to heart and merged them with Classic Liberal economic thinking into his vision for the Union as a collection of semi-independent agrarian states formed by settlers as they moved into uncultivated areas. Also, Locke’s vision that all “mankind are [sic] one community” explains not only parts of Jefferson’s worldview, but many future believers in American Exceptionalism’s universal aspirations.40

Furthermore, because the Real Whig’s program stemmed from the same religious and socio-cultural milieu as Puritanism, and “Locke’s ideas harmonized with the Bible-inspired worldview of colonial thinkers,”41 the two systems saw the same cures for various societal ills in


41 Gelernter, *Americanism*, 76.
the form of virtue, frugality, and diligence. The political-intellectual child produced by this Puritan-Whig intercourse became a form of Christian Republicanism that was “an amalgamation of Real Whig ideology and Protestant theology occurring in American literature and rhetoric leading up to and during the Revolution.”

Another result was the birth of a specific variant of millennialism viewing “America as God’s chosen nation to bring about the final defeat of the forces of the Antichrist.”

At this point, two short digressions are necessary for the forthcoming analysis. First, Americans’ understanding of Locke went down two paths. On one side, some took his focus on liberty and the sanctity of private property as requiring a minimalistic, reactive-only government. On the other hand, some took his view of holding property as a prerequisite for citizenship to justify the government acting as an active dispenser of property (and other resources). Of these readings, the first instantly became dominant in America. Still, since the second, more communitarian understanding of his writings fit with traditional republicanism, it also won adherents of which some, like Thomas Paine (1737-1809), were driven more by emotional imagination than practical reasoning. Therefore, support for their view sporadically occurred throughout early U.S. history but generally remained a peripheral view until the 1930s.

Second, closely related to this debate is the term “equality.” The two main perceptions of this word are individualist and egalitarian. While the former stresses the absence of legal, social, 

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43 Ibid, 51f; see also Ellis, *American Political Cultures*, 28-42. An individual example of the same influence is Jonathan Mayhew; coiner of the phrase “No taxation without representation.” He was a Bostonian minister swayed by Whig thinking and one of many soon-to-be Americans who “baptized Real Whig ideas in the waters of biblical theology.” As early as 1750, he defended, in a sermon, the execution of Charles I by declaring it to have been in line with Paul’s words about governments as a “servant for your good.” In this way voicing support for a government rooted in the people, he offered an interpretation of the Bible partly at odds with Jesus’ words about “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s” and in direct opposition to the politically autocratic attitude endorsed by many other Protestants, like the Swedish and Danish Lutheran Churches. Quote from Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism*, 53.
and other barriers for people to act and accept the disparity in wealth and other outcomes this freedom produces, egalitarians are demanding least partial equality also of outcomes. Thus, these views correspond with the two interpretations of Locke stated above and “equality” was for long hailed as one of American Exceptionalism’s most central notion next to “freedom.”

However, as egalitarians over time began to lose faith in the equalizing power of the marketplace, some of them began to turn to the government to “level the playing field.” As we will see, after 1900, this shifting emphasis of the Lockean heritage would become a force in U.S. politics and lead to a far-reaching transformation of socio-economic thinking throughout American society at large.

**HISTORIOGRAPHIC ROOTS**

Returning one last time to Wilsey, he emphasizes the importance of historiography when understanding American Exceptionalism. And, of course, how historians and others identify, deal with, and designate themes, events, and personalities is imperative. For instance, by describing the American Revolution as leading to the creation of an Empire of Freedom, rather than presenting it as an insurrection against legal authorities, historians portray it positively rather than negatively. In the same way, by describing the Constitution as a document meant to restrain politicians instead of an effort to level the ground for a mercantile empire in North

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45 Wilentz, *Politicians & The Egalitarians*, passim; Gelernter, *Americanism*, 98ff. In fact, it can be argued that equality, as a state of mind, may for many have been more important than freedom since it cannot be taken away.

46 One scholar see the move from equality of opportunity towards more equality of outcome as so far going that he deem it responsible for a “total collapse of American exceptionalism in the last third of the 20th century. See Ellis, *American Political Cultures*, 43-62.
America and later a global role for the U.S., scholars support an understanding of the past that – amongst other things – fosters active forms of American Exceptionalism.\textsuperscript{47}

When studying American Exceptionalism’s evolution in this critical way, it becomes evident that many themes and interpretations vital to the concept stretch back to small groups of nationalistic-minded elitists during and just after the Founding period. Frequently, they were from prominent backgrounds. For instance, during the Revolution and afterward, people like clergyman Jeremy Belknap (1744-1798) used historical occurrences as moral and ethical lessons for the masses. Therefore, they often simplified as much as they stereotyped, but since first impressions tend to last, even as more objective historians have reevaluated their romantic portrayals and ideals, many themes are still today fundamentally construed in the same way.

In the next phase, some of the most intense ideological and historical dialogues of the 1800s affected American Exceptionalism. As U.S. academia was still forming, many of its prominent figures were educated in Europe or, at any rate, strongly influenced by European ideas. One typical such scholar is George Bancroft (1800-1891), a Puritan who was educated in Germany. There he was influenced by German idealism and adopted Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s (1770-1831) view of history as a linear process wherein people rose toward creating an ever-better society. Moreover, most importantly, since Hegel stated in 1830 that “America is the land of the future, where in the ages that be before us, the burden of the world’s history will reveal itself,”\textsuperscript{48} Bancroft came to view Americans as unique by design.

\textsuperscript{47} For example, see Sheldon Richman, \textit{America’s Counter-Revolution: The Constitution Revisited} (Ann Arbor: Griffin & Lash, 2016), passim.

Furthermore, since German idealism and Hegel’s historicism are essentially secular variants of Puritan utopianism and millennialism, these views, when superimposed, reinforced each other and convinced Bancroft that the spread of America’s societal type was a historical duty.\textsuperscript{49} He boasted that “God had indeed chosen America for a special mission in the world, to serve as an example of religious, moral and political liberty,”\textsuperscript{50} and declared “[t]he American Revolution a logical progression of the Reformation because it represented how liberty was [spreading from] the religious realm [to] the economic, social and political realms also.”\textsuperscript{51} Also, Bancroft’s penchant for 19\textsuperscript{th} century German “organic nationalism” made him depict the U.S. as an organism that was evolving away from its “embryonic form throughout the colonial period” into a model of freedom and prosperity for others. This added a touch of internationalism to his patriotism nearly identical to American Exceptionalism in its modern, activist-inclusive form.

As a final point, during the second half of the 1800s, Bancroft’s writings and many of his colleagues nurtured a feeling of American uniqueness and superiority. These sensations had first originated during the War of 1812 when the U.S. survived its second showdown with the British Empire. According to Wilsey, that generation created a “view of superiority that [...] formed the basis of the idea that America would serve as an example to the rest of the world in the near future.”\textsuperscript{52} So, after getting another boost of confidence from the Union surviving the Civil War, Bancroft’s writings pushed Americans to join an exclusive group of people whose self-image was saturated not only by pride and preeminence but convictions of exclusivity and

\textsuperscript{49} Huntington, \textit{Who Are We}, 116; Watt Stewart, “George Bancroft Historian of the American Republic,” in The Mississippi Valley Historical Review Vol. 19, No. 1 (Jun., 1932), 77-86.
\textsuperscript{50} Wilsey, \textit{American Exceptionalism}, 61.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, 60; Lipset, \textit{First New Nation}, 74-89.
\textsuperscript{52} Wilsey, \textit{American Exceptionalism}, 61. The outcome of the War of 1812, though, to some degree had an opposite effect since after “the threats to the nation’s security disappeared [...] the salience of national declined” until the Civil War. However, this does not seem to have affected the evolution of American Exceptionalism. Quote from Huntington, \textit{Who Are We}, 17.
indispensability. However, to function as a modern patriotic concept, the religiosity of American Exceptionalism first needed to be somewhat toned down.

SECULARIZATION OF THE CONCEPT

Despite the fact that the rationalistic thinking of the 18th century steered people’s interest toward secular themes and issues, John Adams (1735-1826) noted as late as the 1780s that Americans could still refer to Congress as “the voice of God.” However, as such views ebbed, U.S. nationalism became as much a creature of the Enlightenment as of Puritan dogmata. For example, Benjamin Franklin’s (1706-1790) Autobiography, written between 1771 and 1790, reflects how “the American errand” in the latter half of the 18th century was transformed from the creation of a theocratic example to “the creation of a secular state that is purified of the corruption of European politics and a social structure based on inherited title.” This process

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53 Walker, National Security, 31f. Similar forms of hyperbolic nationalisms have existed in various forms; e.g., China’s self-image as the Middle Kingdom; Sweden’s self-proclaimed role as protector of “the only true faith” (Lutheranism) in the 1600s; France’s view from 1789 of having a mission civilisatrice to spearhead rationalism and modernism; Britain’s claim that their empire represented the zenith of human development; and the idea of Communism as the end station of historical development in the Soviet Union. See, for example, Hodgson, Myth of American Exceptionalism, 15.

54 Quote from O’Brien, God Land, 58.


56 Madsen, American Exceptionalism, 36f. That there in the late 1700s already existed a strong secular side of American self-identification is made clear also in J. Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur’s (1735-1813) Letters From an American Farmer (1782), that states that an American is not only the result of the former colonies “promiscuous breed [...] of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes” but also from that he leaves “behind all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the government he obeys, and the new rank he holds.” Similarly, John Adams (erroneously) talked about the Mayflower Compact as an example of a social contract like those fashioned by Locke and Rousseau reflects such a marked secular mentality that one scholar calls it valid to talk about “an emerging cult of America itself” already towards the end of the 1700s. Quotes from J. Hector St. John De Crèvecoeur, Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America (New York: Penguin Book, 1981), 68ff and Hodgson, The Myth of American Exceptionalism, 3ff. See also O’Brien, God Land, 29f.
also reveals itself in the Founders’ decisions not to institute a state church or declare America a Christian nation.\textsuperscript{57}

A most crucial effect of this partial secularization of U.S. nationalism is that it contributed, even before the turn of the century, to Americans becoming so captivated by the genius of the Declaration and the Constitution that the Founding Fathers were considered to have established a regime with both universal political and unique moral qualities. And if things were still not flawless, they soon would be. One scholar writes that many Americans at that time reasoned that: “Where their Puritan ancestors had anticipated an exceptional destiny based upon the perfection of ecclesiastical institutions, nineteenth-century intellectuals anticipated the perfection of political, specifically democratic, institutions.”\textsuperscript{58}

Still, the secularization of American Exceptionalism would be a drawn-out process. As the quotes from Bancroft show, most of its advocates continued to express strong Christian beliefs throughout the 19th century, and the process even today remains far from complete. One reason for this was that the religious spirit of exceptionalism was first rejuvenated by the Second Great Awakening in the 1820/30s, and later through waves of immigrants transmitting their own “holy nation” beliefs to their new country.\textsuperscript{59} For example, the Irish considered themselves the saviors of Christianity during the Dark Ages; Swedes saw their form of Lutheranism as “the one and only true faith;” and Poles viewed their country as Europe’s and the West’s shield against

\textsuperscript{57} It is notable that the question if the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation, or if the Founding Fathers aspired to create a secular country, is modern, because, even if separation of church and state was included in the U.S. Constitution, there was never an ambition to separate completely religion from politics, or other communal operations. On the contrary, the Founders – including Thomas Jefferson, whose call for a “firewall” between politics and religion is frequently cited – strongly endorsed Americans religiousness. For two middle-of-the-road works on this topic, see Wilsey, \textit{American Exceptionalism}, 191-202; and John Fea, \textit{Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? A Historical Introduction} (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), passim.

\textsuperscript{58} Madsen, \textit{American Exceptionalism}, 37f. 71.

\textsuperscript{59} Gamble, \textit{In Search of the City}, 91-119; O’Brien, \textit{God Land}, 33ff.
Orthodox Russia. Yet, as part of a mighty nation’s civil religion, exceptionalist themes and arguments were inevitably used in ways that were increasingly both secular and profane. And as American Exceptionalism’s role became to support not only independence but national development, a shift in the connotation of one of the concept’s most important notions occurred.

**The National Spirit**

Puritan settlers, other colonists, and the first generation of Americans generally adhered to a traditional Christian/republican form of the conception of freedom as “a willing surrender to will of the Lord” or some other transcending power or good (including, in its republican-communitarian form, society at large). However, after 1800, people began to embrace a more modern, individualistic form of freedom. The reason for this shift does not need to be explored here, but its importance cannot be exaggerated. This since U.S. history is in no small part a story of how Americans slowly but steadily have turned away from communitarianism and toward individual and, eventually, atomistic freedom. We will therefore frequently return to this subject in the following chapters. An immediate result of Americans’ dedication to individual freedom was though their view of the U.S. as a sanctuary for the world’s oppressed.

In 1776, Thomas Paine penned in *Common Sense*: “Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia, and Africa, have long expelled her – Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for

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61 An in-depth discussion about this difference between traditional and modern freedom and concept evolution in early U.S. history can be found in Foner, *American Freedom*, 3-12.
mankind.” And on this point, he was, for once, in the mainstream. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson both expressed the same ambition, the latter stating that “we shall form to the American union a barrier against the dangerous extension of the British Province of Canada and add to the Empire of liberty an extensive and fertile Country thereby converting dangerous Enemies into valuable friends.” Hence, the idea of individual freedom as America’s main virtue merged with the Whig-Hegelian view that history has a forward-upward trajectory and rejuvenated Winthrop’s idea of the U.S. as a model with that of an active national mission.

Furthermore, besides freedom, original Americanism was based upon a belief in “We the People.” However, this is a more complicated theme because even if the Founding Fathers expressed their belief in the People as “the homogeneous bedrock of America,” they saw it only as a base upon which “a natural aristocracy” of the best and most virtuous would rise and rule. Still, the “language of politics” that gushed from this view was

[...] breathtakingly idealistic: in this unique nation, all men were created equal, deserved the same chance to improve their lot, and were citizens of a self-governing republic that enshrined the liberty of the individual. It was also proudly defensive: America was an isolated land of virtue whose people were on constant guard against the depredations of aristocrats, empire builders, and self-aggrandizing officeholders both within and outside its borders.

Because of this, already original Americanism contained a vital populist staple that “the elite could be accused of betraying the core principles of the republic.” This sentiment would take

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64 Huntington, *Who Are We*, 46ff.
65 For example, see Cullen, *American Dream*, 50ff.
67 Ibid, 15.
time to emerge more fully, but it has been present since the Founding Period and is central to American’s distinctive distrust of government and proclivity for conspiracy thinking.68

Who would be allowed to participate in building America and how her mission could be fulfilled became other sources of conflict. On both issues, two options existed. First, America could try to remain a racially and culturally uniform (Anglo-Saxon) nation, or it could allow others – at the time, effectively other Europeans – to join the experiment. Second, the U.S. could function passively as a model for others to follow (an exemplarist stance), or it could spread its ideals actively (interventionism).69 On the first issue, the U.S., because of immigrants’ assimilation and expulsion of unwanted elements like American Indians, Loyalists,70 and African Americans, would for a long time proceed on both treks. As a result, the country’s “WASP-qualities” was not to be seriously questioned until the 1990s combination of mass immigration from Latin America and the idea of multiculturalism.71

On the second issue, interventionism simply remained an unfeasible track since – lacking both a standing army and natural borders – early American leaders were forced to let grim realities, rather than grand visions, determine matters. For example, in 1793, George Washington was forced to declare neutrality in a war between the U.K. and his old ally France (a move also setting patterns for the future by both being followed up with threats of public prosecution of violators as well as triggering one of America’s first great partisan quarrels). In his Farewell Address, Washington as well felt obliged to advocate for a “great rule of conduct,” meaning that

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71 Huntington, Who Are We, 221-256; Wilson, Only in America, 89ff.
America should strive for strong economic relations but have “as little political connection as possible”\textsuperscript{72} with other countries. Later, Jefferson made this policy bipartisan by including it in his first Inaugural Address,\textsuperscript{73} and the Founding Fathers’ focus on America as a model was similarly conveyed by Alexander Hamilton (1757-1804):

The world has its eye upon America. The noble struggle we have made in the cause of liberty, has occasioned a kind of revolution in human sentiment. The influence of our example has penetrated the gloomy regions of despotism, and has pointed the way to inquiries, which may shake it to its deepest foundations. Men begin to ask every where, who is this tyrant, that dares to build his greatness on our misery and degradation? What commission has he to sacrifice millions to the wanton appetites of himself and the few minions that surround his throne?\textsuperscript{74}

Moreover, since political independence was reliant upon economic self-sufficiency, Washington’s foreign policy was convoyed with Hamilton’s mercantilist policy. Both policies can be said to have begun with the Tariff Act of 1789 and formed the nucleus of what would be known as the American System; an isolationist-protectionist line that was to be practiced (with a few deviations) until World War II.\textsuperscript{75} However, this policy was rigorously applied only towards Europe, whose diplomatic wrangling, warring, and economic competition the infant America could not afford to become entangled. During the 1800s, American Exceptionalism would therefore not only be affected by events such as the U.S. expanding across the continent but also giving support for South and Central American people’s liberation efforts and the exploration of business opportunities throughout the Americas and beyond. Moreover, since these and many


\textsuperscript{73} “...peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none...” From Thomas Jefferson, “Inaugural Address,” (March 4, 1801) \textit{APP}, accessed July 25, 2019, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/201948.


other events were to happen quickly and successfully, American culture, which was optimistic from the start, became marked by ever more brazen forms of risk-taking and large-scale thinking.

Finally, the perception of America as an outlier nation, not only politically but socially and culturally, was apparent from the beginning both at home and abroad. Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), in his comparative analysis of the U.S. vis-à-vis Europe in the 1830s, mused:

The position of the Americans is therefore entirely exceptional and it is quite possible that no democratic people will ever be similarly placed. Their strictly Puritanical origin, their exclusively commercial habits, even the country they inhabit, which appears to divert their minds from the study of science, literature, and the arts, the nearness of Europe which allows them to neglect such pursuits without relapsing into barbarism, a thousand such reasons, of which I have only been able to signal only the main ones, must have focused [sic!] the American mind, in this unusual manner, upon purely practical objects. Everything – his passions, needs, education, circumstances – seems to unite in inclining the native of the United States earthward. Only religion persuades him to raise an occasional and absent-minded glance to heaven.  

Now, this paragraph is not an early identification of American Exceptionalism per se. Read prudently, it is instead a blatant judgment of the state of contemporary intellectual affairs in the U.S. Nonetheless, it does show how different America was and of particular interest is de Tocqueville’s identification of religion as Americans’ only “higher” interest. Indeed, this was the result of a society dominated by a multitude of congregations that were deeply involved in both spiritual and secular endeavors such as schooling. However, possibly, the Christian spirit stood firm also because of the religious nature of American Exceptionalism, and this character would show itself clearly when the concept fused with a European philosophy.

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MANIFEST DESTINY

The influence of geography upon American history is immense. The vastness, amount of resources, and absence of pre-Colombian high civilizations in the area that became the U.S. created a virile, vigilant, and vibrant culture with an appurtenant language about “thinking big,” “going west,” “seizing the moment,” etc. Furthermore, since this fostered indifference for looking abroad, e.g., for inspiration and experiences, these phenomena deeply affected politics, business, and other aspects of American culture. For example, the original Puritan’s “errand into the wilderness,” combined with the endless resources that can be extracted from around the country, has made possible not only unrivaled individual successes but unprecedented public projects like transcontinental railroads, the Moon Program, and the Great Society promoted with adjectives like “new,” “awesome,” and “huge.” Or, as Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) once put it, “We Americans love big things!”

Another key to this development is that the sluggish farm-by-farm westward expansion of the colonies from the 1600s after independence was turned into a geopolitical process marked by quantum leaps like the Louisiana Purchase (1803). In fact, for Thomas Jefferson – and what later became the Democratic Party – expansion became the way to build his Empire of Liberty. It would preserve the U.S. as a loose union of semi-independent agrarian republics and promote...
trade while avoiding perils such as big cities, “commerce,” and industrialization.\textsuperscript{83} However, since theorists such as Montesquieu, Constant, and Rousseau linked territorial conquest to monarchy and militarism, and as the resistance of Native Americans became more of an issue, the expansionists needed to find justifications for keeping this process going.\textsuperscript{84}

For instance, people could turn to John Locke, whose view that since American Indians did not mix the land with labor as farmers, it was there free for the taking.\textsuperscript{85} In 1843, then former President Andrew Jackson (1767-1845) could, as a result, defend U.S. expansion as “extending the area of freedom.”\textsuperscript{86} However, the spirit of the times offered the most profound of defenses. As Europe's feudal ideology was transformed by the French Enlightenment and German Idealism into Romantic Nationalism, the result became a view that offered “a purely terrestrial and anthropocentric vision of perfection in place of earlier religious and other-worldly conceptions.”\textsuperscript{87} Thus, since Romanticist thinking in this way offered a bundle of political and ethical defenses to Europeans for “civilizing” Asia and Africa through colonialism, in the U.S., it took the form of belief in the right to redeem “the Wild West.”

Explicitly, in the first half of the 19th century, in America, Romantic nationalism took the form of Manifest Destiny. The phrase itself did not come into use until journalist John L. O’Sullivan (1813-1895) used it in an 1845 article to defend the annexation of Texas, stating that it is “our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free

\textsuperscript{85} Frymer, \textit{Building An American Empire}, 38ff.
\textsuperscript{87} Anthony D. Smith, \textit{Chosen People} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1-28, quote from 9.
development of our yearly multiplying millions.”

However, his article’s sentiments dated back to the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis & Clark expedition. For example, in 1801, Thomas Jefferson had written that the U.S. would “cover the whole northern, if not the southern continent, with a people speaking the same language, governed in similar forms, and by similar laws.” Later, John Quincy Adams (1767-1848) also promoted “continentalism.” In fact, his whole political career focused on expansion, and he became a promoter of exceptionalism in its early, still predominantly religious form. Stressing the Founders’ achievements and Christian faith that “gave to the world the first irrevocable pledge of the fulfillment of the prophesies announced directly from Heaven at the birth of the Saviour,” his vision was clear:

The whole continent of North America appears to be destined by Divine Providence to be peopled by one nation, speaking one language, professing one general system of religious and political principles, and accustomed to one general tenor of social usages and customs. For the common happiness of them all, for their peace and prosperity, I believe it is indispensable that they should be associated in one federal Union.

However, it is imperative to note that Quincy Adams’ vision for the U.S. was limited to North America and that he, in 1821, gave a July 4th speech that fully endorsed George Washington’s isolationist foreign policy. He said, since 1789, America had wisely abstained from “interference in the concerns of others, even when the conflict has been for principles to which she clings.” And he did not envision an end to this policy because, “probably for centuries

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88 John O'Sullivan, “Annexation,” United States Magazine and Democratic Review 17, no.1 (July-August 1845).
89 Hietala, Manifest Design, x, vx; Wilsey, American Exceptionalism, 76.
91 Among other things, John Quincy Adams negotiated the Treaty of 1818 and the Transcontinental Treaty in 1819, drew the U.S.’s borders toward Canada and Mexico, provided for a joint occupation with the U.K. of Oregon Country, and purchased Florida from Spain.
to come, all the contests of that Aceldama, the European World, will be contests between
inveterate power, and emerging right.” Thus, the U.S. would never adopt an activist policy:

[S]he goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the
freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.
She will recommend the general cause, by the countenance of her voice, and the
benignant sympathy of her example.\textsuperscript{94}

Moreover, the consequences that would result from such involvement would be devastating:

She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even
the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself, beyond the power of
extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and
ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom. The fundamental
maxims of her policy would insensibly change from liberty to force. The frontlet upon
her brows would no longer beam with the ineffable splendor of freedom and
independence; but in its stead would soon be substituted an imperial diadem, flashing in
false and tarnished lustre the murky radiance of dominion and power. She might become
the dictatress of the world: she would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit.\textsuperscript{95}

In hindsight, this last paragraph seems both prophetic and ironic in that it was Quincy
Adams who, two years later, as the de facto formulator of the Monroe Doctrine, put an end to
European colonization in the Americas and opened a door for future U.S. meddling in the
Caribbean (and beyond). He unconsciously did so by making concrete three subthemes into
potential arguments for geographic expansion. First, the American people and U.S. institutions
embody special virtues; second, Americans had the right to divide “the Wild West” into
Jeffersonian republics that could add themselves to the union; and third, it was the destiny of the
American people to accomplish this calling.\textsuperscript{96} In addition, this intellectual heritage was to be

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
used by Quincy Adams’ immediate successor to further a development that affected American Exceptionalism even more than the country’s rapid geographic expansion.

FROM ELITISM TO POPULISM

Influenced by John Locke’s idea that all citizens have a right to property, Andrew Jackson reformed Americanism by making Jefferson’s yeoman farmer of the interior, rather than the “natural aristocracy” along the East Coast, the political backbone of the country. Besides, this populism not only embodied the “resentment of the well-bred, the well-connected, and the well-paid” hinted earlier. It also had a messianic strain that resulted in a paradigmatic shift away from Hamiltonian realism. Because, even if Jackson’s goals were “rooted in the commonsense tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment that moral, scientific, political, and religious truths can be ascertained by the average person,” his imagination had a clear idyllic bent. Accordingly, his vision of America as a “folksy” country became “more than an intellectual conviction in the United States; it [became] a cultural force.” Important is also the fact that Jackson’s foreign policy, by drawing “a sharp contrast between the Lockean political order that prevails at home with what they see as a Hobbesian international system” continuously persuaded Americans that “in a competitive world, each sovereign state must place its own interests first.”

Nevertheless, Jackson’s policies did enhance the U.S. from a model nation of republican virtue to the cradle of modern democracy by adding the concrete quality – at least compared with “republicanism” – of universal suffrage to the exceptionalist matrix ready for export. Indeed, his

98 White, New Politics, 30ff; Cullen, American Dream, 65-74.
99 Mead, “The Tea Party and American Foreign Policy,” 34.
push to extend democracy in America triggered an international movement as “English conservatives attributed the Reform Act of 1832 to the extension of universal suffrage in the young American republic”\(^\text{100}\) that marked the beginning of a century-long expansion of voting rights all over Europe (and later beyond that, the world). However, most important in this setting is that since the right to vote was still dependent on owning land and property, democracy, in the meaning of all people’s right to vote, made continuous territorial expansion necessary.\(^\text{101}\)

However, by the 1830s, a substantial number of American Indians blocked further geographic expansion. Earlier, they had not been a severe problem and been treated relatively fairly. For example, George Washington had called them “brothers,” and Thomas Jefferson, even though patronizingly addressed them as “red children,”\(^\text{102}\) aspired to make them participants in North America’s civilization process. Jackson, however, allowed neither time nor room for such a process. In 1835, he instead declared it “an established fact [that American Indians] cannot live in contact with a civilized community,”\(^\text{103}\) and decided that they were to be expelled from their homes east of the Mississippi. In his Farewell Address, he, therefore, felt free to boast:

> Our Constitution is no longer a doubtful experiment, and at the end of nearly half a century we find that it has preserved unimpaired the liberties of the people, secured the rights of property, and that our country has improved and is flourishing beyond any former example in the history of nations.\(^\text{104}\)

\(^\text{100}\) Chilton Williamson Jr., *After Tocqueville: The Promise and Failure of Democracy* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2012), 64.

\(^\text{101}\) Ellis, *American Political Cultures*, 33ff.

\(^\text{102}\) Stuckey, *Defining Americans*, 32-60; Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, 74-82.


Thus, the American Indians became victims of Jackson’s active-exclusive form of American Exceptionalism known as Manifest Destiny.\textsuperscript{105} Still, since this did not equate to a more specific policy other than opening new areas for white settlement across North America, the concept kept George Washington’s “great rule” active by actually containing U.S. ambitions. For instance, while Europe was struck by popular revolutions in 1848, Americans could end an expansionist war against Mexico at the same time that former Secretary of State Henry Clay (1777-1852) turned down Hungarian pleas for help to win freedom from their Austrian overlords. Echoing Quincy Adams, he said that the U.S. must “keep our lamp burning brightly on this western shore as a light to all nations,” but see that it does not “hazard its utter extinction amid the ruins of fallen or falling republics in Europe.”\textsuperscript{106}

Manifest Destiny is of interest in this thesis for three more reasons. First, since during the first half of the 1800s the U.S. experienced the early rise of modern racism, the concept came to impart Anglo-Saxon superiority. Thus, it would not only be used as an alibi for the harsh dealings with the American Indians, but to justify wars against countries like Mexico, whose “brown” people had earlier been seen at least as semi-equal Europeans, but were now deemed incapable of governing themselves. Also, as the questions of territorial expansion and slavery became more intertwined, Manifest Destiny solidified many Americans’ already grim view of Africans and made already existing arguments defending slavery stronger.\textsuperscript{107} At the same time, it shall be noted that racism, like Manifest Destiny, in reality, \textit{limited} American expansion.

\textsuperscript{105} Stuckey, \textit{Defining Americans}, 39-60.
\textsuperscript{106} Quote from Buchanan, \textit{A Republic}, 124.
Because if and when the U.S. Government perceived that an area could not be settled mainly with white people, it usually restrained from acquiring it.\textsuperscript{108}

Second, even though Manifest Destiny advocates still used a profoundly Christian vocabulary, it contributed to the long-term secularization (and politicization) of American Exceptionalism. After Andrew Jackson’s shift toward a plebeian democracy, for example, O’Sullivan could be heard arguing that “democratic principles [are] the animating force of Christianity [and] salvation itself was not to be found in the person and work of Christ, but in democracy.”\textsuperscript{109} This was an essential step in making “democratism” part of the U.S. nationalist paradigm. Still, even if Manifest Destiny became more of a political concept, it was employed mainly by Democrats, following the expansionist tradition of Jefferson and Jackson, while Whigs and later Republicans generally avoided employing the term until the late 1800s.

Third, through his argumentation, O’Sullivan helped create a more rounded metaphysical theory supporting American Exceptionalism. Like Bancroft, he divided human history into five phases stretching from barbarism, theocracy, statism, and aristocracy, to democracy, and placed the meaning and direction of U.S. history squarely within the Whig history tradition and Hegelian historicism. Specifically, O’Sullivan labeled U.S. expansion a step in “America’s inevitable upward march to first-rate status,” called the annexation of Texas a “fulfillment of the general law which is rolling our population westward,” and branded U.S.-style democracy the end-goal of history. Thus, he articulated a deterministic worldview that differed in detail but matched with current solons like Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and Karl Marx (1818-1883).\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid, 13, 133ff, 172-219.
\textsuperscript{109} Stuckey, Defining Americans, 21ff. Quote from Wilsey, American Exceptionalism, 81.
\textsuperscript{110} Wilsey, American Exceptionalism, 77f.
Finally, because disagreements over slavery made further expansion divisive after the Mexican-American War in 1848, Manifest Destiny never gained a more prominent place in American discourse (except today’s status as a by and large derogatory term for atrocities towards American Indians). Even during the decade leading up to the Civil War, both North and South supporters preferred to refer to the American Revolution when arguing about what region was most genuinely American, rather than trying to connect back to how the land had been settled.\(^\text{111}\) Also, an estimate must be that the aggression against American Indians committed in its name, along with the general direction of 19\(^{\text{th}}\)-century political and moral developments, made a form of counter-reaction to Manifest Destiny all but destined to occur.\(^\text{112}\)

**Lincoln’s Alternative**

Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), a small-town lawyer from Illinois, on what was then still the Frontier, was a genuinely religious and intelligent autodidact in whose imagination the U.S. was humankind’s “last best hope of earth.”\(^\text{113}\) He was hence a keen believer in American Exceptionalism, and as a politician, military leader, and theorist of U.S. nationalism, he would formulate what one scholar called “the first developed form of open American Exceptionalism” in response to the “theological crisis” to the nation’s civil religion brought on by slavery.\(^\text{114}\) In

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\(^\text{114}\) Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism*, 84, 103.
fact, Lincoln’s reinterpretation of essential segments of the concept was so profound that Robert Bellah a century later branded him America’s greatest civil religion theologian ever.

On the fundamental level, Lincoln reshaped exceptionalist thinking by professing that the Declaration’s statement that “all men are created equal” should encompass all, not just white, men.\textsuperscript{115} He said that if that document was amended to read that “all men are created equal, except Negroes, and foreigners, and Catholics,” he would immigrate “to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty [like] Russia.”\textsuperscript{116} Hence, Lincoln redefined the sociopolitical contract of America. In more detail, by declaring the Declaration's principles to hold precedence over the Constitution, he revised America's story to be as much about the equality of all its citizens as about their liberty and property rights.\textsuperscript{117} (To look ahead, this would too help divorce the two documents by diluting Americans’ respect for the freedom-focused realism of the Constitution compared to the Rousseauian idealism of the Declaration, which in turn resulted in a long-term gain for the egalitarian interpretation of John Locke.\textsuperscript{118})

Lincoln also reinterpreted some of American Exceptionalism’s religious assumptions. O’Sullivan and other believers in Manifest Destiny had argued that God was perpetually on America’s side, and they were convinced that Providence guided America’s actions so that she could do no wrong. In contrast, Lincoln refused even to acknowledge whether God was on the North’s side in the Civil War, only expressing the hope that the North was on God’s side.\textsuperscript{119}

Likewise, while O’Sullivan argued that democratic principles animated Christianity because “the

\textsuperscript{115} In 1856, Lincoln said, “Let us in building our new [Republican] party make our corner-stone the Declaration of Independence. Let us build on this rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against us.” Quote from Gelernter, Americanism, 115.
\textsuperscript{116} Quote from White, Still Seeing Red, 7.
\textsuperscript{118} Arnn, Founders’ Key, passim.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid, 86f.
voice of the people [in an American-style democracy] will be one with the voice of God."\textsuperscript{120} Lincoln forsook such auspicious thinking. He assumed instead that the voice of the people, given the imperfections of human nature, made Americans’ actions in line with God only when they acted in step with His moral codes.\textsuperscript{121} Thus, he called them God’s “almost chosen people."\textsuperscript{122}

Furthermore, by stressing the concept of “free labor” as opposed to slavery, Lincoln rejuvenated the Protestant work ethic, outlined what half a century later would become the current socioeconomic version of the American Dream, and primed the U.S. for the oncoming of large-scale capitalism.\textsuperscript{123} Underwriting the idea – already in motion at the time – that through the principles in the Declaration the Union was a hallowed entity, he also braced the idea that the U.S. had a global role to play. One scholar explains:

Lincoln gives the United States a new origin in 1776 – rather than the gradual development from a centuries-long tradition of self-government and self-understanding – and with this comes a mission. The country, previously dedicated only to its own perpetuity, is now set on a course for the realization of a state of universal equality. [...] Now, in other words, the union may in principle become reoccupied with the order of the whole world.\textsuperscript{124}

Another small, but symbolic, change brought about by Lincoln was that his intense nationalism heartened people to stop referring to these United States and instead start using the singular.\textsuperscript{125}

In sum, Lincoln’s most obvious historical contribution through the Civil War and his philosophical efforts were to partly rewrite America’s story to be as much about equality as freedom. Less obvious but equally important is though that his way of strengthening Americans’

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid, 81-89.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid, 86f.
\textsuperscript{122} Gelernter, Americanism, 111.
\textsuperscript{123} Cullen, American Dream, 84-102; Morone, Hellfire Nation, 200ff.
\textsuperscript{124} Litke, Twilight of the Republic, 101.
\textsuperscript{125} Huntington, Who Are We, 119.
self-image by moderating its exceptionalism in time would make people more inclined to support the export of U.S. virtues. Because, if the U.S., as O’Sullivan and others argued, was totally different from other countries, what chance would there be that others would be able to copy it even if they wanted to? As well, since Lincoln’s words and deeds after his death were sanctified, his name would offer emotional support for both more egalitarian domestic policies and a more open form of exceptionalism that allowed for “a new potential to expand the scope of [America’s] government both at home and abroad.”

NEW FRONTIERS

After the Civil War, because of the victory and moral rightfulness of the North, Lincoln’s “open” variant of American Exceptionalism became dominant. However, the political effects of this would take time to unfold, and the term Manifest Destiny, as well as some exclusive aspects of its thinking, persisted. For example, Orestes A. Brownson, in The American Republic (1865), hailed the country’s institutional virtues but still stressed its exclusivity. Explicitly, while debunking the popular notion that the U.S. was the result of a social contract of the type presented by Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau, he specified it as a unique outcome of English history and fixed its “special mission [...] to continue and complete in the political order the Græco-Roman civilization” in America only.

Besides mental unpreparedness, several more roadblocks remained before Americans could launch a bid for world domination. The most fundamental factor was that after the U.S.

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126 Ibid, 113. See also Pierard & Linder, Civil Religion, 108ff.
purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867, and since further conquests of Canada or Mexico were not consistent with the ideological or popular post-war sentiment, the U.S. was now simply out of space. Thus, the “energies” propelling westward expansion had to find new outlets and two possible vents existed in the form of internal development and acquisition of overseas territories, and in the half-century following the Civil War, Americans would exploit both options.128

Initially, though, Americans focused on the first opportunity by thrusting themselves, through the “Free Soil” policy, urbanization, and industrialization, into a developmental frenzy that made them the richest people in the world. Another indication of the enduring introvert concentration underlying this choice is that even though the label Manifest Destiny survived, it lost most of its political impetus and turned into an expedient token finally used by both parties. For instance, Republican President William McKinley (1843-1901) would use it in 1898 to defend the annexation of Hawaii just to get it hurled back at him the following year by his Democratic opponent William Jennings Bryan when he denounced the Philippine-American War by saying that “‘Destiny’ is not as manifest as it was a few weeks ago.”129

Nevertheless, Americans’ belief in spreading their virtues had by then been growing for decades and a shift in both attitude and aggressiveness was taking place as Social Darwinism nurtured the expansionist sentiment. We will return to this theme, but it can be noted already here that from the 1880s, this ideology swayed white people everywhere to view themselves as racially superior.130 In America, it convinced people like Reverend Josiah Strong (1847-1916) that God wanted Americans to Christianize and civilize the world even if the result meant “the

128 For a general background, see Frymer, Building An American Empire, passim.
extinction for the inferior races [through] vitality and civilization.”131 Americans’ engagement by the late 19th century in a period of traditional imperialism would also, in 1899, inspire the British “imperial poet” Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) to caress their exceptionalist sense of worth by dedicating the poem *The White Man’s Burden* to their “civilizing” of the Philippines:

*Take up the White Man’s burden -  
Ye dare not stoop to less -  
Nor call too loud on Freedom  
To cloak your weariness;  
By all ye cry or whisper,  
By all ye leave or do,  
The silent, sullen peoples  
Shall weigh your gods and you.*191

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We need Hawaii just as much and a good deal more
than we did California. It is Manifest Destiny.

WILLIAM MCKINLEY (1898)

CHAPTER 2 |

A New Land

The 1890s became a watershed in American history. Symbolically, the decade started with the
close of the Indian Wars in the form of the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890 and the official
closing of the Frontier, or “the meeting point between savagery and civilization.” Additional
events took place almost every year after that. For example, the Panic of 1893 led to a recession
and a wave of violent strikes. Despite that setback, in 1895, the U.S. passed the U.K. as the
world leader in industrial output, and the year after that, the election of President McKinley
marked the beginning of the Progressive Era. And most importantly, under his leadership, the
country, through the 1898 Spanish-American War, entered world politics by engaging in a short
outburst of old-style imperialist conduct leading to the acquisition of overseas outposts.

1 Frederick Jackson Turner, The Significance of the Frontier in American History (New York: Henry Holt and
2 Ernest R. May, Imperial Democracy: The Emergence of America as a Great Power (Chicago: Imprint
Publications, 1991), passim; George C. Herring, From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776
Frontier Anxiety From The Old West To The New Deal (University Press of Kansas, 1996), passim; Lewis L. Gould,
America in the Progressive Era 1890-1914 (Harlow, UK: Longman, 2001), 3ff; Niall Ferguson, Colossus: The Rise
and Fall of the American Empire (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 33-60; Robert Endicott Osgood, Ideals and
All the reasons for the drama of the 1890s cannot be dealt with in this setting, but one key point must be emphasized. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932) professed in 1893 that because America had been a farming nation from birth, and “Go West!” in many ways had been the essence of its culture, the Frontier’s closing would deeply affect the nation.\(^3\) And it did. When the U.S. entered World War I in 1917, the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian vision of a union of semi-independent agrarian republics would be gone.\(^4\) Instead, unceasing industrial development – together with the steady influx of immigrants and the rapid urbanization following in its path – had not only led to profound socioeconomic changes, but political, military, and diplomatic conditions had altered the U.S. and turned it into an industrialized giant and world power.\(^5\)

Together these changes led to a “frontier anxiety” that would persist into the 1930s.\(^6\) For example, in 1921, President Warren G. Harding (1865-1923) would worry that: “The base of the pyramid of civilization which rests upon the soil is shrinking through the drift of population from farm to city.”\(^7\) However, a second prediction by Turner that “the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise”\(^8\) was also vindicated. As in Europe, where

\(^{3}\) Turner, *Frontier in American History*, 1-38. Even if Turner’s ‘frontier thesis’ has been questioned, it cannot be reasonably argued against that the experience of tens of millions of settlers over more than a century, as well as the end of such an era, must have influenced American culture and society strongly. See also Wrobel, *End Of American Exceptionalism*, 3-12; Frymer, *Building An American Empire*, 13, 266ff. For a critique of Turner, see Patricia Nelson, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1987), passim; Madsen, *American Exceptionalism*, 122ff.

\(^{4}\) Richard Hofstadter in *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Book, 1955) branded the homage Americans since the late 19th century have paid to the yeoman farmer “the agrarian myth” and noted that it quickly turned into a stereotype since agriculture already by then had become more commercial and industrial. Nevertheless, he also points out that the alleged loss of “free land” was a prime driving force for the Populist Movement (23-59).


\(^{8}\) Turner, *Frontier in American History*, 37.
optimism about technological and other forms of progress had colored work as early as Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873). Americans in increasing numbers turned away from the stable security of villages and small towns and welcomed instead the progress and prospects offered by big cities. In turn, this affected not only how Americans viewed their country in general but the political discourse and people’s beliefs in and interpretations of American Exceptionalism.

**The Technocratic Turn**

After 1776, nearly uninterrupted successes for over a hundred years nurtured a belief in the near perfectibility of the U.S., its institutions, and population. The basic story went like this: left to themselves, Americans (with God’s help) had turned a continental wilderness into a thriving civilization stretching from sea to shining sea. This view had been reinforced by the idea of a Manifest Destiny and the notion of America being blessed with a special mission in human history. However, during the last quarter of the 19th century, this view began to fracture. The futuristic optimism of the latter half of the 1800s was namely not focused only on material advances and technological progress. It also transformed intellectual milieus in ways that, despite continuous successes, lessened some people’s view of the U.S.

The reason for this paradoxical development was that critiques of political, social, and economic circumstances had not ended in 1776. On the contrary, republicanism long offered an idealistic ballast to American culture’s materialistic side, and criticisms of institutions and ideals like capitalism, slavery, and excessive individualism had been around from the start.\(^9\) Also, the

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horrors of the Civil War and the recurrent economic “panics” gripping society shook people’s optimism at the same time when “the United States came rapidly to approximate the nations of Europe, as headlong industrialization produced the same social stratification, inequality of income, and class warfare that had always characterized Old World societies.” As a result, while some complained about bad working conditions, poor housing, and sanitation problems, others demanded female suffrage, unemployment insurance, and old-age pensions.

Hence, the drive for more equality of outcome that was ingrained in the communitarian interpretations of John Locke began to slowly gain ground, and as focus turned from triumphs to plights, the visions of European ideologues such as August Comte, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), and Karl Marx, as well as domestic dreamers like H.D. Thoreau (1817-1862), started to get traction. Their ideas would never earn a mass following because of Americans’ strong belief in both individual and communitarian Lockean principles. However, since at the same time an “association in the popular mind between ‘political innovation’ and the advance of science” grew stronger, a core of American academics and other professionals formed who shared many European colleagues’ conviction that humanity stood on the edge of a final stage of history.

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11 Concerning early Progressives use of and contributions to the evolution of American Exceptionalism, for example, see Angela Lahr’s essay “Lightening ‘Human Spirit-Lamps:’ Francis Willard, the Conscience of Reform, and American Civil Religion” in Edwards & Valenzano (ed.) *Rhetoric of American Civil Religion*, 53-75, that deals with Francis Willard’s use of such arguments as president of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).
13 Ibid, 48-52.
In more detail, many thought that in the brave new world lying ahead, scientific, medical, and other developments could, when combined with economic growth and scientifically organized administration, lead to boundless improvements. This American Utopia was foreshadowed in inventions like electricity, skyscrapers, telephones, cars, medicines, and other goods. Also, since mass production made these things cheap, the only thing apparently missing was the will to allocate them to ordinary people. Thus, many were carried away by visions arising from their idyllic rather than moral imaginations about that wisely designed policies could resolve all problems. Indeed, all that seemed needed to happen was to unfetter administrators and others from hampering constitutional and ideological shackles. Naturally, therefore, this attitude found its way into politics.

THE PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT

During the 20th century, in Europe, the “modernist” and positivist attitude underlying the technocratic turn would power schools of thought like communism, fascism, social democracy, and social liberalism. Even in the U.S. – which lacked the Old World’s history of statism and was instead inundated by individualism – the modernist worldview would have paradigmatic effects. Writes one scholar:

During the early twentieth century, it was not uncommon to hear leading Americans from a wide range of political and religious backgrounds articulate intuitive visions proclaiming human natural goodness and the ability of politics to transform society and even the world. Interpretations of social and political disorder as products of the inefficient management of institutions or of the incomplete realization of progress, equality, or democracy became more frequent in the United States. Increasingly, the

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17 Berman, Primacy of Politics, 47-151.
person perceived as deserving of society’s attention and praise was the one who had great plans to serve and save mankind.\textsuperscript{18}

However, compared with European ideologies like socialism and fascism, the philosophical nature of American Progressivism was weak and elusive. One important reason for this that it was moderated from the start by \textit{pragmatism}; a school of thought whose gist is that the truth of theories and beliefs should be measured only by their practical application, not by the abstract dogmas of any specific ideology.\textsuperscript{19}

Nonetheless, a crucial landmark is that from the 1880s onward, scholars like Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924), John Dewey (1859-1952), and Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929), whose minds reflected both pragmatism and the technocratic turn, began their careers.\textsuperscript{20} Although their academic focus shifted, they would change many people’s perceptions about what politicians can do. Two common denominators were namely that European thought systems influenced their worldviews and that their ideals thus differed from the American doctrine of limited government. For example, the American Economic Association (founded in 1885) declared the state to be “an educational and ethical agency whose positive aid is an indispensable condition of human progress.”\textsuperscript{21} Also, religious people with similar views began exacting political action to right social wrongs using the device, “What would Jesus do?”\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{18} Garrison, \textit{An Empire of Ideals}, 42.
\textsuperscript{20} Gould, \textit{America in the Progressive Era}, 8.
\textsuperscript{22} Foner, \textit{American Freedom}, 130; Tuveson, \textit{Redeemer Nation}, 52-90; Ellis, \textit{American Political Cultures}, 20 ff; James T. Patterson, \textit{America’s Struggle Against Poverty 1900-1980} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 20-34.
In the first decade and a half of the 1900s, several more events took place that laid a platform for “modern liberalism.” For example, in 1909, Herbert Croly (1869-1930), who later would be a co-founder of the radical magazine *The New Republic*, published *The Promise of American Life*; a book that argued that the U.S. could only be saved by an active government spreading wealth more evenly across the population by a corporatist apparatus. That year one journalist also proclaimed that “enhanced federal power [is] the surest guarantor of core values in an industrial democracy.”\(^{23}\) And in 1914, Walter Lippmann (1889-1974), soon to become one of American liberalism’s leading voices, deemed modern society too complex to be free and demanded “scientific government.”\(^{24}\) However, since more ordinary Americans’ affection for traditional freedom coupled with a stable sociopolitical system, these ideas spread slowly. Thus, the U.S. continued to lag in statist inclinations, and the only large-scale social improvement project before the 1930s would be the Prohibition fiasco.\(^{25}\)

However, even if the Progressive Era did not become an age of grand overhauls, it produced a mass of laws, regulations, and reforms intended to battle corruption, wily business practices, and immoral conduct. These early sprouts of political and social engineering rested upon positivistic confidence that humans’ private and collective behavior could be altered. But, might people’s behavior be changed simply from the outside only, top-down through reforms? Or did change demand internal mental-cultural, bottom-up changes? As Rousseauians, Progressives leaned naturally towards the latter, but they were also attracted to the former as technocrats. Many of them consequently embraced Social Darwinism, which offered both


external and internal control mechanisms (plus the idea of constant social change that undercut conservative attitudes). In practice, Progressives combined reformism and eugenics into an ad hoc model designed to perfect U.S. society through methods stretching from birth control, via laws against obscenity, to euthanasia of “unproductive” people.26

In America, the Progressive Movement’s human effects were limited compared to Europe, where countries as different as Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and Sweden would institute both sweeping reforms and massive eugenic programs. Still, the movement appealed to Americans’ perfectionist tendencies and had at least three effects on American Exceptionalism. First, it moved the focus from traditional sources of progress, such as individual work, saving, and private enterprise, toward collective action; i.e., a change from a cultural-practical toward an ideological-theoretical view of progress took place, shifting people’s hope of achieving equality from the market place to the political meeting (and medical operating) room. Second, the Puritan bent for socializing sin and penalizing it collectively was reinvented as a striving to restore traditional values by pruning American’s passion for personal freedom.27 Third, as America’s inclination for perfection combined with positivists’ belief in infinite progress, some shifted from viewing the U.S. as an epitome of statecraft to an incomplete or even defective creation.28

Of these changes, the third is the most important. An early reflection of this new view of America was the Farmer’s Alliance of 1872, followed by the formation of the People’s Party in 1891, of which the latter’s “Omaha Platform” painted a dull picture of life in America:

[W]e meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot-box, the Legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the ermine of the bench. The people are demoralized; most of the States have been compelled to isolate the voters at the polling places to prevent universal intimidation and bribery. The newspapers are largely subsidized or muzzled, public opinion silenced, business prostrated, homes covered with mortgages, labor impoverished, and the land concentrating in the hands of capitalists. The urban workmen are denied the right to organize for self-protection, imported pauperized labor beats down their wages, a hireling standing army, unrecognized by our laws, is established to shoot them down, and they are rapidly degenerating into European conditions. The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few, unprecedented in the history of mankind; and the possessors of those, in turn, despise the republic and endanger liberty. From the same prolific womb of governmental injustice we breed the two great classes – tramps and millionaires.29

Undoubtedly, this dark image did not reflect a more commonly held picture of America. Yet, as populist movements tend to do, the Omaha Platform offers, in crystallized form, a snapshot of spreading attitudes at the time. The People Party’s relative success before the Panic of 1893 makes this clear.30 Moreover, this was a critical “path dependent” moment for the U.S. left that over time would make it, as in Europe, primarily focused on “[i]nequality, not of opportunity, but of material conditions and political influence.”31 Hence, a seed was sown to would one day make politics more polarized in America than in Europe, where both sides – despite their own set of fundamental differences – were deeply affected by the continent’s statist heritage.

Furthermore, the view of society as a work in progress rather than a finished creation naturally generate opinions about what needs to be done, especially in a country like the U.S., where culture and politics are saturated with the Enlightenment’s faith in mankind’s ability to study and correct nature. Thus, it is not surprising that numerous laws and regulations aiming to

30 In the 1892 election, the People’s Party’s presidential candidate James B. Weaver carried four states (Colorado, Kansas, Idaho, and Nevada) and received over one million votes total.
31 Brooks, American Exceptionalism, 22.
fix societal wrongs were instituted – and even more proposed – during a politically active period like the turn of the last century.\textsuperscript{32} And even though many of the Populist Movement’s proposals – such as a federal income tax, direct election of Senators, and an eight-hour working day – did not win instant approval, many of them survived and later became part of the Progressive Movement and eventually the New Deal.

Hence, it would seem as many vocal people adjusted their views of the U.S. from a completed archetype to an incomplete model, and the successes of the People’s Party showed that populism had substantial support among ordinary citizens, the belief in America probably declined somewhat (just as European’s view of their countries at that time was disturbed by agitation conducted by labor movements and socialist parties). Still, by the 1890s, the relative richness and dynamism of the U.S. had become so clear and distinctive, not least for the millions of immigrants at that time pouring in from dirt poor, autocratic countries in Eastern and Southern Europe, that the overall image of America changed only marginally.\textsuperscript{33} Or, metaphorically: if the earlier picture of the U.S. had been that of a finished city on a hill, most Americans – and millions more around the world – positively still viewed Uncle Sam at least as a lantern-bearer well-suited to lead other peoples toward the future.

Even so, populism altered the political importance and potential impact of American Exceptionalism. However, it did so in a counter-intuitive way, as the image of the U.S. as an imperfect society made activist policies both at home and abroad \textit{more} likely. Because as Americans began to admit faults at home and launched reforms to correct them, they could more easily reassure themselves that they knew what was best for others also. A sign of this so-called

\textsuperscript{32} Gould, \textit{America in the Progressive Era}, 3-17; Kazin, \textit{Populist Persuasion}, 27-42.

\textsuperscript{33} Roger Daniels, \textit{Coming To America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life} (New York: Perennial, 2002), 185-237.
liberal-developmentalism is that some Progressives turned out to be imperialists eager to achieve improvements abroad. An account of how this development affected domestic as well as foreign policy will be presented below. However, to make this process intelligible, a short digression regarding changes in U.S. party politics around the same time first needs to be presented.34

THE GREAT SHIFT

A sometimes-overlooked fact in U.S. history is that the main parties between the 1890s and the 1920s effectively switched places on the ideological map. Before, the Democrats had been for many intents and purposes (in modern parlance) a center-right party. Specifically, following Jefferson and Jackson, they had advocated a minimalistic federal government, low tariffs, laissez-faire economics, individual freedom, and reflected an agrarian populism that was hostile to “big business” and monopolies. Another party pivot had been stats’ rights, especially after the GOP formed as an anti-slavery force in 1854, which after the Civil War made them the party of Jim Crow. More anomalous for a right-wing party is that the Democrats also had been a secularist-internationalist party and that they attracted many immigrant votes.35

On their hand, the Republican Party had, as a continuation of the Federalist-Whig tradition, been patrons of mercantilism, tariffs, industrialization, social harmony, public education, and Yankee Protestantism, including its strong work ethic. In addition, as disciples of Lincoln, they were ardent believers in Americanism and devotees to the country’s traditional

isolationist foreign policy. Hence, since its inception in the 1850s, the GOP had been a sturdily centrist force for societal order that was “inveighing against the dangers of unrestrained individualism, violence, and parochialism”\(^{36}\) and made the party the natural home for workers and business people alike.

As the established party system buckled from the Populist Movement, some Democrats realized that there was no longer room for two rather conservative parties and that it, as the “out party,” had to change to attract new voters. William Jennings Bryan, a firebrand orator, took the lead in this development, as the party’s 1896 presidential candidate, by adopting the request for “free silver.”\(^{37}\) Such a policy was by most elites deemed frivolous, and his speech that humanity should not be crucified “upon a cross of gold” unaffectedly populist. Still, at the same time, it was largely void of exceptionalism, and by alluding to Andrew Jackson’s stand against “the encroachments of aggregated wealth,” it presaged what decades later would become a time marked by European-like class-based argumentation. In the decades that followed, the Democrats would also begin to abandon limited government and states’ rights for majority rule and “increasing government intervention in and regulation of the marketplace, the redistribution of wealth through government transfers [...] and demand-led economic growth.”\(^{38}\)

As the Democrats in this way gradually started to turn into America’s statist – and in time protectionist – party, the Republicans moved rightward. This development was first primarily relative to the Democrats’ leftward drift. However, after the unprecedented accumulation of power and resources at the federal level under Woodrow Wilson and his “war socialism,” during the 1920s, the GOP would also actively change its policies rightward. Also, in hindsight, the

\(^{36}\) Ibid, 57-124; quote from 57.  
party’s right-wing turn can be said to have started already in 1898, when many of its leading figures decided to conduct foreign policy based on an aggressive active-inclusive form of American Exceptionalism.

**AMERICAN IMPERIALISM**

The 1890s brought the first clear move away from the isolationist-protectionist policies of George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, and contemporary observers have offered various reasons for it. Opinion-makers like journalist Charles A. Conant (1861-1915) argued that colonies would be essential for the future of the U.S. economy. Future president Theodore Roosevelt saw racial and cultural grounds for an Anglo-Saxon future in which the U.S. ruled the world together with the British. And Captain Alfred T. Mahan (1840-1914), who in 1890 won praise for a book that would affect German and Japanese maritime doctrines during the world wars, reasoned that America had to break its isolation for both military and economic reasons. In addition, “the scramble for Africa” between Europe’s big powers also played a role.

However, none of these views or the theories underlying them are powerful enough to offer a singular explanation for the brief period of American imperialism that followed. For instance, none of the many attempts to explain U.S. behavior around 1900 merely by economic factors, such as the need for fresh export markets, is convincing. Quite the opposite: studies like Walter LaFeber’s *The American Age* that dwell upon the subject are, despite their empirical

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dignity, often cartoonish in their one-sidedness. To put it simply, although economic factors indeed were important for some policymakers and businessmen, the positive effects of territories acquired from 1898 – with a possible exception of Hawaii\(^{42}\) – were insignificant to most companies and the U.S. government. Besides, as will be shown, most historians today agree that President McKinley’s decision in 1898 to invade Cuba was based more on idealist principles than material needs or concerns.\(^{43}\)

Likewise, it is wrong to explain the U.S.’ foreign policy at the time with lingering Manifest Destiny sentiments and/or as a fulfillment of the Monroe Doctrine’s anti-colonial spirit. First, this does not explain why there were no substantial intrusions of American settlers into the acquired areas. In reality, besides military personnel and bureaucrats, the inflow seems to have been negligible. Second, at the same time as these areas were denied independence (see below), there was no ambition to admit them into the Union as new states.\(^{44}\) Instead, “civilizing” them was said to be the goal and described as a moral responsibility. Thus, it now became standard to argue that the U.S. did not intrude abroad to protect or expand either the homeland or its interests but to carry out ideological and sociocultural change on behalf of conquered peoples.\(^{45}\)

Since different theories about the American imperialist interval all encompass some truth, they are best seen as accompanying instead of excluding explanations. To cast U.S. behavior from 1898 as a result of combined materialistic and idealist motifs is thus the most conceivable and the most prolific vantage point for the following analysis. In sum, it will view U.S. actions as

\(^{44}\) The exception became Hawaii. However, its history is different and was not part of the Paris Treaty. See Tom Coffman, *Nation Within: The History of the American Occupation of Hawaii* (Kihei, HI: Koa Books, 1998).
\(^{45}\) Herring, *Colony to Superpower*, 299f.
a combination of worldly needs, a growing impact of American Exceptionalism, and a variant of the contemporary European habit to dress up territorial expansion in words not about “conquering” but about “civilizing.” Yes, such a multifaceted theory is so broad that it risks failing the test of being called an academic theory at all, but it may truthfully be the only way to both describe and explain what transpired.

THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

After purchasing Alaska in 1867, Americans showed no interest in growing the country further in a northern direction. However, some still dreamt about expanding the Union west- and southward into the Pacific and Caribbean. In 1870, for example, the Grant administration considered annexing Santo Domingo (today the Dominican Republic), and in 1889 an incident with Britain and Germany regarding the Samoan Islands occurred. In the 1880s, Congress also authorized an offensive naval build-up program, and with Presidents Grover Cleveland’s extension of the Monroe Doctrine in 1895 – from forbidding new European colonies in the Americas to declaring all matters within the hemisphere a potential U.S. interest – arguably made war with Spain inevitable. Since the debate about the “splendid little war” that followed went

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46 May, Imperial Democracy, 3-24; Robert L. Beisner, From the Old Diplomacy to the New 1865-1900 (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc. 1986), 32-71.
to the core of how the U.S. could best serve the world – either as a passive model or as an active diffuser of American qualities – it is an excellent place to start studying the impact of American Exceptionalism from around 1900.49

Even before war with Spain became an issue, several developments fostered debates about America’s place, roles, and duties in the world, which all pointed toward the same conclusion: America, by not rivaling Europe for colonies, was forgoing a chance not only to become a world power but neglecting its mission to transform the world in its image. Moreover, because Americans had become more aware of world affairs through, e.g., immigrants and the telegraph, there was a growing feeling – at least amongst elites – that isolationism was no longer either possible or moral.50 For instance, in 1894, the Turkish genocide of Armenians produced calls for American military action to stop it, at least if U.S. citizens were harmed.51

Furthermore, when it came to Cuba, its proximity and richness in natural resources combined with the Spanish regime’s autocratic monarchism had long tantalized American minds. Already around 1800, Jefferson and others had eyed the island as a future state of the U.S.52 Thus, after an uprising erupted on Cuba in 1895, support for the rebels grew during the three-year-long guerilla war that followed as “[m]any goodhearted Americans saw it as the only

49 Herring, Colony to Superpower, 299; Beisner, From the Old Diplomacy, 120-153. Academic judgments about the Spanish-American War stretch from Samuel Flagg Bemis’ branding of it as “the great aberration” of American history, to historian George C. Cunning’s account that “in its aims, its methods, and the rhetoric used to justify it […] followed logically from earlier patterns.”
50 H. Wayne Morgan, William McKinley and His America (Syracuse; NY: Syracuse University Press, 1963), 328f.
51 May, Imperial Democracy, 27ff. For example, the Republican Party’s 1896 Platform stated that “the United States should exercise all the influence it can properly exert to bring these atrocities to an end.” From Johnson & Porter (ed.), National Party Platforms, 108.
52 Frymer, Building An American Empire), 205ff; Louis A. Pérez Jr., Cuba in the American Imagination: Metaphor and the Imperial Ethos (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 1-11. Tellingly, a few decades earlier, when Spain had been a republic, war between the countries had by most been deemed impossible. See Huntington, Who Are We, 49.
righteous course.” The press bolstered this development as editorial support for the Cubans also grew in regions exempt from the East Coast populist “yellow press” war between William R. Hearst’s *New York Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World*. Even in the Midwest, the heartland of American isolationism, a common editorial theme was that “Spain violated American interests in the Caribbean and that her presence in that area was inimical to the consummation of America’s ‘manifest destiny.’”

Naturally, the editors’ strategy to muster support for the Cubans by appealing to the belief that America had a unique role to play overseas affected politics. Support for a U.S. intervention on Cuba appeared first in Congress, where members felt the pressure and passed supportive resolutions in both chambers. However, since foreign policy is a presidential prerogative, such a parliamentary fuss meant little, and Presidents Cleveland and McKinley formulated U.S. policy. And even if both expressed strong sympathies for the Cubans, they belonged to the old school of thought that shunned the idea of carrying out political-ideological change abroad and feared that it could lead to acquiring colonies.

Consequently, the advancement of war came slowly. For example, in 1896, after public support for intervention was incited by a Spanish decision to open a system of reconcentrado (concentration) camps across Cuba, Cleveland still assured that the U.S. would not intervene since Americas “own ample and diversified domains satisfy all possible longings for territory,

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55 Auxier, George W., “Middle Western Newspapers and the Spanish American War, 1895-1898” in *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Mars, 1940), 524.
preclude all dreams of conquest, and prevent any casting of covetous eyes upon neighboring regions.”

And his successor, in his 1897 Inaugural Address, declared:

It has been the policy of the United States since the foundation of the Government to cultivate relations of peace and amity with all the nations of the world, and this accords with my conception of our duty now. We have cherished the policy of non-interference with affairs of foreign governments wisely inaugurated by Washington, keeping ourselves free from entanglement, either as allies or foes, content to leave undisturbed with them the settlement of their own domestic concerns. It will be our aim to pursue a firm and dignified foreign policy, which shall be just, impartial, ever watchful of our national honor, and always insisting upon the enforcement of the lawful rights of American citizens everywhere. Our diplomacy should seek nothing more and accept nothing less than is due us. We want no wars of conquest; we must avoid the temptation of territorial aggression.

Also, both Cleveland and McKinley long avoided the moral side of the issue and did not cite any special U.S. rights, duties, or responsibilities to intervene abroad. Instead, they appealed to fears that America could be accused of artless conquest. McKinley, in April 1898, despite being a genuinely religious exceptionalist who in his Inaugural Address had said that Americans had “advanced the cause of freedom throughout the world,” only briefly referred to the U.S.’ mission in his final request for congressional approval to invade Cuba. He stated that the present situation “bear to the traditional policy of our Government if it is to accord with the precepts laid down by the founders of the Republic and religiously observed by succeeding Administrations to the present day” and instead emphasized a general humanitarian reason for the intervention: “In

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60 McKinley, “Inaugural Address,” (March 4, 1897).
the name of humanity, in the name of civilization, in behalf of endangered American interests which give us the right and the duty to speak and to act, the war in Cuba must stop.61

Nevertheless, because of media and growing public sentiments, McKinley had been forced to increase his pressure on the Spanish beyond the point where war could no longer be avoided.62 And this development had not least been cultivated by politicians and others using plenty of exceptionalist arguments. For example, on March 17, after a personal visit to Cuba, Republican Senator Redfield Proctor (1831-1908) from Vermont had declared on the chamber floor that America could no longer be a bystander:

Not until peace comes and the reconcentrados can go back to their country, rebuild their homes, reclaim their tillage plots, which quickly run up to brush in that wonderful soil and clime, and until they can be free from danger of molestation in so doing. Until then the American people must, in the meantime, care for them. It is true that the alcaldes, other authorities and relief committees are now trying to do something, and desire, I believe, to do the best they can. But the problem is beyond their means and capacity and the work is one to which they are not accustomed.63

Public support for the war had also been amplified by parts of the Protestant clergy. For instance, one minister of the Epiphany Baptist Church in Philadelphia afterward said that no war had been “more righteous than that which we have undertaken, nor one closer to the law of the self-sacrificing Christ that we bear one another’s burdens.”64

Thus, the Spanish-American War was partially, or maybe even mainly, a result of support for a new, firmer, and activist view of American Exceptionalism. Therefore, opponents of the war feared that it would become a public facilitator for further conquest and alter Americans’

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62 Morgan, William McKinley, 342-350; Pierard & Linder, Civil Religion, 114-124.
64 Quote from Pierard & Linder, Civil Religion, 126.
view of their country’s proper place in the world. And they were to be proven right. Even before
the Spanish-American War had ended, the military triumph it meant transformed war fever into
patriotic and, to some extent, religious fervor.

THE POST-WAR DEBATE

After the war, authors like Robert Ellis Thompson, a Presbyterian clergyman and educator, saw
God’s hand behind every twist and turn of U.S. history, and citizens and pundits alike argued
that the war verified a new role for the U.S. as a significant political and military power.65
Besides, freeing Cuba from its Spanish royal overlords convinced many that America could
make exemptionalist claims, i.e., that the U.S., because of its uniqueness, can ignore international
rules that do not concur with its exceptional mission. For example, Alfred T. Mahan spoke for
many when asserting that if America violated international law to help Cuba, so be it. For him,
this was no worse or incriminating than when people before the Civil War illegally helped
fugitive slaves.66

Again, these sentiments were based on an inseparable mix of political ambition,
economic need, and exceptionalist conviction. Two events taking place on June 15, 1898,
demonstrate this. First, on this day in Boston, the American Anti-Imperialist League gathered in
Faneuil Hall – where Samuel Adams had argued for independence from the U.K. – to protest
what it saw as dark clouds on the political sky. For instance, referring to chatter about wresting
Puerto Rico and the Philippines from the Spanish Empire following the rolling invasion of Cuba,

one speaker thundered: “We are not here to oppose war [but] to insist that a war begun in the
name of humanity shall not be turned into a war for empire.” And the next speaker clarified that
this would “sacrifice the principles on which the Republic was founded” and add America “to
the list of oppressors of mankind.”67 Thus, even Anti-Imperialists did not question America’s
right (or duty) to invade a foreign country to “liberate” it. They only expressed fears that the
war in Cuba would derail into something they saw as incompatible with the Declaration’s ideals.

Second, such feelings that day also flew across Washington, D.C., where Congress
convened to vote on Hawaii’s annexation. However, House Speaker Thomas Reed was so upset
by the idea – which he saw as absurd as “annex[ing] the moon” – that he did not preside over the
session and other opponents, like in Boston, excelled in reciting both George Washington and
Abraham Lincoln’s views of the Declaration and the Constitution to defend their stance.68 But,
the annexationists carried the day. To oppose the historic annexing, one House member argued,
was “antediluvian and thorough stupidity.” And while some expressed themselves more crassly –
“a Great manufacturing nation [like the U.S.] must find new markets for our energy and
enterprise” – most seem to have reasoned as the member who matched these views: “We need
not, nor do I believe we will, enter into a conquest of force but, to the contrary, our higher
civilization will be carried across the Pacific by the white and peaceful wings of our rapidly
increasing commerce.”69 That day the vote for annexation was 209-91, and a few weeks later, on
July 4, a joint resolution passed that sealed the deal.

67 Quotes from Stephen Kinzer, The True Flag: Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain, and the Birth of American Empire
68 Ibid, 7f.
69 Quotes from Ibid, 8.
After the war’s end, a similarly complacent attitude would affect the U.S. Government’s dealings with the areas conquered from Spain. In February 1899, McKinley said that America, by accepting the Paris Peace Treaty, was “obeying a higher moral obligation which rested upon us.” However, in neither place were the local population’s wishes given real consideration. By then, Guam had already been placed under the U.S. Navy’s control by Executive Order; Puerto Rico was, through the 1900 Foraker Act, to be organized into an unincorporated territory with only a limited degree of popular government; and Cuba, which could not formally be annexed because of a prewar decision, was to be given independence in 1901 but only after the so-called Platt Amendment guaranteed that the island remained within the U.S. fold.

Thus, in the end, only the greatest spoil of the war, the Philippines, turned out to be a thorny issue. Situated halfway around the world, much larger, densely populated, and culturally different even compared to Spain’s Caribbean outposts, many felt reluctance to deal with it at first. Since there had been talk before the war about the need for smaller American bases in the area, like coaling stations, McKinley started with floating the idea to keep only a sliver of the archipelago, maybe Manila, while others wanted to grant the islands instant independence. But after the Filipinos revolted against their new rulers, even previous war opponents changed their minds. For example, a branch of the Sons of the American Revolution supported annexation because the U.S. occupation had “paralyzed the… oppressors hand;” one reverend predicted that U.S. rule would make the Philippines “the garden of the universe […] We will fill them with school houses and missionaries;” and William Jennings Bryan, who earlier had declared that

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70 Quote from Pierard & Linder, Civil Religion, 133.
72 Combs, History of American Foreign Policy, 28-47.
73 May, Imperial Democracy, 246-248.
“the Philippines are too far away and their people too different from ours to be annexed” now boasted: “Behold a republic gradually but surely becomes the supreme moral factor in the world’s progress and the accepted arbiter of the world’s disputes – a republic whose history, like the path of the just, ‘is as the shining light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.’”

President McKinley, too, finally had a complete change of heart. After the war, he had first settled the question of Hawaii by supporting full annexation – “It is Manifest destiny” – before making up his mind also about the Philippines. However, he did so first after taking a tour of his political home turf and the center of U.S. isolationism, the Midwest. There, in nearly 60 speeches, he tested the ground for colonial expansion and exceptionalist arguments, e.g., by asserting that the war with Spain had been fought “in a holy cause.” Indeed, a president surveying the opinions of “normal folks” on such an important issue in this way would never even have occurred to the Founders who had once created the U.S. political system as it was to keep just such issues far away from the gentry.

Still, McKinley got the answers he wanted and, upon returning to Washington, D.C., he continued to emphasize the historic and idealistic side of what was happening. In a classic episode, he told a group of clergymen that one night, while restlessly walking the White House’s corridors and pondering the annexation issue, he had had an epiphany. The message had been that it was America’s sacred duty to “educate the Filipinos, and uplift them and civilize them and Christianize them, and by God’s grace to do the very best we could by them, as our fellow-man

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74 Quote from Kinzer, True Flag, 107.
76 May, Imperial Democracy, 244.
77 Quotes from Kinzer, True Flag, 82f.
for whom Christ also died.”78 Moreover, the central line in his last speech before his assassination the following year would be a final reflection of the overall development:

“Isolation is no longer possible or desirable.”79

In these examples, the power of American Exceptionalism is made clear. Even though annexation violated if not the words of the Constitution but the spirit of the Declaration upon which America was founded, most people’s worries about such matters were subdued by the belief in a special mission for the U.S. in world history. For instance, when Republican Senator George F. Hoar (1826-1904) from Massachusetts during the ratification debate on the Treaty of Paris said he worried that America, by accepting it, would violate the Constitution and look like “a cheap-jack country raking after the cart for the leavings of European tyranny,” his party friend and Senate colleague from Connecticut Orville Platt (1827-1905) exploded: “The literal application of the Senator’s doctrine would have turned back the Mayflower from our coast and would have prevented our expansion westward to the Pacific Ocean.”80

Furthermore, exceptionalist ideals were often mingled with racial biases. One example is “America’s most vociferous imperialist”81 Republican Senator Albert J. Beveridge (1862-1927) from Indiana. He called the Filipinos “children” and declared opponents to annexation to be wrong because Americans, who stood for high values such as liberty, had the right to rule such a “barbarous race” for both their own good and national grandeur. He echoed racial views too by declaring that “God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a

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78 May, Imperial Democracy, 253.
80 Quote from Kinzer, True Flag, 105.
81 Osgood, Ideals and Self-Interest, 87. See also Litke, Twilight of the Republic, 122-132.
thousand years for nothing [and] made us the master organizers of the world to establish a system where chaos reigns.” And he continued:

[O]f all our race He has marked the American people as His chosen Nation finally to lead in the regeneration of the world. This is the divine mission of America [...] We are trustees of the world’s progress, guardians of its righteous peace. The judgment of the Master is upon us: “Ye have been faithful over a few things; I will make you rulers over many things.”

And Beveridge’s colleague, Massachusetts Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge (1850-1924), who was, moreover, a professional historian, agreed:

[To abort America’s] mighty movement westward [to] the shores of Asia, to the very edge of the cradle of the Arians [...] would be a wrong to humanity, a dereliction to duty, a base betrayal of the Filipinos who have supported us [...] and in the highest degree contrary to sound morals [since America] has a great mission in the world – a mission of good, a mission of freedom.

Because of this, as happens every so often in U.S. history when it comes to foreign policy, opposition of the annexation of the Philippines came with a high price and was met with scorn. For example, the aforementioned Senator Hoar drew upon himself not only the wrath of many colleagues but Vice President Theodore Roosevelt – a vociferous expansionist and religious believer in American Exceptionalism – for asking if it was acceptable to “impose on an unwilling people your Declaration of Independence and your Constitution and your notions of freedom and notions of what is good.” Consequently, after the decision had been made, the

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85 Quote from Kinzer, True Flag, 105.
debate receded quickly, and Americans settled down into their new role as a great power with a set of overseas holdings stretching from the Caribbean to South East Asia.

**PARADIGM SHIFT**

Obviously, what ripped through American society in 1898-99 was a wave of support for traditional imperialism. However, annexationists back then fiercely denied this. For instance, McKinley assured people that the U.S.’ actions were poles apart from colonialism because Americans were inherently different:

> The American people, entrenched in freedom at home, take their love for it with them wherever they go, and they reject as mistaken and unworthy the doctrine that we lose our own liberties by securing the enduring foundations of liberty to others. Our institutions will not deteriorate by extension, and our sense of justice will not abate under tropic suns in distant seas.

This denial of the very idea that the U.S. can engage in simple conquest and the tendency to explain it away with exceptionalist arguments has been around ever since. For example, as will be shown later, that attitude was to be front and center for many supporters of the 2003 Iraq War. Thus, the Spanish-American War not only gave birth to a never-before-seen aggressive form of active-inclusive American Exceptionalism, it arguably created a shield of compliancy that boosted further ambitions.

> Conspicuously, the invasion of Cuba in 1898 marks the beginning of U.S. political, economic, and military interventions in the Caribbean known as the “Banana Wars,” which

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would last until 1934. Additionally, with Roosevelt’s “Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine in 1904, stating that Americans thenceforth would intervene on Europe’s behalf in any conflicts with Latin America, the U.S. confirmed itself as a hegemon throughout the Western hemisphere. As well, since Americans at that time expressed an “enormous confidence in at least the potential of the American future,” and this “had a defining impact on the sense of purpose with which the Americans would project their power abroad,” the Corollary functioned as a first, but not the last, internationalization of American Exceptionalism.

In 1905, now President Roosevelt offered an example of this new attitude at the Alamo in Texas. Standing in front of this symbol of American heroism, he, who always had been obsessed with doing “the right thing,” now urged the nation to do the same thing and shoulder the burden that history had laid upon it:

We can not decide whether we will be great or not. The only thing we can decide is whether, being great, we will do well or do ill. We have got our duty in the world. We must do our duty to others, and we must do our duty to our selves. […] We have duties in connection with the great position we have taken. We can not shirk these duties. We can do them well or do them ill, but do them we must.

This theme that America does not have a choice has since been repeated ad infinitum by U.S. presidents, politicians, and pundits.

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To summarize, it seems that reactions from public figures like McKinley, Bryan, and Roosevelt around 1900 signal a paradigm shift in American self-awareness as the focus of U.S. foreign policy shifted from its earlier, realistic aim to have “ample power to cover limited, largely hemispheric goals” to express a “moral purpose embodied in the quest for universal peace, democracy, and justice.” This swing was so intense that many started to believe that “to oppose [America’s] noble intent could only suggest ignoble motive,” and that Americanization – in the cloaked meaning of civilization, democratization, and modernization – was innately good, even when forced upon others. Hence, it is now time to expand this evaluation to see if this more aggressive form of American Exceptionalism also affected domestic politics.

THE 1910S

With a few exceptions, mainly Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln, presidents in the 19th century had “stayed in place and on script,” meaning that they had accepted their office’s narrow domestic role and did not use it for demagogy. However, as pressure for reforms grew at home in tandem with the country’s rising international stature, this order became destined to fall, particularly after Theodore Roosevelt, a typical machismo Progressive nationalist of the time, ascended to the presidency. Using the presidency as a “bully pulpit” to promote domestic reforms and flex American muscles abroad, he became a “bridge president” between the old and the new, concluding Jackson’s alteration of the presidency – and in turn the nature, culture, and

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93 Quote from Pérez, Cuba in the American Imagination, 6.
94 Ibid, 7, 258.
“unwritten constitution” of the political system – from a low-profile, first-among-equals kind of executive into a tribune-like office whose holders are seen as representatives of the people.96

Roosevelt’s use of American Exceptionalism was a minor but essential part of this process. Compared to the often-dreary homilies offered by 19th-century presidents, his 1905 Inauguration Address became an intense exercise in American Exceptionalism and an aidentémoire about the tremendous responsibility resting upon America as a political model:

To us as a people it has been granted to lay the foundations of our national life in a new continent. We are the heirs of the ages, and yet we have had to pay few of the penalties which in old countries are exacted by the dead hand of a bygone civilization. […] We have become a great nation, forced by the fact of its greatness into relations with the other nations of the earth, and we must behave as beseems a people with such responsibilities. […] If we fail, the cause of free self-government throughout the world will rock to its foundations, and therefore our responsibility is heavy, to ourselves, to the world as it is to-day, and to the generations yet unborn.97

However, apart from some foreign policy speeches, Roosevelt’s more ordinary presidential addresses reveal scant use of exceptionalist themes. Tellingly, he did not even seem to have made use of it in his unparalleled “swing around the circle” to support the Hepburn Act,98 or after the significant losses for his party in the 1906 midterm election, when he embraced a more truly Progressive agenda in an attempt to halt further Democratic gains. One reason for this is perhaps that the rhetorical traditions surrounding the presidency still held back even a political juggernaut like Roosevelt. Another is that he probably figured out what many

97 Theodore Roosevelt, “Inaugural Address,” (March 4, 1905), APP, accessed June 4, 2018, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/206052. To demonstrate America’s new status, Roosevelt would later, e.g., dispatch the Great White Fleet; a Navy battle fleet that completed an around the world journey 1907-09. Its mission was officially only to make friendly visits to other countries, but it was, of course, also a demonstration of the U.S. as a world power and its military’s now global reach. See Herring, Colony to Superpower, 349.
98 The Hepburn Act regulated railroad shipping rates and was one of the most controversial issues Congress had dealt with in decades and Jeffrey K. Tulis in Rhetorical Presidency (Princeton: Princeton Paperbacks, 1988) deem it as the “birth to the modern administrative state” (101).
Progressives would struggle with throughout the 20th century – that exceptionalist rhetoric, because nationalist talk is traditionalistic by nature, often does not lend itself well to arguing for or defending domestic reforms. We will return to this issue in the coming chapters.

Though, after leaving the White House, Roosevelt could engage himself more freely in the day’s trends, and he used this freedom to present original thoughts about domestic and foreign issues. Undoubtedly, his most important contribution came in foreign policy where, after receiving the 1910 Nobel Peace Prize for his mediation in the Russo-Japanese War, he urged “those great powers honestly bent on peace [to] form a League of Peace, not only to keep the peace among themselves but to prevent, by force if necessary, its being broken by others.”

However, as an ex-President, Roosevelt also wrote some of the first paragraphs to a new chapter in U.S. political history by using exceptionalist arguments in domestic debates.

Most important, when Roosevelt defined his theme of “New Nationalism” in a speech in Osawatomie, Kansas, in 1910, he argued that because America was lagging behind Western Europe in welfare reforms, it needed to build “a real democracy” and organize “an economic system under which each man shall be guaranteed the opportunity to show the best that there is in him.” And this was not an option because the U.S. was now

[...] the central feature of the history of the world; for the world has set its face hopefully toward our democracy; and, O my fellow citizens, each one of you carries on your shoulders not only the burden of doing well for the sake of your own country, but the burden of doing well and of seeing that this nation does well for the sake of mankind.

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99 Quote from John Milton Cooper Jr., *Breaking the Heart of the World: Woodrow Wilson and the Fight for the League of Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 11. In Europe, this suggestion was perceived as untimely (or worse), but it implanted a meme that, merged with American Exceptionalism, would eventually transform not only the U.S. but world politics.


101 Ibid.
In detail, what Roosevelt asked for was “a policy of a far more active governmental interference with social and economic conditions in this country than we have yet had” in the form of a range of social and political reforms, including insurance for the elderly, unemployed, and disabled; an eight-hour workday; farm relief; a federal income tax; and female suffrage. In other words, he used the notion of the U.S. as a model for others as an argument for domestic reforms. And by later doing so also during the 1912 GOP nomination process and in his maverick presidential run for his own Progressive Party, he set a crucial precedent for Progressives.

Finally, it should be noted that President William H. Taft (1857-1930) continued Roosevelt’s policies overall, both at home and abroad, like anti-trust efforts and minimizing European influence in the Caribbean and Central America through “dollar diplomacy.” Though, lacking his predecessor’s animated persona, he pulled back from his predecessor’s populist-style presidency. Taft’s 1909 Inaugural Address, for instance, became a technocratic lecture free of exceptionalist passages except for noting that, “The governments of our dependencies in Porto Rico [sic] and the Philippines are progressing as favorably as could be desired” and that the U.S. “in each dependency is upholding the traditions of civil liberty and increasing popular control which might be expected under American auspices.” Still, the new trajectory of the presidency would gain new impetus as Taft’s successor started using exceptionalist arguments in a dual quest to reform America and to remake the world.

102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
104 According to Gould in America in the Progressive Era, Roosevelt’s “Progressive party did not go as far as the New Deal of Franklin D. Roosevelt would, but it represented a long step in that direction” (65), and his New Nationalism program do offer a Social Democratic approach to society. See Berman, Primacy of Politics, 96-124.
105 Herring, Colony to Superpower, 372ff; Gould, America in the Progressive Era, 54f.
106 Barber, The Presidential Character, 195-208.
The world is not looking for servants, there are plenty of these, but for masters,

men who form their purposes and then carry them out,

let the consequences be what they may.

WOODROW WILSON (1907)

CHAPTER 3 |

War and Peace

After acquiring outposts in the Caribbean and the Pacific Ocean through the Spanish-American War, the U.S.’ transformation into a world power continued. In June 1900, President McKinley sent U.S. troops to Beijing to rescue besieged foreigners, Americans included, and his successors continued to intervene abroad at an accelerated pace. Before entering World War I in 1917, the U.S. would send troops five times to Nicaragua; four times each to Honduras and Cuba; three times to Panama and the Dominican Republic, twice to China and Mexico; and one time to Samoa, Haiti, and Korea.¹ The reason behind these intrusions varied, but arguments used to defend them are informative since many reflect the active form of American Exceptionalism gaining ground after 1898.

For instance, Theodore Roosevelt claimed that a partial American take-over of the Dominican Republic led to “a degree of peace and prosperity [not seen in that country for] at

least a century”\(^2\) and defended continued involvement in Cuba with, “I know of no action by any other government in relation to a weaker power which showed such disinterested efficiency in rendering service.”\(^3\) And his successor, William H. Taft, made statements like the U.S. administration of “Puerto Rico and the Philippines are progressing as favorably as could be desired.”\(^4\) U.S. presidents at this point also began to claim that their political duties were global. Roosevelt defended the military action in Panama as an “obligation to mankind [that] gave to the people of Panama self-government,”\(^5\) and described his 1905 mediation to end the Russo-Japanese War as a political and humanitarian responsibility,\(^6\) while Taft, using a mixture of material and idealistic wiles, defended a coup in Nicaragua ousting president José Zelaya.\(^7\)

Unquestionably, such comments could be disregarded as cynical remarks, concealing typical economic and other great power motives for interfering in other countries’ affairs. And to some extent, of course, they were. Nevertheless, as expressed by a pattern of nation-building projects from the Caribbean to the Pacific rim, the spike of international involvements after 1898 was partly driven by a candid belief in the rightness to spread American values and institutions.\(^8\) Put differently, the Puritan urge to perfect things at home merged with the exceptionalist desire to create America-like environments abroad. Moreover, given the American “think-big”

\(^2\) Dearborn, *Exceptionalist-In-Chief*, 34.
\(^3\) Ibid, 35.
\(^4\) Taft, “Inaugural Address,” (March 4, 1909).
\(^5\) Ibid, 36.
\(^6\) Theodore Roosevelt’s prime worry about the Russo-Japanese War seem to have been the balance of power in the Far East and how victories for the different sides would affect the U.S.’s political and military position in the area. However, as noted elsewhere, important political decisions are seldom one-dimensional.
\(^7\) Kinzer, *Overthrow*, 56-70.
mentality, it is not so surprising that this ambition eventually inflated into a determination to Americanize the international system as a whole.

**THE WILSON PRESIDENCY**

As domestic reforms and foreign policy became electoral issues, the rhetorical use of American Exceptionalism became more articulate. On the campaign trail in 1912, Woodrow Wilson was heard proclaiming, “I believe that God presided in the inception of this nation […] to show the way to the nations of the world how they shall walk in the paths of liberty.”9 Because Wilson was a positivistic technocrat *and* a religious idealist, this language did reflect his self-image, which was that God had chosen him to “restore America” so it could serve the world as a model for democracy.10 Wilson also declared that “nations like the United States and Britain that were “organically” disposed toward democracy should educate other peoples for self-government”11 and that America “was born to exemplify that devotion to the elements of righteousness which are derived from the revelations of Holy Scripture.”12

Accordingly, in his 1913 Inaugural Address, Wilson picked up where Roosevelt had left off by including exceptionalist arguments for his New Freedom agenda. Referring to the Puritan theme of America being a particular nation born virtuous but always threatened by forces of decay, he declared: “The Nation now seeks to use the Democratic Party […] to interpret a change in its own plans and point of view [because] some old things […] have dropped their

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9 Quote from Dearborn, *Exceptionalist-In-Chief*, 60.
11 Herring, *Colony to Superpower*, 380.
12 Quote from White, *Barack Obama’s America*, 159.
disguises and shown themselves alien and sinister.” Wilson bowed to the Puritans too by promising “to cleanse and purify government”\textsuperscript{13} by combating governmental waste and corruption because “evil has come with the good […] Our duty is to cleanse, to reconsider, to restore, to correct the evil without impairing the good.”\textsuperscript{14} In his first July 4\textsuperscript{th} address as President, he then went further by mobilizing fallen Union soldiers in the Battle of Gettysburg for his policies. Speaking \textit{in situ} in Pennsylvania, he asked his audience to view them as actors in the never-ending battle throughout U.S. history between progress and decay:

But do we deem the Nation complete and finished? These venerable men crowding here to this famous field have set us a great example of devotion and utter sacrifice. They were willing to die [so] that the people might live. But their task is done. Their day is turned into evening. They look to us to perfect what they established. Their work is handed on to us, to be done in another way, but not in another spirit. Our day is not over; it is upon us in full tide.\textsuperscript{15}

Early in his presidency, Wilson, like Roosevelt, rationed his nationalistic jargon for similarly non-political occasions. Even in December 1913, when he became the first President since John Adams to deliver a State of the Union to Congress in person, he left it void of exceptionalist themes concerning all things domestic.\textsuperscript{16} Furthermore, when he used such rhetoric, he, again like Roosevelt, used it primarily to criticize existing political, societal, and other conditions at home and promote reforms. In other words, early American Exceptionalism found what for a time would be its place in the radical sphere of politics, and it was liberals like Wilson

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Ellis, \textit{American Political Culture}, 25.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Woodrow Wilson, “Inaugural Address,” (March 4, 1913) \textit{APP}, accessed June 4, 2018, \url{https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/207576}.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Woodrow Wilson, “Address at Gettysburg,” (July 4, 1913) \textit{APP}, accessed February 21, 2017, \url{https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/206406}.
\end{itemize}
and educator John Dewey “who energetically promoted the ‘religion of democracy’ during the early part of the twentieth century.”

Initially, Wilson also used exceptional rhetoric sparingly in foreign policy speeches. Even his declaration of American neutrality on August 20, 1914, became more technical than patriotic. One possible reason for this is that Wilson, compared to Roosevelt, was a theorist and a rhetorically skilled but “dry” speaker adept in expressing subtleties like “America being one of the greatest nations in the world” rather than the greatest. But there is also another possible reason. As a critic of the U.S. political system during his youth, Wilson had expressed support for a European parliamentary system and felt that the Constitution’s traditional view of liberty was “[r]elative to the forces that at a given time and place are increasingly felt to be oppressive.” Indeed, he was no parochial exceptionalist but a representative for the dual contemporary ideals of a moralist and a stout, top-down technocratic leader.

Nonetheless, Wilson’s belief in America as a model for freedom was unshakeable, and when faced with a crisis of the established world order (World War I), he became the first president to systematically use exceptionalist language. This changed America's political-philosophical landscape because, by doing so, Wilson finalized the ongoing transformation since Lincoln’s administration of Americans viewing their country as a “New Israel” concerned with domestic perfection and seeing it as a “Christ-Nation” with a duty to evangelize all nations. As one scholar noted:

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17 Pierard & Linder, *Civil Religion*, 286.
19 Quote from Arnn, *Founders’ Key*, 9.
It is important to distinguish between mission on the one hand as simply a nation’s perception of itself as superior to others and as having been singled out by destiny, or history, or God for special blessing, and mission on the other hand an outward-directed, salvific crusade, that leads a nation to conceive of itself as the instrument for the redemption of the world. In the first case, mission can actually look more to the past than to the future; it can be conservative, guided by a sense of duty to preserve principles and institutions, a conviction of being the guardian of a tradition [while] an “expansive” mission is [typically] predatory, universalist, and even revolutionary. It fulfills its mission by active engagement, by intervention, by outright conquest, or by the forced spread of its ideology and institutions.21

Hence, Wilson abandoned the vision of the Founding Fathers of America as a passive model for others and turned the views of John Quincy Adams on its head by setting out to alter the world.

A NEW WORLD ORDER

For Wilson, World War I magnified the importance of a new world order centered upon American values. When re-nominated for the Presidency in 1916, he echoed Theodore Roosevelt by saying, “We are to play a leading part in the world drama whether we wish it or not,” adding, “We shall lend, not borrow; act for ourselves, not imitate or follow; organize and initiate, not peep about merely to see where we may get in.”22 Before taking the U.S. into war, he also made it clear that America’s “only reason for existence as a government, was to show men the paths of liberty”23 and claimed that God personally called him to lead this crusade.

To fathom this kind of conceit, we must consider the crucial role of the imagination and understand a person like Wilson’s view of human nature. Unfortunately, our knowledge about

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23 Quote from Gamble, “Savior Nation.”
his view on this subject is imprecise, but his writings and comments indicate that he held a
“modern” view of human nature that was principally different from the Founding Fathers.24
Precisely, Wilson seems to believe in a good – or at least malleable – human nature that,
combined with his faith in American Exceptionalism, a Hegelian view of history, and inclination
for progressive-technocratic thinking, propped up the conviction that someone (he) alone could
create a new and peaceful international system. Also, Wilson’s ecclesiastical background (his
father had been a Presbyterian minister) made him prone to harken back to the time before
Lincoln when people like John L. O’Sullivan believed in an American mission that could do no
wrong. So, even though Wilson admitted that America had erred both at home and abroad, it was
only in the past since his idealism would give new directions to U.S. policies.

It should be further noted that Wilson’s foreign policy vision reverberated Immanuel
Kant’s idea about a world system built on cooperation between democracies.25 This vision had
been previously aired in America by President Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885) and resurfaced a
few years earlier with Roosevelt’s idea of a League of Peace.26 However, by going from words to
deeds on a global scale, Wilson became the formulator of modern U.S. foreign policy, whose
outlines suited well the American “think-big” tradition, the positivist-technocratic spirit of the
day, and the liberal internationalist vision that a better world could be created through reason,
logic, education, and force (if necessary). And since he deemed the U.S. the “chief interpreter to

24 For Wilson’s view on human nature, see Pestritto, Wilson, 1-132; Ronald J. Pestritto, “Woodrow Wilson:
freedom/article/killing-democracy/.
25 Immanuel Kant, Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History (New Haven: Yale
26 In his 1873 Inaugural Address, Grant said: “I believe that our Great Maker is preparing the world, in His own
good time, to become one nation, speaking one language, and when armies and navies will be no longer required.”
Ulysses S. Grant, “Inaugural Address,” (March 4, 1873) APP, accessed June 4, 2018,
https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/203658.
the world of those democratic principles,” he expected other nations to accept his offer to create such a system for them.27

Finally, like that of many ideologues and religious devotees, Wilson’s mind embodied an optimism that, over time, hardened into near fanaticism. For instance, when interfering in Mexico in 1914, he told the British that he was “to teach the South American republics to elect good men.”28 This comment also reveals Wilson’s broader goal for Latin America – whose people his Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan referred to as “our political children” – to turn the region into a realm with U.S.-like governments and economies.29 Moreover, in 1918, when faced with the prospect of a lengthy war or even a German victory (after Russia’s capitulation at Brest-Litovsk), he pledged America to a possibly endless struggle: “Force, force to the utmost, force without stint or limit, the righteous and triumphant force which shall make right the law of the world and cast every selfish dominion down in the dust.”30 Thus, Wilson became the first – but not last – president to show a perilous devotion to American Exceptionalism.

THE GREAT WAR

After the outbreak of World War I in August 1914, a tug-of-war broke out in the U.S. between isolationists and advocates of an active foreign policy. Among the latter, Theodore Roosevelt openly sympathized with the British and French and demanded, if not a straight-out war, a hard-

29 Ibid; Herring, *Colony to Superpower*, 386ff; Dearborn, *Exceptionalist-In-Chief*, 60f.
American line against the Germans. However, tradition and internal division between population segments – especially the nation’s large (and electorally influential) groups of German-Americans and Irish-Americans, who resented support for the Entente – carried the day when Wilson declared American neutrality. At that time, this decision fit his agenda as well: as a detractor of the global balance of power system, he could now act diplomatically for “a just peace” and a new world order based on America-like international institutions.31

All such attempts were futile, but, again, as every so often when ideologues fail, Wilson’s resolve grew stronger, not weaker. After years of diplomatic maneuvering, in a speech to the Senate on January 22, 1917, he moved from merely talking about peace to Roosevelt’s proposition of a “League for Peace” and offered an exercise in American Exceptionalism to its defense. Declaring that this would make the Monroe Doctrine the “doctrine of the world,” Wilson outlined a program for the world to follow:

I am proposing government by the consent of the governed; that freedom of the seas which in international conference after conference representatives of the United States have urged with the eloquence of those who are the convinced disciples of liberty; and that moderation of armaments which makes of armies and navies a power for order merely, not an instrument of aggression or of selfish violence.

He also added, “These are American principles, American policies. We could stand for no others. And they are also the principles and policies of forward-looking men and women everywhere, of every modern nation, of every enlightened community. They are the principles of mankind and must prevail.”32

Nevertheless, Wilson’s ideological convictions and affinity for all things British made his calls for “a peace without victory” sound doubtful. The autocratic nature of the Kaiser regime also clashed so strongly with his ideals that he eventually persuaded himself that a democratized Germany – which required an Allied victory – was necessary for a new world order. Because of this, the main pre-war result of Wilson’s diplomatic contriving was a deepening of the U.S.’s already budding “special relationship” with the U.K. In the end, it was also his reservations regarding Berlin, combined with German blunders and belligerence, that pushed him to go to war. For that reason, in his war message to Congress on April 2, 1917, Wilson presented the war as a crusade that America had no choice but to join:

The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them.

In another message to the American people on April 16, Wilson again portrayed the conflict as a “grim and terrible war for democracy and human rights,” not merely an already three-year-long traditional conflict between great powers. Once again, he too defined U.S. intentions as idealistic: “There is not a single selfish element, so far as I can see, in the cause we are fighting for. We are fighting for what we believe and wish to be the rights of mankind and for the future peace and security of the world.” In other words, Wilson used America’s entry into

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33 Kennedy, *Will to Believe*, 52-64, 134-223.
37 Ibid.
the war to turn his vision of a new world order into a national war goal. His administration also began to define America’s aims as different from the other Allies; entering the war as an “associate, not an ally”\textsuperscript{38} of the U.K. and France. However, since Wilson for years had described the warring sides’ objectives as “virtually the same,”\textsuperscript{39} he still needed to garner support for it from the public.

**VENDING WAR**

Boosting support for the war became the job for the Committee on Public Information (CPI), also called the Creel Committee after its chairman, journalist George Creel. It was a traditional propaganda agency created by executive order within a week after the U.S. entered the war.\textsuperscript{40} However, the CPI also had as a goal to “educate” the American people about “President Wilson’s theories” relating to a new world order and make them “known to every village crossroads in this country and in remote corners of foreign lands.”\textsuperscript{41} Thus, it meant introducing a “modern form of state power, the manipulation of public opinion,”\textsuperscript{42} which after the war would turn into a cornerstone for reforms and other political undertakings both at home and abroad.

To execute Wilson’s mission, the CPI mobilized every available medium such as newspapers, posters, radio, and movies, and its staff even invented new propaganda techniques in the process. One novelty was the use of around 75,000 “Four Minute Men” to give a total of

\textsuperscript{38} Cooper, *Breaking the Heart*, 23ff; Herring, *Colony to Superpower*, 413f.
\textsuperscript{39} Quote from Buchanan, *A Republic*, 208.
\textsuperscript{40} Cull, *The Cold War*, 6ff.
\textsuperscript{41} Alan Axelrod, *Selling the Great War: The Making of American Propaganda* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 81. The CPI also tried to shape public opinion in other Allied nations, “to ensure that the people of these
over seven million stump-speeches, mainly in movie theaters, selling war bonds, and arousing public enthusiasm for the war.43 A typical speech contained phrases like the following:

Now, then, do you want to take the slightest chance of meeting Prussianism here in America? If not, then you’ll have to help in summoning all the resources of this country for the giant struggle. For resources will win the war. Here’s the way you can help save our resources. Instead of throwing money away on unnecessary things, buy Thrift Stamps, 25 cents, and War-Savings Stamps, $4.12, worth $5 in five years, 4 per cent compound interest. They’re good as government money; like a mortgage on the U.S.A. Here’s one of the War-Savings Certificates, and here’s a Thrift Card. Ask at any post office, any bank, or store wherever you see a W.S.S. sign. It is up to us. We, the people, must win the war.44

The CPI was not the only organization that threw themselves into a frenzy to arouse Americans’ patriotism. For example, in 1917, Congress organized a patriotic contest asking people to compose an “American Creed” declaration which the House of Representatives later presented as a resolution:

I believe in the United States of America as a government of the people, by the people, for the people; whose just powers are derived from the consent of the governed, a democracy in a republic, a sovereign Nation of many sovereign States; a perfect union, one and inseparable; established upon those principles of freedom, equality, justice, and humanity for which American patriots sacrificed their lives and fortunes. I therefore believe it is my duty to my country to love it, to support its Constitution, to obey its laws, to respect its flag, and to defend it against all enemies.45

Since war propaganda always overflows with posturing rhetoric, it would, just as with the Spanish-American War, be possible to label Wilson, the CPI, and others’ portrayal of World War

43 Michael Linfield, Freedom Under Fire: U.S. Civil Liberties in Times of War (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 48f; Axelrod, Selling the Great War, passim. According to Axelrod, the CPI was so successful that later “Adolf Hitler and his henchmen – especially propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels – studied Creel and his Committee on Public Information.” (133f)
I as a war for freedom and democracy as hyperbole. However, this would (again) be erroneous since both the general sentiment – or at least the opinion amongst societal elites – was that “America’s traditional policies of isolation appeared increasingly out of touch with reality.”

Wilson himself saw the war that way (after entering it), and by 1917, millions of Americans had become persuaded that Germany was malicious and convinced that the time was ripe for an international order making similar bloodbaths in the future impossible.

This “idealistic belligerency” also showed itself among the clergy. Preachers primarily from Protestant dominations had, as seen, been formulators of The Social Gospel movement, a part of the Progressive movement, and essential supporters of the Spanish-American War. Now, being well-read in American Exceptionalism’s Christian scope and having a Manichean habit of seeing everything in black and white, many became voices supporting Wilson’s war efforts.

Writers one historian: “In the same way that American imperialism at the turn of the century was [seen as] not a betrayal of domestic reform idealism but rather the expression of the same expansive, interventionist spirit on an international scale […] Their enthusiasm for the war was an acknowledged extension of their theological progressivism.”

Furthermore, to advance his course even more, in the summer of 1917, Wilson established The Inquiry. This was a group of over one hundred academics and other experts that – akin to similar groups in the U.K. and France – would analyze the world and present strategies for the coming peace process. However, since they knew what Wilson wanted in the form of a new world order and most of the group’s members were technocrats, many came to see

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46 Kennedy, Will to Believe, 126.
47 Osgood, Ideals and Self-Interest, 264-304.
49 Kennedy, Will to Believe, 128-161,
their task as a bureaucratic work order and/or treated it more as a scientific problem than a political process. As a result, some of The Inquiry’s findings were of dubious quality but nevertheless used as both motivation and argument for Wilson’s peace plan.

Known as the “Fourteen Point” speech, Wilson presented this plan on January 8, 1918, culminating with a plea for creating a League of Nations. Because of the proposal’s international nature, its language was void of patriotic clichés, but beneath its neutral words lay the President’s exceptionalist as well as progressive and technocratic values. And as soon as the war was over, he beefed up the language.\(^{50}\) In his 1918 State of the Union, delivered a few weeks after the war’s end, Wilson said that the U.S. was “to give order and organization to this peace not only for ourselves but for the other peoples of the world as well, so far as they will suffer us to serve them.” He also said he hoped to return from the peace talks “with the happy assurance that it has been possible to translate into action the great ideals for which America has striven.”\(^{51}\)

**THE BATTLE OF THE LEAGUE**

Wilson sailed off to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference with the ambition to restore the world with a “scientific” peace treaty, but since what he argued there was mostly said behind closed doors, this process has been omitted from this thesis.\(^{52}\) However, upon returning to the U.S. in July 1919 and submitting the Versailles Treaty’s final version to the U.S. Senate for ratification, he gave a speech to that chamber that stands out as a master document of modern exceptionalism.

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After providing an account as to why the U.S. entered the war and hailing the millions of Americans who risked their lives as “champions of liberty and of right,” he said:

It is thus that a new role and a new responsibility have come to this great nation that we honor and which we would all wish to lift to yet higher levels of service and achievement. The stage is set, the destiny disclosed. It has come about by no plan of our conceiving, but by the hand of God who led us into this way. We cannot turn back. We can only go forward, with lifted eyes and freshened spirit, to follow the vision. It was of this that we dreamed at our birth. America shall in truth show the way. The light streams upon the path ahead, and nowhere else. \(^53\)

The central issue before Congress was the Draft Covenant of the League of Nations. Since the idea for such a league came from Theodore Roosevelt, and Wilson’s version was supported by other prominent Republicans such as ex-President Taft, its approval should have been a formality. \(^54\) However, in Paris, Wilson had gone further in his attempt to universalize American principles by suggesting “exceptional institutions and deliberation that were similar to the U.S. domestic model” and many feared that this would destroy “the traditional American role in world affairs that had been built over generations.” \(^55\) The debate that followed thus became so fierce that it had “all the ingredients of a fight except actual physical blows.” \(^56\)

Since this debate has already been carefully studied, including the role played by American Exceptionalism, only a few dimensions of it will be pointed out here. \(^57\) Most importantly, given the historic dignity of the issue, the ratio of exceptionalist arguments in the League debate was surprisingly low. Still, the fact that pro-league Internationalists, moderate

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\(^{54}\) John Milton Cooper Jr., Breaking the Heart, 10-54; Barber, The Presidential Character, 13-34.


\(^{56}\) Cooper, Breaking the Heart, 1.

\(^{57}\) Ibid, 1-54; Herring, Colony to Superpower, 423-435.
Reservationists, and hardline Irreconcilables all to some degree made use of such arguments does indicate that the concept had become integrated into U.S. political discourse. Besides, all sides in this battle bore such a nationalistic conceit that “[d]our reflections about ignoble aims always referred to other nations, in Europe and Asia – never to the United States of America.” This conceit arguably stemmed from the fact that the U.S. had brought the war to a quick end and that its aptness as a model rose with the fall of Europe’s monarchical order and the advent of communism in Russia. Also, that Wilson and various senators, in the end, followed in McKinley’s footsteps and appealed directly to the people for support marks another step in the development of U.S. foreign policy from an elitist to that of a more populist policy field.

To sum up, the League Debate already started in March 1919, when Wilson first introduced a draft version of the treaty, and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, a supporter of Roosevelt’s original league idea but soon to be the leader of the Reservationists, debated his fellow Republican and President of Harvard University Lawrence Lowell on the issue. The exceptionalist language in this particular debate was isolated to a few comments by Lodge about the U.S. being “a great moral asset of Christian civilization,” and that world peace, instead of Wilson’s League of Nations, was best favored by keeping “America as she is […] in her ideals and in her principles.” Nevertheless, this remark is noteworthy because it seems to be one of the first examples of a leading opponent’s exceptionalist arguments, rather than a proponent, of a new and vital policy.

58 Cooper, Breaking the Heart, 5.
59 Tulis, Rhetorical Presidency, 147-161.
60 The Lodge-Lowell Debate of the Proposed League of Nations (Boston: Old Trust Company, 1919), 52, 54. See also Cooper, Breaking the Heart, 75ff.
Otherwise, American Exceptionalism was mostly employed by supporters of the League of Nations, especially Wilson. He advocated for U.S. membership with what can only be described as a messianic devotion; e.g., stating that the Senate should ratify the treaty because it would allow America to “fulfill [its] sacred promise to mankind [and accept] the leadership of the world” without becoming

[…] an exploiting power, but a liberating power, a power to show the world that when America was born it was indeed a finger pointed toward those lands into which men could deploy some of these days and live in happy freedom, look each other in the eyes as equals, see that no man was put upon, that no people were forced to accept authority which was not of their own choice, and that out of the general generous impulse of the human genius and the human spirit we were lifted along the levels of civilization today when there should be wars no more, but men should govern themselves in peace and amity and quiet. That is the leadership we said we wanted, and now the world offers it to us. It is inconceivable that we should reject it.61

This speech, given at the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City on September 23, 1919, during a nationwide tour to cultivate public support for the League, is one of the clearest examples of pre-World War II rhetorical use of American Exceptionalism. But it failed.

**WILSON’S TESTAMENT**

Theories abound as to why the Senate ultimately rejected the League of Nations in 1920. The most common answer is that it was Wilson’s refusal to compromise with the Reservationists, whose demands he believed would reduce the League to a paper tiger and undermine America’s God-given role in the world.62 Though, whatever happened, Wilson continued to use exceptionalist arguments to promote an active international role for the U.S. For instance, in his

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1920 State of the Union, he argued that the U.S. was destined to play such a leading role and declared that Lincoln’s words “Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith let us dare to do our duty as we understand it” revealed the most vital faith of the nation:

With that faith and the birth of a nation founded upon it came to the hope into the world that a new order would prevail throughout the affairs of mankind, an order in which reason and right would take precedence over covetousness and force; and I believe that I express the wish and purpose of every thoughtful American when I say that this sentence marks for us in the plainest manner the part we should play alike in the arrangement of our domestic affairs and in our exercise of influence upon the affairs of the world. By this faith, and by this faith alone, can the world be lifted out of its present confusion and despair.63

Wilson also avowed that it was the country’s destiny to complete the course of human history:

Democracy is an assertion of the right of the individual to live and to be treated justly as against any attempt on the part of any combination of individuals to make laws which will overburden him or which will destroy his equality among his fellows in the matter of right or privilege; and I think we all realize that the day has come when Democracy is being put upon its final test. [...] This is the time of all others when Democracy should prove its purity and its spiritual power to prevail. It is surely the manifest destiny of the United States to lead in the attempt to make this spirit prevail.64

Before closing this section, two more things need to be pointed out. First, the fact that the U.S. State Department grew in rank during the war made the “Wilsonian spirit” sink so deeply into the country’s foreign policy establishment that from then on, “[w]hoever populated the Foreign Service, they accepted American exceptionalism as a given.”65 Moreover, since the Wilsonian attitude during World War II and the Cold War would color ever-widening political,
academic, and journalistic circles, it would in time become both a postulate and a bureaucratic driving force of U.S. foreign policy virtually independent of electoral results.

Second, for the following analysis, it is crucial to note that World War I affected Europeans and Americans in different ways. In 1914, the former had greeted the war as a geopolitically clarifying, socially cleansing, and culturally tonic event, but four years of terrible casualties traumatized them so profoundly that many turned into de facto pacifists “from Venus” bent on avoiding war at nearly any cost. Americans, who did not have culpability for the war and brought it to a quick end, did not go through similar distress and remained “on Mars.”66 Thus, for them, war continued to be a for sure always unwanted but still – to paraphrase Carl von Clausewitz – a viable continuation of politics by other means. Even so, World War I did change the requisites for U.S. foreign policy enough, contrary to popular belief, to impede the country from reverting to full-scale isolationism.67

RETURN TO NORMALCY

In the U.S., traditions and conflicting forces made the political fallout of World War I uncertain for decades. On one side, the country’s standing as a great power, its new role as the world’s major creditor nation, and the Wilsonian “legacy of American duty to spread freedom and of internationalism as a way to bring American ideals to the rest of the world”68 made it impossible to withdraw from world affairs entirely. On the other, lingering isolationist impulses, the decision not to join the League of Nations, and idealist-pacifist undercurrents still confined U.S.

66 The terms “Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus” comes from Robert Kagan’s Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 3.
67 Gelernter, Americanism, 170ff.
68 Dearborn, Exceptionalist In Chief, 71.
undertakings. Also, with peace, the League fight over, and the interventionist firebrands
Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson both gone, general public fatigue set in concerning foreign policy. Furthermore, this sundry picture was further blurred as World War I’s image as a war for democracy began to erode during the 1920s, thanks to a wave of revisionist interpretations questioning both its necessity and the moral rightfulness of America to join it.  

Consequently, the arcade for exceptionalist rhetoric shrunk drastically. Republicans, however, began to foster a new “America First” foreign policy they entitled “Americanism.” During the war, this term had been used to indicate patriotic unity but was now given a different meaning as the opposite to Wilson’s progressive-internationalist program and a return to policies and principles that Republicans believed had made the U.S. exceptional in the first place.  

Running for the presidency in 1920, Senator Warren G. Harding from Ohio explained:

America’s present need is not heroics, but healing; not nostrums, but normalcy; not revolution, but restoration; not agitation, but adjustment; not surgery, but serenity; not the dramatic, but the dispassionate; not experiment, but equipoise; not submergence in internationality, but sustainment in triumphant nationality.

The people agreed. The next year, President Harding could sprinkle his Inaugural Address with phrases such as “law and civilization are inseparable [and] our representative government is the highest expression and surest guaranty of both […] and that [s]urely there must have been God’s intent in the making of this new-world Republic.” And although he did assure Americans that the U.S. again would “seek no part in directing the destinies of the Old World,” he also – in a hostile nod towards Wilson’s sort of a League of Nations – declared that

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69 John W. Dean, Warren G. Harding (New York: Times Book, 2004), 95ff; Osgood, Ideals and Self-Interest, 333ff, 365ff. For example, liberal interventionists were so repelled by the “realist price” Wilson had been forced to pay to get Europeans to accept the League of Nation that many of them in practice turned isolationists.

70 Osgood, Ideals and Self-Interests, 311-321.

71 Dean, Harding, 57.
“a world supergovernment is contrary to everything we cherish and can have no sanction by our Republic.” That year he also put pen to paper and specified that “[m]eddling abroad tends to make Americans forget that they are Americans [and] leads us into the entanglements against which Washington warned us.”

Thus, with the war’s end, the GOP adopted an updated but still passive variant of American Exceptionalism, according to which the U.S. would not forsake its interests or responsibilities but function mainly as an example. Harding, as well as Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover, would therefore pursue a more “open” form of foreign policy than earlier GOP presidents, e.g., by working on expanding international trade and embracing Theodore Roosevelt’s original idea about an obligation-free “association of nations.” They also promoted the 1921-1922 Washington Disarmament Conference, limiting great power’s navies’ tonnage; the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Peace Pact, wherein the U.S. and fourteen other countries officially outlawed war; the 1932 Stimson Doctrine, declaring that the U.S. refused to recognize border changes achieved by force, and conducting what would later become known as a “Good Neighbor Policy” that left the U.S. deeply involved in Latin America.

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74 Gerring, Party Ideologies, 111ff.
75 Cooper, Breaking the Heart, 138, 382. The outline for this policy had been laid down in 1919 by Senator Philander C. Knox from Pennsylvania in a speech not only rejecting American membership in the League of Nations but the Versailles Treaty, which he sardonically described as “the Truce of Versailles,” as a whole. He also opposed all kinds of permanent post-war involvements and said that President Wilson should not even have gone to Paris. Instead, America “who sought no territory, nor indemnity, nor aggrandized power, should have rested, signed our peace when our associates made peace, and quit the war as we entered it, still free and independent, masters of our own destiny, able to work for the benefit of all mankind, un-hampered by entangling alliances or commitments.” Quote from The Treaty of Versailles, American opinion (Boston: Old Colony Trust Company, 1919), 42. See also Herring, Colony to Superpower, 450-483.
76 Ibid, 470-477; Osgood, Ideals and Self-Interest, 338-346.
Interestingly, though, the three Republican presidents of the 1920s seldom used exceptionalist language to sell these or other projects. Instead, when using such talk, they used it to define and defend the America First principle, as Coolidge did in his 1923 State of the Union:

Our country has one cardinal principle to maintain in its foreign policy. It is an American principle. It must be an American policy. We attend to our own affairs, conserve our own strength, and protect the interests of our own citizens; but we recognize thoroughly our obligation to help others, reserving to the decision of our own Judgment the time, the place, and the method.  

That year Coolidge also used exceptionalist talk to defend the decade’s historic halt on mass immigration: “To preserve American standards for all our inhabitants, whether they were the descendants of former generations residing here or the most recent arrivals, restrictive immigration laws were passed.” He also made statements like the U.S. did “not need to import any foreign economic ideas or any foreign government” since it was better to “stick to the American brand of government, the American brand of equality, and the American brand of wages. America had better stay America.”

At the same time, however, not even Coolidge – who is customarily seen as America’s last “minimalist” president – was a traditional isolationist. Amongst other things, he supported the 1924 Dawes Plan, which resolved the issue of Germany’s WWI reparations, and described the U.S.’ part in that war as a natural – if temporary – expression of the nation’s true nature:

Under the eternal urge of freedom we became an independent nation. A little less than 50 years later that freedom and independence were reasserted in the face of all the world, and guarded, supported, and secured by the Monroe Doctrine. The narrow fringe of states along the Atlantic seaboard advanced its frontiers across the hills and plains of an

79 Quote from Gerring, Party Ideologies, 113.
intervening continent until it passed down the golden slope to the Pacific. We made freedom a birthright. We extended our domain over distant islands in order to safeguard our own interests and accepted the consequent obligation to bestow justice and liberty upon less favored peoples. In the defense of our own ideals and in the general cause of liberty we entered the Great War. When victory had been fully secured, we withdrew to our own shores unrecompensed save in the consciousness of duty done.  

In this speech, Coolidge also promised that Americans would never “fail to respond, whenever necessary to mitigate human suffering and assist in the rehabilitation of distressed nations.” However, since the 1920s was to be a peaceful decade, this turned out to be a costless promise, and Americans could instead enjoy themselves as never before.

**THE ROARING TWENTIES**

In the 1920s, the era’s positivist-technocratic spirit was obscured by good economic times, and the decade is today known for its easy-minded and individualist-oriented culture. As noted by Irving Babbitt back in 1924, several circumstances made American post-World War I optimism worldlier, more individualistic, and less sensitive (e.g., by confusing material and moral progress) than the communitarian ethos and civilization-focused passion of the 1800s. Also, the fact that by now the U.S. had “crossed the historical divide between the age of scarcity when the problem of the economy was producing enough, and the age of surplus, when the problem was to producing too much,” along with the fading memories of the Frontier, made the “New Era”

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81 This was essentially a chimera. Besides the rolling back of various wartime regulations and taxes, the regulatory machinery of the administrative state continued to grow. See Joan Hoff Wilson, *Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc.), 79-167.


marked by a different mood than before the war. One indicator of this is that the term “American Dream” started to be used in its modern, primarily materialistic connotation.  

Furthermore, since the good times were attributed to a return to “the American System,” public opinion both at home and abroad about things American turned generally positive. Most importantly, the booming U.S. economy offered a counter proof to claims about that socialism was the wave of the future while enduring Wilsonian rhetoric offered minorities and colonized peoples worldwide a democratic alternative to Leninist talk of self-determination. Consequently, a “soft power” revolution began as American culture went global through movies, music, architecture, and consumer goods exports. This wave profoundly affected parts of Europe’s lower and middle classes, seeking an alternative to the continent’s old monarchical-aristocratic order, and European businesses, which were pulling parts of the continent’s industry into the modern, mass-producing era. Thus, a New York Times reporter in Europe declared towards the end of the decade that “Isolation is a myth […] The United States is ever present.” Hence, the rough contours of a future ideological U.S.-Soviet showdown began to appear.

Nonetheless, despite of all this, in the 1920s, American Exceptionalism seems only to have been used modestly in the domestic realm by conservatives, primarily as an argument to roll back Wilson’s “war socialism” and restore the country to its perceived exceptionalist pre-war state. One reason for this could be that the presence of millions of immigrants and half-assimilated first-generation Americans still rendered peacetime nationalistic jargon ineffective.


The still weak presidency, and persisting local and regional focus of U.S. politics and media, did not favor nationalistic rhetoric either. Nor did the fact that pride over making the world “safe for democracy” faded after the post-war recession ended in 1922.

This trend is observable in the decades’ Inaugural Addresses. Of Harding’s exceptionalist lines in 1921, only two related directly to domestic matters, and his immediate successors similarly offered only a handful of apparent phrases. In 1925, Coolidge asserted that Americans best fulfilled their “obligations to humanity by continuing to be openly and candidly, intensely and scrupulously, American.” And four years later, Hoover stated: “We aspire to distinction in the world, but to a distinction based upon confidence in our sense of justice as well as our accomplishments within our borders and in our lives.” Before that, though, Harding had made some use of exceptionalist language to address one of the decade’s most sensitive issues.

THE RACE QUESTION

Despite its growing ethnic diversity, America through the 1800s remained a socially and culturally relatively uniform nation, mostly because immigrants from Protestant countries could assimilate themselves effortlessly (and Irish Catholics were already partially Anglo-Saxon in language and culture). Assimilation was viewed as a “duty of those immigrants to understand and cherish our political principles, and our duty to see that they did.” In addition, Progressives,
always keen on making processes more effective and regimenting people, had in the late 1800s made the Americanization of immigrants, e.g., using the public school system, a vital issue.\(^91\) Overall, this had spared the country from starker tensions within its white population. The ethnic harms faced by most Americans were, therefore, besides some incidents like the burning of Catholic churches and traditional cultural and religious biases against Catholics and Jews, limited, at least compared to what happened to American Indians and African Americans.\(^92\)

When the U.S. experienced more massive tensions within the majority population during World War I, the shock therefore became severe. Woodrow Wilson and others then began accusing “hyphenated Americans,” including German-Americans, of not being “real” Americans and pressured them to assimilate completely. For instance, in 1915, Wilson told a group of newly sworn-in citizens:

> You cannot dedicate yourself to America unless you become in every respect and with every purpose of your will thorough Americans. You cannot become thorough Americans if you think of yourselves in groups. America does not consist of groups. A man who thinks of himself as belonging to a particular national group in America has not yet become an American, and the man who goes among you to trade upon your nationality is no worthy son to live under the Stars and Stripes.\(^93\)

And after the U.S. entered the war, Wilson spurred the panic regarding German-Americans further by making statements like the German government

> ... has many spokesmen here, in places high and low. They have learned discretion. They keep within the law. It is opinion they utter now, not sedition. They proclaim the liberal purposes of their masters: declare this a foreign war which can touch America with no danger to either her lands or her institutions; set England at the center of the stage and talk of her ambition to assert economic dominion throughout the world; appeal to our

\(^{91}\) Huntington, *Who Are We*, 132ff.

\(^{92}\) Wilson, *Only in America*, 86-102.

ancient tradition of isolation in the politics of the nations; and seek to undermine the
government with false professions of loyalty to its principles.94

During the war, even more aggressive efforts to boost loyalty and crackdowns on alleged foreign spies, “slackers,” and rabble-rousers were conducted. In a country where nearly a third of the population had been born in foreign countries or were first-generation natives, this poisoned the societal atmosphere as the message was repeatedly driven home in the streets by vigilantes, engaging in the lot from surveillance to book burnings to lynchings.95 And since such menaces lived on after the war in the form of the harassment of returning African American soldiers and the Red Scare c. 1917-21, including the Department of Justice’s so-called Palmer Raids, Harding, after assuming office, tried to address the various tensions.96

To start, Harding simply defused much of the political pressure by commuting a prison sentence for Socialist Party-leader Eugene Debs, who during the war had violated the Espionage Act by speaking out against it.97 The ethnic issue, however, was a thornier subject. Harding started with writing about immigrants not as “men and woman of foreign birth [but as] Americans,” and he blamed the problem on a pre-war lack of “patriotic devotion needed to fuse all into the pure metal of Americanism.”98 And he continued:

The way to unite and blend foreign blood in the life stream of America is to put an end to groups; an end to classes; an end to special appeal to any of them; an end to particular favor for any of them. Let’s fix our gaze afresh on the Constitution, with equal rights to

all, and put an end to special favors at home and special influence abroad, and think of the American, erect and confident in the rights of his citizenship.  

However, even though Harding declared that, “Here in America we have no racial entity,” this was far from a matter of course in a country that was still essentially Anglo-Saxon, and many had personal memories of both slavery and the Civil War. Therefore, a few months later, he used exceptionalist reasoning anew to address blacks’ and whites’ animosity. In front of a racially segregated audience in Birmingham, Alabama, he professed that it was time for political and economic equality in the U.S. before pointing at the white section and thundering: “Whether you like it or not, unless our democracy is a lie you must stand for that equality.” Furthermore, his successor continued to use exceptionalist points to address racial issues. For instance, in 1924, Coolidge told the African American students at Howard University:

The progress of the colored people on this continent is one of the marvels of modern history. We are perhaps even yet too near to this phenomenon to be able fully to appreciate its significance. That can be impressed on us only as we study and contrast the rapid advancement of the colored people in America with the slow and painful upward movement of humanity as a whole throughout the long human story.

But since the time for racial accord was not yet ripe, not even exceptionalist talk had much of an impact. On the other hand, Coolidge’s successor would, through both his policies and philosophizing about exceptionalism, affect the concept in notable ways.

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100 Ibid, 246.  
101 Quote from Dean, *Harding*, 126.  
103 Beasley, *You, the People*, 111ff.
American Individualism

During the 1920s, the right drift of the GOP began to gather momentum.\textsuperscript{104} Though, abandoning over half a century of centrist political, intellectual heritage was not easy. After significant gains for radical candidates in the 1922 midterms, Harding and later Coolidge’s Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover – a classic American self-made multi-millionaire and Progressive Republican from Iowa – therefore ventured into the porticos of political philosophy to develop a modern variant of American Exceptionalism as a guide for their party. However, as a technocrat by both nature and schooling (he was a mining engineer), Hoover’s ambition became over-ambitious, complicated, and unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{105}

In \textit{American Individualism} (1922), Hoover tried to place himself within the tradition of American Exceptionalism, and on the whole, his view of U.S. history and the telos of the country was mainstream. He explained that his years abroad had convinced him that U.S. exceptionality in both spirit and experience stemmed from the country’s particular form of individualism, which he, resounding de Tocqueville, ascribed primarily to its lack of traditional class boundaries.\textsuperscript{106} Hoover also described American democracy as a property that “arises out of individualism and prospers through it alone,” not merely a gift from God or a byproduct of socioeconomic progress. Thus, he considered the protection of American individualism from threats from both the right and the left key.

However, Hoover was no friend of the “rogue individualism” or the freewheeling economy of the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, which he described as “every man for himself and the devil

\textsuperscript{104} Gerring, \textit{Party Ideologies}, 125-135.
\textsuperscript{105} Barber, \textit{Presidential Character}, 39ff, 57-68, 101-110.
take the hindmost.” Moreover, by avoiding exceptionalist language while trying to draw a path between capitalism and socialism – the “disintegrating theories of Europe” – his message became blurred. For instance, although he desired to preserve capitalism, keep taxes low, and balance the budget, he wanted to help people fulfill their American dreams by “leveling the playing field” with political, bureaucratic means. Also, as a ballast to individual and economic laissez-faire, Hoover wanted to cultivate an attitude of public service, government/businesses cooperation, and “cooperative individualism.” Yet, these latter efforts had to remain strictly voluntary, or else society might slide into socialism, which he – based on his European experiences and the unfolding “ghastly failure of Russia” – loathed most of all.

Despite this indistinct message, in 1928, Hoover won a landslide victory, and the following March, he delivered an Inaugural Address true both to his party’s America First foreign policy and his Progressivism. In the first area, as noted above, he stated that America should strive for “a distinction based upon confidence in our sense of justice as well as our accomplishments within our own borders and in our own lives” and in the second, he promised to eradicate poverty as well as introduce universal healthcare, among other things. However, within a year, the worst economic meltdown in U.S. history took precedence over all his plans. Instead, his confidence in technocratic methods, coupled with his view that government “ought to plan more, as if in a war,” primed him to new levels of political measures to fight the slump.

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107 Hoover, American Individualism, 43.
109 Gerring, Party Ideologies, 101-111; quote from Hoover, American Individualism, 14.
110 Hoover, “Inaugural Address” (March 4, 1929).
THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Just as the good times of the 1920s had been ascribed to America’s socioeconomic order, when the Great Depression hit, it became perceived as a result of its systematic flaws. Consequently, both public and political faith in it quickly began to erode. This development was advanced by extremist left- and right-wing propaganda, the spread of new economic-technocratic theories like Keynesianism, and increasing support for – or at least enlarged attention paid to – statist alternatives such as communism, social democracy, modern liberalism, fascism, and national socialism.\(^{112}\) Hoover’s administration also undermined America’s standing because even if it was conducting a foreign policy consistent with the GOP’s post-war program, the President himself tried to counterpart his domestic “cooperative individualism” with “independent internationalism.”

Specifically, this latter policy rested upon Hoover’s confidence that what the world needed was far-reaching Americanization, but was at the same time hindered by his insight that “it was futile to try to impose American ideals upon other peoples by arms or treaties.”\(^{113}\) Given that, Hoover tried to secure world peace through voluntary cooperation between countries, intensify the pursuit to regularize U.S. relations with Latin America, and foster stability in Europe through increased levels of economic interdependence.\(^{114}\) However, since he was also a believer in autarchy and wanted the U.S. to be self-sufficient in foods and industrial products, the strain created by conflicting objectives undermined his attempts to counter the Great Depression.\(^ {115}\)

In a nutshell, Hoover first tried to resolve the Great Depression through a balanced budget and a combination of free-market and interventionist policies. When this did not work, he

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\(^{112}\) Ibid, 218-261; Berman, Primacy of Politics, passim.
\(^{113}\) Wilson, Herbert Hoover, 55.
\(^{114}\) Ibid, 168ff, 199ff.
\(^{115}\) Ibid, 178f.
turned instead to fighting the crisis by falling back on an equally uneasy mix of his party’s
traditional statist leanings and international collaboration. However, by then, he had wrecked
most of America’s political advantage and damaged its economic credibility through actions that
made global cooperation hard. Most damaging, Hoover had ignored advice from more than one
thousand experts and signed the 1930 Hawley-Smoot Act, which increased 900 import duties and
ignited an international trade war.\footnote{Shlaes, \emph{Forgotten Man}, 85-146; Douglas A. Irwin, \emph{Trade Policy Disaster: Lessons from the 1930s} (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 1-48; Herring, \emph{Colony to Superpower}, 478ff; Lawrence W. Reed, \emph{Great Myths of the Great Depression} (Midland, MI: The Mackinac Center for Public Policy, 2016), passim; Wilson, \emph{Herbert Hoover}, 143-149.}

Even so, since Hoover’s policies resembled the traditional “American System,” the
public at first supported them. That he did not use much explicit exceptionalist rhetoric to defend
them or himself may therefore seem remarkable.\footnote{Wilson, \emph{Herbert Hoover}, 147ff.} However, like Wilson, nationalistic jargon
did not come naturally to him, and both his domestic and foreign policy rhetoric reflected his
technocratic persona instead. Like his European political contemporaries, Hoover also favored a
still familiar wartime vocabulary with terms such as “defense,” “front,” and “attack,” but this did
not help him battle the Great Depression’s army of fear, despair, and need. However, Hoover did
end his presidency by expressing himself in more familiar exceptionalist terms and with an
emotional appeal to his successor to preserve America’s societal order:

\begin{quote}
We have builded [sic] a system of individualism peculiarly our own which must not be
forgotten in any governmental acts, for from it have grown greater accomplishments than
those of any other nation. On the social and economic sides, the background of our
American system and the motivation of progress is essentially that we should allow free
play of social and economic forces as far as will not limit equality of opportunity and as
will at the same time stimulate the initiative and enterprise of our people. In the maintenance
of this balance the Federal Government can permit of no privilege to any person or group.
\end{quote}
It should act as a regulatory agent and not as a participant in economic and social life. The moment the Government participates, it becomes a competitor with the people.\textsuperscript{118}

And the reason for this plea seems candid: by then, he had finally realized that many voters’ penchant had changed in ways that did not go well with the country’s ideological heritage.

**The New Deal**

To what degree Hoover deviated from traditional American political dogma can be debated. For example, in 1974, former New Deal administrator Rexford Tugwell judged that “the whole New Deal was extrapolated from programs that Hoover started.”\textsuperscript{119} Still, that it was Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882-1945) who took those final steps away from the country’s politically minimalistic and economically *laissez-faire* era is unquestionable. Some of his policies would also challenge central American Exceptionalist notions.\textsuperscript{120} First and foremost, FDR would change the traditionally negative interpretation of “freedom” to mean a system where “all have a chance to make themselves a dignified and worthy life.”\textsuperscript{121} It is consequently crucial to study in detail his persona and how he chose (not) to present, explain, and defend his policies.

An archetypical New England patrician, FDR lacked deep ideological convictions but showed an unshakable belief in his abilities and historical role. He was also a shrewd power player and born orator, without whose inspiring character modern U.S. history certainly would

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{118} Herbert Hoover, “Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union” (December 6, 1932), in *APP*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/207748, accessed May 17, 2017.
\item \textsuperscript{120} Hodgson, *Myth of American Exceptionalism*, 12.
\item \textsuperscript{121} Quote from Churchwell, *Behold America*, 203.
\end{itemize}
have unfolded very differently.\textsuperscript{122} FDR was also a firm believer in American Exceptionalism, but was more of an internationalist than his cousin Theodore had been. He, therefore, like Hoover, did not excessively exploit nationalist language.\textsuperscript{123} And when he did so, his naturally flowing language often appeared a bit stiffed, like in his second Inaugural Address:

\begin{quote}
I see a great nation, upon a great continent, blessed with a great wealth of natural resources. Its hundred and thirty million people are at peace among themselves; they are making their country a good neighbor among the nations. I see a United States which can demonstrate that, under democratic methods of government, national wealth can be translated into a spreading volume of human comforts hitherto unknown, and the lowest standard of living can be raised far above the level of mere subsistence.\textsuperscript{124}
\end{quote}

Partly because of this, as President, FDR would be more prone to praise God than traditional American virtues, and he once described himself as “a Christian and a Democrat, that is all.”\textsuperscript{125} One example of his religious language can be found in his first Inaugural Address, where after blaming the Great Depression on Wall Street, he alluded to the Bible’s tale about Jesus in the temple overthrowing the tables of the moneychangers: “The money changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization.”\textsuperscript{126} In office, he would also use such language when defending the New Deal to a group of ministers: “We call what we have been doing ‘human security’ and ‘social justice.’ In the last analysis, all of these terms can be described by one word, and that is Christianity.”\textsuperscript{127} FDR would thus not make much use of exceptionalist talk until world developments began moving towards war, and when it came to

\begin{footnotes}
\item[123] Ibid, 40-73.
\item[127] Stuckey, \textit{Defining Americans}, 235ff; quote from 236.
\end{footnotes}
domestic politics because parts of the New Deal, as noted, stood opposite to the country’s political tradition, he would seldom do it at all. Tellingly, the one time FDR did try to square his vision of the future with the American political and economic tradition before winning the White House, the fallout can be deemed feeble.

THE COMMONWEALTH CLUB SPEECH

The New Deal took form ad hoc after FDR entered the White House. Until then, he had no real plan for what to do and deliberately talked politics in familiar (but non-exceptionalist) terms: like the need to lower taxes, balance the budget, and trade his internationalism for a muted form of isolationism.\(^\text{128}\) In fact, during the 1932 campaign, FDR often attacked Hoover from the right. Amongst other things, he said the President engaged in “reckless and extravagant” spending and of thinking “that we ought to center control of everything in Washington as rapidly as possible.” Similarly, his vice-presidential candidate charged that Hoover’s policies were “leading the country down the path of socialism.”\(^\text{129}\)

However, on September 23, 1932, at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, FDR revealed the goal for his presidential bid to be a redefinition of the societal contract. In doing so, he finalized the drawn-out process to make equal in the American context the communitarian interpretation of John Locke with its individualist counterpart and by start divorcing the Declaration from the Constitution. The historical result of this latter – as it has been called by a critical specialist – “derailment of the American political tradition” would be that while the


\(^{129}\) Quotes from Otto Friedrich, “FDR’s Disputed Legacy” (February 1, 1982), Time, 23.
former document for most retained “its place of honor and authority,” the Constitution was to be demoted by more and more people because it seemed as “too inflexible to accommodate the changing needs of government and the people it will manage.”\footnote{Arnn, \textit{Founders’ Key}, 12.} To be sure, the long-term effect of this speech was to remain unclear. Actually, it was to unfold over decades.

Nevertheless, the bottom line of FDR’s argument was that the socioeconomic realities of the present “Machine Era” rendered so many established truths obsolete that a shift from equality of opportunity toward a basic level of parity in outcome was necessary. Hence, he became the first (victorious) contender for the presidency to openly promote basic material egalitarianism. Or, to put it differently, FDR was – partly following Wilson’s reasonings – seeking a mandate to shift from a \textit{nomocratic} to a \textit{teleocratic} view of the Constitution, so it could be viewed as “an instrument designed to fulfill the ends, commitments, or promises of the Declaration.”\footnote{Kendall & Carey, \textit{American Political Tradition}, xxii. The framework \textit{nomocratic/teleocratic} comes originally from Michael Oakeshott’s \textit{On Human Conduct} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).} This was also so radical that, despite shunning exceptionalist talk, he felt forced to dig deep into American folklore for supporting arguments.

FDR began his speech by echoing Fredrick Jackson Turner, saying that earlier “when a depression came, a new section of land was open in the West; and even our temporary misfortune served our \textit{manifest destiny}.” But since there was no longer a “safety valve in the form of a Western prairie to which those thrown out of work by the Eastern economic machines can go for a new start,” the U.S. had reached its “last frontier.”\footnote{Roosevelt, \textit{Great Speeches}, 21ff. Emphasis added.} Thus, radical change was necessary, and FDR called “for a re-appraisal of values” and said the “task now is \textit{not} discovery or exploitation of natural resources, or necessarily producing more goods.”\footnote{Ibid, 24. Emphasis added.} Instead,
It is the soberer, less dramatic business of administering resources and plants already in hand, of seeking to reestablish foreign markets for our surplus production, of meeting the problem of under consumption, of adjusting production to consumption, of distributing wealth and products more equitably, of adapting existing economic organizations to the service of the people. The day of enlightened administration has come.\textsuperscript{134}

To briefly presage a later subject, what FDR did here was to elevate the “technocratic turn” into a ruling philosophy and widen a door for an “administrative state” so big that in time it would turn into what some (including this author) see as a virtually independent, extraconstitutional fourth branch of government that over time has become “arbitrary, complex, and shrouded in mystery.”\textsuperscript{135} Alternatively, what one scholar has called a “Second Republic,” where classical liberalism has been replaced by “interest group liberalism,”\textsuperscript{136} was born.

Later in the speech, FDR further distanced himself from the American tradition by calling for “economic planning, not for this period alone but for our needs for a long time to come.” He supported this suggestion saying the U.S. had inherited the “principle of regulation [that] has been for centuries a component part of the common law” from England before adding an appeal:

Faith in America, faith in our tradition of personal responsibility, faith in our institutions, faith in ourselves demands we reorganize the new terms of the old social contract. We shall fulfill them, as we fulfilled the obligations of the apparent Utopia which Jefferson imagined for us in 1776 […] We must do so, lest a rising tide of misery engendered by our common failure, engulf us all. But failure is not an American habit […]\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid, 25. Emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{135} Arnn, Founders’ Key, 14ff.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid, 26f.
Hence, the Commonwealth Club Speech was an attempt by FDR to link his worldview and policies with the American tradition. Still, even he seems not to have been fully convinced because he afterward avoided the subject for years to come.

FDR’s First Term

As President, FDR sustained his largely nonexceptionalist rhetoric. For example, his first Inaugural Address contains only a few platitudes like, “This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper.” And even his strongest statement, about the U.S. being “the most superbly enduring political mechanism the modern world has produced” is not a traditional hail of the Constitution’s virtues, but a sigh of relief that the document allowed an expansion of the government to meet present challenges. Also noteworthy is that in this speech, FDR did not mention the moment’s dramatic international developments; castigated societal elites as out of touch; branded the existing economic order as “an outworn tradition;” and continued Hoover’s use of military phrases like “a trained and loyal army willing to sacrifice.”

However, there were to be exceptions to this “rule.” For example, FDR would make ample use of equality, but almost always in the term’s Progressive meaning. He would also regularly invoke the image of “the Pioneer” and other historical allegories but typically use them to support deviations from traditional policies rather than defend them. At the DNC in 1936, for instance, FDR first said that “Philadelphia [the site of the convention] is fitting ground on which to reaffirm the faith of our fathers; to pledge ourselves to restore to the people a wider freedom; to give to 1936 as the founders gave to 1776 – an American way of life.” Still, he then returned

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to the theme that what had made the U.S. exceptional was no longer enough: “The age of machinery, of railroads; of steam and electricity; the telegraph and the radio; mass production, mass distribution – all of these combined to bring forward a new civilization and with it a new problem for those who sought to remain free.”\textsuperscript{139}

Despite FDR’s rhetorical discretion, his ideological move was noted. John Dewey observed that “an inner split” had taken place in American liberalism, and that its newer form saw the “the business of the state” to be the promotion of “all modes of human association in which the moral claims of the members of a society are embodied.”\textsuperscript{140} In the 1930s, FDR’s statist-materialist attitude also revealed itself in the form of “structuralist” theories replacing moralistic-individualistic views on various topics. For example, the Puritan habit of socializing individual sins and resolving them collectively reappeared in fields such as poverty deterrence. Even the President sometimes admitted this shift by referring to the New Deal as a way to create a “democracy of opportunity,”\textsuperscript{141} which meant a shift from the immaterial-spiritual or “metaphysical” component of the American Dream towards its material or “physical” side.\textsuperscript{142} However, this paradigm shift would mostly take place “under the radar,” and many related discourses, especially in political and academic arenas, would not truly change until the 1960s.

A final point to make here is that – given the nationalistic fervor of the 1930s, the U.S. government’s use of timely political panaches like the Blue Eagle,\textsuperscript{143} and FDR’s mastery of the

\textsuperscript{140} Quote from Novak, \textit{Choosing Our King}, 156.
\textsuperscript{141} Gerring, \textit{Party Ideologies}, 212; Patterson, \textit{America’s Struggle Against Poverty}, 37-77; Morone, \textit{Hellfire nation}, 350-377.
\textsuperscript{143} The Blue Eagle was the National Recovery Administration’s symbol that, together with the text “NRA Member. We Do Our Part” was used by companies in compliance with the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Acts regulations and price controls. The NRA was declared unconstitutional in 1935. See Shlaes, \textit{The Forgotten Man}, 150ff.
radio – it may seem strange that the decade did not bring on a surge in the use of exceptionalist rhetoric. Besides FDR’s unease with the subject, the main reason for this seems to be that the decade’s recurrence of confidence in technocratic policies – primarily Keynesian economics – dampened the appeal of notions like anti-statism and individualism. However, again there were exceptions. For instance, FDR did use Thanksgiving proclamations not only to express gratitude for peace and prosperity but to “instruct citizens to recall America’s unique commitment to values of liberty, freedom, human dignity, community, and democracy.” Also, American Exceptionalism still carried enormous political potential, and FDR’s scant direct use of the theme handed it over to his adversaries – and several of them did not hesitate to use it.

A Widening Use

A bit surprisingly, among the public figures to use exceptionalist arguments to attack FDR were other Democrats. For example, the party’s 1928 presidential candidate Al Smith accused him of abandoning the “fresh air of free America [for] the foul air of communist Russia,” and Martin Dies, the chair of the House Special Committee on Un-American Activities, who asserted that FDR’s government employed “not less than two thousand out-right communists and party-liners.” Partly because of such criticism, in 1936, FDR felt forced to reject “the support of any advocate of Communism or of any other alien ‘ism’ which would by fair means or foul change our American democracy.” He also called Communism “a manifestation of the social unrest which always comes with widespread economic maladjustment” and defended the New Deal as a

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145 Dallek, Franklin D. Roosevelt, 247.
146 Quote from White, Still Seeing Red, 35.
“war against those conditions which make revolutions – against the inequalities and resentments which breed them.”

However, this defense was certainly aimed most towards the right, where critiques about FDR violating American freedoms were legion. For example, halfway through FDR’s first term, Herbert Hoover wrote a book titled *The Challenge to Liberty* (1934). Making more use of exceptionalist vernacular than earlier, he elaborated upon his old theme of individualism and the dangers of tampering with the U.S.’s unique regime. The book marked the start of a life-long campaign in which Hoover would warn Americans about the creeping “welfarism” that he saw stemming from liberal policies, an endeavor in which he would use exceptionalist language increasingly to drive home this message. In 1958, he would write that “the Founding Fathers consecrated a new republic ‘under the protection of Divine Providence’” and four years later boast that the “word America carries meanings which lie deep in the soul of our people.”

Another actor exploiting American Exceptionalism to criticize FDR was the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM). Because of the Great Depression, Americans’ opinion of capitalism and business had turned negative, and whether FDR’s “democratic collectivism” could do better was the question of the hour. At first, it looked so, but when the economy took a new nosedive in 1937, NAM launched a campaign warning about regulations, bureaucratization, and tax increases. One pamphlet stressed the Puritan work ethic and stressed the earlier typically assumed only connection between individualism and private enterprise:


149 Brands, *Traitor to His Class*, 215; 362ff.
Give freedom to the brains and energy of men. Do not paralyze them with dictatorship, do not cause them to atrophy under regimentation, do not render them impotent with initiative killed. Turn them loose – inspire them… reward them in good old American free enterprise fashion.\(^{150}\)

Because of this, by 1939, public opinion swung back towards more business-friendly stances, and the flickering support for socialism, which had shown itself earlier, died out. In 1940, one poll showed that three-quarters of Americans rejected the idea of a maximum yearly income. And from 1937 to 1948, when Gallup routinely included “socialist” as an option alongside ‘Republican’ and ‘Democrat’ when measuring Americans’ party ID, typically only about 1 percent identified as socialists.\(^{151}\) Furthermore, during the same time-period, NAM re-contextualized American Exceptionalism partly to connote a “tripod of freedom [with] equal emphases on representative government, civil liberties, and free-enterprise”\(^{152}\) that would become the backbone in the GOP’s more firmly free market, anti-statist post-war agenda.\(^{153}\) Also, as the Democrats in the 1930s on economic issues moved left with the New Deal and became the new “in-party,” the GOP began what would become a 30-year long, slow move from its traditional patriarchal role into a more rhetorically right-wing populist party.\(^{154}\)

To summarize, FDR did break significant new ground with the New Deal, making equal for the first time in America the individual and communitarian interpretations of John Locke.


\(^{152}\) Ibid, 76ff.

\(^{153}\) The GOP already in its 1936 platform changed the connotation of the term American System from its traditional meaning of government intervention and tariffs to a “system of free enterprise, private consumption, and equality of opportunity.” See Gerring, *Party Ideologies*, 136. See also White, *New Politics*, 126ff.

\(^{154}\) Ibid, 142-151.
And even if the electorate’s ideological left turn in the 1930s was – as opposed to their electoral behavior – to be a temporary swing brought on by the Great Depression, the New Deal marks a permanent leftward shift of U.S. politics. In the 1950s, the Eisenhower Administration would take several initiatives – especially within infrastructure and education – that made the larger role of the U.S. Government permanent, and Progressives in the following decade would finally make a truly paradigmatic breakthrough. However, before that, Americans were first forced to fight another old type of “hot” conflict and then a new form of “cold” war that, to some degree, pushed the country back towards the center-right.
The democratic aspiration is no mere recent phase in human history. It is human history.

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT (1941)

CHAPTER 4 |

A Dual Revolution

During his first term, FDR focused almost exclusively on domestic policy. This was a choice as well as a necessity, given the Great Depression, and laid the groundwork for a welfare state that would revolutionize America politically when bursting into full bloom in the 1960s. However, during his second term, as events began sliding toward a new world war, FDR became a critical agent also in the ongoing “Wilsonification” of U.S. foreign policy. As awareness spread that oceans could no longer shield the country from world perils and exceptionalist-minded Americans began to advocate for the active spread of democracy as a cure to communism and fascism, he changed his tune and began addressing foreign policy more frequently. This escalation unfolded over several years, and he used an increasing amount of exceptionalist arguments to explain his ideas in the process.¹

Like Wilson and Hoover, FDR never allowed himself to be carried away by nationalist sentiments. On the contrary, he continued to tint his speeches with Progressive code words like

¹ Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest*, 403ff; Herring, *Colonies to Superpower*, 484-537.
“equality” much more than terms like “freedom.” Moreover, his language revealed that he had remained more internationalist than nationalist. For instance, in 1937, when FDR asked Congress to reauthorize his right to sign international trade agreements, he argued it as a way to avoid war: “Economic strife, resulting from inordinate or discriminatory trade barriers, is one of the most fruitful sources of political animosity and military conflict.”

In October of that year, his internationalist form of American Exceptionalism – which during World War II would become so all-encompassing that it is better termed “democratic welfarism” or “human rightsism” – was for the first time made clear in his so-called Quarantine Address.

Focusing on the issue of totalitarianism, FDR symbolically chose to give this speech in the informal capital of American isolationism, Chicago. There he suggested isolating countries violating international treaties that “marked the process of civilization toward a condition of law and order.” FDR also painted hopes of escaping current world developments as naïve because “[t]here is a solidarity and interdependence about the modern world, both technically and morally, which makes it impossible for any nation completely to isolate itself from economic and political upheavals in the rest of the world.”

However, he did not suggest any specific actions, and the isolationist tradition ran so deep that his effort did nothing to sway public opinion. This was instead reflected by the *America First* movement; a group of isolationist anti-war activists like Walt Disney, Henry Ford, Charles Lindberg, Gore Vidal, and Gerald Ford.

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4 Herring, *Colony to Superpower*, 520-537.

5 Churchwell, *Behold America*, 270.
For that reason, at the outbreak of World War II on September 3, 1939, FDR could do nothing but repeat Wilson’s act from a quarter of a century earlier and declare U.S. neutrality.6 However, he defended this decision by saying that since neutrality would protect America and her societal system, it would ultimately serve the world:

[W]e have every right and every reason to maintain as a national policy the fundamental moralities, the teachings of religion and the continuation of efforts to restore peace – for some day, though the time may be distant, we can be of even greater help to a crippled humanity.7

In addition, FDR added a remark that the U.S. would “be consistent in seeking for humanity a final peace which will eliminate, as far as it is possible to do so, the continued use of force between nations.” However, he also stated that his country would stop “war from coming to the Americas. For that we have historic precedent that goes back to […] George Washington.”8

There is also one crucial difference between FDR’s 1939 war message compared to Wilson’s. While the latter in 1914 had declared that everyone “who really loves America will act and speak in the true spirit of neutrality,”9 FDR encouraged Americans to discriminate between the warring sides: “I cannot ask that every American remain neutral in thought as well. Even a neutral has a right to take account of facts. Even a neutral cannot be asked to close his mind or his conscience.”10 In other words, he did not want Americans pretending to be ideologically

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8 Ibid.
neutral. And this time, both political and public support for the Allies promptly became clear. According to one poll, 84 percent of Americans favored an Allied victory.\(^\text{11}\) Still, not even Germany’s invasion of Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, and Luxemburg, or France’s historic fall in 1940, affected Americans’ opposition to themselves entering the war. That would take a year more and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.\(^\text{12}\) Nevertheless, after securing a third term in November 1940, FDR increased his effort to compel Americans to fight fascism.

A 3-STEP PREP FOR WAR

Within a three-week Mid-winter period in 1940/41, FDR gave three thematically interrelated speeches filled with exceptionalist language that summarized his views on the world situation and comprised all but a direct call for the U.S. to enter World War II.\(^\text{13}\) First, in a New Year’s speech on December 29, he began with a warning that not “since Jamestown and Plymouth Rock has our American civilization been in such danger as now.” He then eventually concluded with stating that the future of freedom hung upon giving the U.K. the means to win the war and that this required the “American industrial genius” to turn the U.S. into “the great arsenal of democracy.”\(^\text{14}\)

A week later, in his 1941 State of the Union, which coincided with the introduction of the Lend-Lease Bill making military aid to the U.K. possible, FDR pushed his analysis further. And he did so in a way that would have worldwide consequences. In line with his Progressive views, he ascribed the world’s political problems to socioeconomic evils and defined the cure as a

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\(^{11}\) Herring, *Colony to Superpower*, 518.
\(^{12}\) Ibid, 538f.
“healthy and strong democracy.” He then went far beyond the norm of the time by linking the
success of democracy to “four essential human freedoms.”

The first is freedom of speech and expression – everywhere in the world. The second is
freedom of every person to worship God in his own way – everywhere in the world. The
third is freedom from want – which, translated into world terms, means economic
understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its
inhabitants – everywhere in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear – which,
translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point
and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of
physical aggression against any neighbor – anywhere in the world.15

We will return to these points.

Two weeks later, FDR rounded off this “war drive” in his third Inaugural Address, which
became one of his most exceptionalistic speeches ever. Perhaps for the first time since 1932, he
made an elaborate attempt to place the present in the context of U.S. history. He depicted it as a
linear progression from George Washington’s creating of a nation, through the preservation of
the Union by Abraham Lincoln, to the present day, where it was now his turn to save the country
from external maladies. He also called upon Americans “to pause for a moment and take stock –
to recall what our place in history has been, and to rediscover what we are and what we may be”
before offering a set answer. Democracy would triumph, he maintained, but only if America
acted against fascism as it had acted against the Great Depression, meaning “quickly, boldly,
decisively […] within the three-way framework of the Constitution of the United States.”16

To drive home this claim, FDR went so deep into the mythos of America that he touched
American Exceptionalism’s deterministic core. Declaring democracy “the most humane, the

15 Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Annual Message to Congress on the State of the Union,” (January 6, 1941) APP, accessed
16 Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Third Inaugural Address,” (January 23, 1941) APP, accessed July 17, 2017,
https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/210116.
most advanced, and in the end the most unconquerable of all forms of human society,” he praised it as the propelling force of history: “The democratic aspiration is no mere recent phase in human history. It is human history. It permeated the ancient life of early peoples. It blazed anew in the middle ages. It was written in Magna Carta.” And nowhere had this spirit been more vibrant than in the New World:

In the Americas its impact has been irresistible. America has been the New World in all tongues, and to all peoples, not because this continent was a new-found land, but because all those who came here believed they could create upon this continent a new life – a life that should be new in freedom. Its vitality was written into our own Mayflower Compact, into the Declaration of Independence, into the Constitution of the United States, into the Gettysburg Address.17

For the duration of his presidency, FDR would return to this theme. For instance, in 1942, he would say that the Axis Power’s blocking of Americans’ and other free people’s “forward movement across history” must fail since “those who put their faith in the people”18 will always prevail. And in his last Inaugural Address, he would boast: “The Almighty God has blessed our land in many ways. He has given our people stout hearts and strong arms with which to strike mighty blows for freedom and truth. He has given to our country a faith which has become the hope of all peoples in an anguished world.”19

As will be shown, besides boosting wartime morale, what FDR did on these and other occasions was to suggest a move from an individual to a communitarian interpretation of John Locke on an international basis, much as he had done domestically in his 1932 speech at the Commonwealth Club. However, we are not quite there yet. First, we need to explore the

17 Ibid.
implications both at home and abroad of FDR’s linking of political democracy to specific societal and material conditions.

**HISTORICAL CONSEQUENCES**

The imperative regarding FDR’s four freedoms is that while the first two equate the traditional “negative” freedoms of speech and religion, the notions about freedom from fear and freedom from want are “positive” freedoms, or *rights*, that cannot simply be granted but must somehow be politically provided. At home, they thus prompted some form of welfare state larger than what the New Deal offered. In 1943, FDR would articulate this as a duty of the U.S. government to protect its citizenry from “all major economic hazards [...] from the cradle to the grave.”

Hence, the four freedom theme constituted a final breakthrough for an outlook on societal affairs that supported the federal government’s large role. And even though World War II would hinder FDR himself from making much use of this view, it was (as we will see below) an opening not to be lost by his successor. In addition, the four freedoms theme strongly affected culture. By inspiring painters like Norman Rockwell and novelists such as John Crowley, it became so ingrained in popular culture that, e.g., the Four Freedoms Plaza was later made the headquarters for Marvel Comics superheroes the Fantastic Four.

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20 Franklin D. Roosevelt, “State of the Union Address,” (January 7, 1943) *APP*, accessed July 25, 2017, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/209971. The full segment of this speech goes: “When you talk with our young men and women, you will find that with the opportunity for employment they want assurance against the evils of all major economic hazards – assurance that will extend from the cradle to the grave. And this great Government can and must provide this assurance. I have been told that this is no time to speak of a better America after the war. I am told it is a grave error on my part. I dissent. And if the security of the individual citizen, or the family, should become a subject of national debate, the country knows where I stand.” I.e., even if the specific quote is a generic sum-up, FDR expressed both support and sympathy for the idea it represented.

Hence, from a political viewpoint, FDR’s four freedoms is a system nearly identical to Social Democracy.\(^{22}\) Still, there were two distinct features of his version of this ideology. First, if the U.S. failed to create the conditions he described as necessary for a stable democracy at home, the country could hardly ask others to follow suit. Hence, in a way, U.S. domestic and foreign policies had to be organically connected. Second, FDR envisioned that political, economic, and social reforms in other countries should strive towards Americanization and accept global U.S. leadership, which, in turn, demanded some kind of international body that could define rights, set goals, decide needs, and reallocate resources between nations. Thus, by declaring his freedoms to be universal standards, FDR transmuted the basis for U.S. foreign policy from an obligation to care for American interests to an onus for tending to the whole world’s wellbeing.

In other words, FDR suggested a more active form of American Exceptionalism than Wilson, who had aspired primarily only to transform international relations according to American standards. And some Americans liked this, even before the U.S. entered the war. For example, in February 1941, news magnate Henry R. Luce (1898-1967) wrote a piece in *Life Magazine* titled “The American Century” that stated that it was “our time to be the powerhouse from which the ideals spread throughout the world” and lift “mankind from the level of the beasts to what the Psalmist called a little lower than the angels.”\(^{23}\) The U.S. could achieve this because “unlike the prestige of Rome or Genghis Khan or 19th Century England, American prestige throughout the world is faith in the good intentions as well as in the ultimate intelligence and ultimate strength of the whole American people.” Luce also exposed a Protean understanding of FDR’s ideas by stating that they meant “sharing with all peoples of our Bill of Rights, our


\(^{23}\) Henry R. Luce, “The American Century,” *Life Magazine* (February 17, 1941), 64. The text can also be found at: http://www-personal.umich.edu/~mlassite/discussions261/luce.pdf (accessed June 13, 2018).
Declaration of Independence, our Constitution, our magnificent industrial products, our technical skills. It must be an internationalism of the people, by the people and for the people.”\textsuperscript{24}

Because of this, FDR’s vision for democracy (defined as a belief in people's right everywhere to participate equally in politics) would become an elaborate and costly goal for U.S. foreign policy after World War II. Specifically, on account of his materialistic view of what was needed to sustain a free society, this created need for more intricate forms of nation-building than ever before. Indeed, to the already complex task of creating appropriate political and legal institutions for democracy in often-underdeveloped societies, the transplantation of large amounts of economic, social, and cultural peculiarities was added.\textsuperscript{25} A full year before his Four Freedoms speech, FDR had also made clear what he thought other people needed to do:

> Of course, the peoples of other nations have the right to choose their own form of Government. But we in this nation still believe that such choice should be predicated on certain freedoms which we think are essential everywhere. We know that we ourselves shall never be wholly safe at home unless other governments recognize such freedoms. Twenty-one American Republics [...] are displaying a unanimity of ideals and practical relationships which gives hope that what is being done here can be done on other continents.\textsuperscript{26}

Furthermore, FDR included his freedoms in the Atlantic Charter wherein he and Winston Churchill in August 1941 laid down their vision of a post-war world order centered on the doctrine of human rights. This was a “bold attempt [...] to internationalize the New Deal”\textsuperscript{27} and had global implications stretching far beyond Grover Cleveland’s and Theodore Roosevelt’s extensions of the Monroe Doctrine. In short, the four freedoms theme would not only inspire

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Borgwardt, New Deal for the World, 46-86.
\textsuperscript{26} Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Annual Message to the Congress,” January 3, 1940, APP, accessed July 25, 2017, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/210437. Accordingly, after the war, the demands placed upon defeated countries like (West) Germany and Japan, and other nations aspiring to align themselves politically with Western powers often became tough (at least economically; politically, the U.S. often continued to accept violations of human rights, etc.).
\textsuperscript{27} Borgwardt, New Deal for the World, 3.
post-war liberation movements in places such as the Middle East but frame the “civilian”
declaration of the United Nations a few months later, making positive rights a part of the future
U.N.’s agenda. So, FDR’s freedoms (and the exceptionalist notions they reflected) have since
influenced the goals and methods of countless international declarations, development plans, and
other policies. Yet, none of this might have happened if the U.S. had not entered World War II.

WORLD WAR II

On December 7, 1941, FDR’s work came to fruition. Since he had already before Pearl Harbor
rejuvenated the meme about an American mission by inflating it, he could now use it to drum up
support for both war efforts and post-war plans, arguing it was time for Americans “to cleanse
the world of ancient evils, ancient ills.” And as with World War I, nationalist and exceptionalist
jargon soon flourished everywhere. For example, some of the over 2,700 so-called Liberty ships
built for the military were named after the Declaration of Independence signers. However,
FDR’s use of exceptionalist language played only supportive roles in his speeches and seemed to
have diminished toward the war’s end, except for stressing the link between how the U.S. looked
and worked at home and her overseas stature. On this issue, FDR often went further than
landmark Progressives like Wilson had done and therefore blurred even further the already fuzzy

28 Douglas Little, American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945 (Chapel Hill: The
29 The label was originally the name of the countries allying to defeat the Axis Powers.
30 Osgood, Ideals and Self-Interest, 424ff; Borgwardt, New Deal for the World, 1-11, 14-45, 303f. In fact, nation
building projects based on FDR’s visions were tried already during the war in places like Iran. See Herring, Colony
to Superpower, 564ff.
31 Franklin D. Roosevelt, “State of the Union Address,” January 6, 1942, APP, accessed August 7, 2017,
https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/210559.
32 “American Merchant Marine at War,” American Merchant Marine at War, accessed August 14, 2017,
line (which existed since Puritan times) between America’s inner workings and its behavior with the world. For instance, he once equated the U.S. government’s responsibility of caring for homecoming American soldiers with the duty “to restore [Axis occupied] peoples to the dignity of human beings, masters of their own fate, entitled to freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want and freedom from fear.”

To summarize, FDR spun his war rhetoric around the notion that the U.S. had a historical role to play as an enforcer of a better future for mankind. And although he did so at least as much with religious language as exceptionalist slogans, he significantly enlarged the scope of his internationalized form of exceptionalism through the four freedoms theme. In concert with the effects of the Great Depression, his wartime rhetoric, therefore, lent a critical hand to break the age-old isolationist-protectionist paradigm of U.S. politics by changing millions of Americans’ views of world affairs for – as it turned out – more than half a century. Because of that, FDR’s war efforts could be deemed as one of the most successful one-man political campaigns ever. Moreover, by selecting a new Vice-Presidential candidate ahead of the 1944 election that shared both his foreign and domestic visions, his effort would mark U.S. politics for another decade.

34 Brands, Traitor to His Class, 586f.
Harry S. Truman (1884-1972) was catapulted into the Oval Office by FDR’s sudden death on April 12, 1945. Therefore, he was forced to spend his first year fathoming a multitude of issues FDR had not informed him about (including the Manhattan project) and getting his own team in place. This resulted in a rocky start for Truman’s presidency. Additionally, the war’s end created an intricate mix of budding optimism, fears about a post-war recession, risks of an isolationist backlash, and uncertainty about the future among leaders and citizens alike. This created an unruly political atmosphere that prevailed for years. However, since historical developments tend to create their own momentum, or “stickiness,” and Truman was neither interested in nor capable of changing course, the transformation of both domestic and foreign politics continued.

The second half of the 1940s can be seen as three partially overlapping phases marked by Truman’s attempt to pursue shifting objectives. First, the demobilization phase of 1945-1946, as defined by his struggle to shift the U.S. economy and society back to peacetime conditions through efforts such as a quick discharge of millions of soldiers with the so-called GI Bill (which cemented generations of American’s new, more positive view of government involvement in social affairs). Second, an escalation period in 1946-47 occurred, marked by deteriorating hopes to shape a new world order with the Soviets. Third, in 1947-48, there was the beginning of the Cold War, in which containment of Communism became the goal for U.S. foreign policy.

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38 Herman, Joseph McCarthy, 77.
Moreover, through this process, increasingly, Truman used exceptionalist rhetoric to promote his policies and portray the Soviets as America’s new, sworn enemy.

Before going into the details, however, a few details should be noted about Truman’s background. His upbringing in a typical American backwater in Missouri defined his personality – hardworking, honest, blunt – and it made him sincerely religious, a stalwart believer in American Exceptionalism, and more prone to use nationalist rhetoric than his cosmopolitan predecessor.39 For example, he often called America “God’s country,”40 and what his “meatloaf prose (nothing fancy, nothing phony)”41 lacked in grace compared to FDR, he offset with precision and candor. In his first message to Congress four days after taking office, he stated:

Our forefathers came to our rugged shores in search of religious tolerance, political freedom and economic opportunity. For those fundamental rights, they risked their lives. We well know today that such rights can be preserved only by constant vigilance, the eternal price of liberty! 42

In hindsight, this speech reflects a profound shift in domestic political ambiance during Truman’s term of office. Because of Americans’ traditional political, economic, and other views, Progressives had earlier felt obliged to make only small and gradual changes. Even FDR had at the height of his presidency had consistently claimed that his reforms were not meant to change but protect the essential nature of the U.S. However, Truman began to exploit people’s increased support for the collectivist policies stemming from the New Deal, the four freedoms theme, and World War II with the war’s end. Indeed, we are here dealing with relatively small rhetorical, but

politically and psychologically imperative, changes that would not bear full fruit until the 1960s.
Yet in Truman’s first speech to Congress, he stopped asserting that his policies would be in line with the American tradition. Instead, he promised to stay on FDR’s course:

Here in America, we have labored long and hard to achieve a social order worthy of our great heritage. In our time, tremendous progress has been made toward a really democratic way of life. Let me assure the forward-looking people of America that there will be no relaxation in our efforts to improve the lot of the common people.43

In other words, Truman, bolstered by optimism about the coming peace and the outpouring of support created by FDR’s death, felt confident to finally shift the burden of proof toward conservatives, demanding of them to explain why reforms should not be introduced or expanded. This episode for that reason indicates an important marker not only in the Democratic Party’s history, but it represents a breaking point in U.S. history because whoever owns this privilege in the world of modern politics and mass media has a considerable advantage while opponents arguing against reforms often have a steep – if not impossible – hill to climb.

Truman continued to lower the threshold for reform. For example, after the Japanese surrender in August 1945 – which he said proved that the “spirit of liberty, the freedom of the individual, and the personal dignity of man, are the strongest and toughest and most enduring forces in all the world”44 – he called a special session of Congress to present a reform program. This essentially was a Progressive bucket list of demands, e.g., improved unemployment insurance, increased minimum wage, and continued price controls. And again, he did not defend

43 Ibid.
or explain any of them in ways Progressives would have done earlier. Regarding housing reforms, for instance, he excited the American proclivity for grandness and exploration by stating that, “We must go on. We must widen our horizon even further.”

If fast-forwarding to the 1948 election campaign, this new paradigm was so firmly established that U.S. politics seemed to take on a European, class-based feature; e.g., as Truman at times sounded almost as left-wing as one of his challengers, former Vice President Henry Wallace (1888-1965). And after being elected in his own right, even though his Fair Deal never became the new start for Progressivism that Truman had hoped, he pushed rhetorically further left by declaring the old U.S. economic regime obsolete: “We have abandoned the ‘trickledown’ concept of national prosperity. Instead, we believe that our economic system should rest on a democratic foundation and that wealth should be created for the benefit of all.” He also eclipsed earlier Progressives by singling out equality, rather than freedom, as the prime mover of American history: “The driving force behind our progress is our faith in our democratic institutions. That faith is embodied in the promise of equal rights and equal opportunities which the founders of our Republic proclaimed to their countrymen and to the world.”

Furthermore, like Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson, and FDR, Truman never missed an opportunity to stress the connection between domestic and foreign policies to promote reforms at home. For example, in 1945, he described full employment in America as a necessity because

49 Ibid.
“unless there is security here at home there cannot be lasting peace in the world.”\textsuperscript{50} Over the years, Truman also tried to broaden this link toward civil rights reforms; amongst other things by describing them as indispensable to protect America’s stature abroad. However, the time was still not ripe. Similar to Harding’s and Coolidge’s actions in the 1920s, his move on civil rights, therefore, had little success. Subsequently, even if Truman’s Civil Rights Commission lay the groundwork for what was to come, and he did integrate the military, civil rights would not become a hot issue until the next decade.

This last circumstance indicates that even if the ideological topography had begun to change, the essence of U.S. politics and American Exceptionalism had not. The political milieu was still in flux and stalwarts were – even if their isolationism and old form of conservatism were ebbing – asking for rollbacks of whole New Deal programs well-into the 1950s. Their leader Robert A. Taft (1889-1953) also stated things like, “It is said that Harry Truman is no socialist [but what difference does it make] if all his policies lead to socialism?”\textsuperscript{51} Moreover, after the GOP victory in the 1946 midterms – ahead of which the party’s House Minority Leader Joseph Martin had promised to “ferret out all those who sought to destroy the American way of life”\textsuperscript{52} and as new Speaker later declared that “there is no room in the government of the United States for any who prefer the Communist system”\textsuperscript{53} – Truman himself shifted focus toward more traditional themes such as budget balancing.\textsuperscript{54} However, the attention soon shifted toward foreign policy, which started to take on historically unique features after the war.

\textsuperscript{50} Truman, “Special Message to the Congress,” (September 6, 1945).
\textsuperscript{52} Quote from Herman, \textit{Joseph McCarthy}, 39.
\textsuperscript{53} Quote from White, \textit{Still Seeing Red}, 48.
THE COLD WAR

Americanism and Communism are both universal ideologies sharing two common denominators in their beliefs: that they represent the future of humanity and offer the best way to create material well-being. Before the end of World War II, the U.S. State Department had, therefore, presaged a conflict between socialism and capitalism, and as it began to manifest in 1946, Truman had to revise several post-war visions.55 Upset by Communist atrocities in Eastern Europe, he began to test the waters for depicting the Cold War as a struggle between right and wrong.56 However, Americans, or at least not their elites, were not yet ready to accept a new, open-ended struggle against totalitarianism, especially not against such a recent ally. Because while 56 percent of Americans saw that the U.S.’s relations with Russia would be “troublesome [...] in the next few years,” the political and media reactions to Winston Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” speech on March 5 that year in Fulton, Missouri, was harsh.57 Even Truman felt forced to make a belittling U-turn from private support to public condemnation and invite Stalin to Missouri for a reply (which the Soviet leader turned down); a snub unparalleled in the history of “the special relationship” between the two countries.58

However, in early 1947, the turnaround came swiftly. After delivering only a single complaint that some peace accords were delayed “due partly to the difficulty of reaching agreement with the Soviet Union” in his State of the Union on January 6, Truman’s administration launched a campaign “to pose the [Soviet] threat in stark ideological terms.”59

56 Leffler, Soul of Mankind, 41ff.
57 White, Still Seeing Red, 25.
58 McCullough, Truman, 486ff; White, Still Seeing Red, 25f; Herring, Colony to Superpower, 615ff.
59 Leffler, Soul of Mankind, 70f.
Three months later, on March 6, he also clarified the difference between the U.S. and the Soviet Union in a speech about the dangers of isolationism and protectionism:

There is one thing that Americans value even more than peace. It is freedom. Freedom of worship – freedom of speech – freedom of enterprise. It must be true that the first two of these freedoms are related to the third. For, throughout history, freedom of worship and freedom of speech have been most frequently enjoyed in those societies that have accorded a considerable measure of freedom to individual enterprise. Freedom has flourished where power has been dispersed. It has languished where power has been too highly centralized. So our devotion to freedom of enterprise, in the United States, has deeper roots than a desire to protect the profits of ownership. It is part and parcel of what we call American.60

Moreover, a week later, Truman presented the doctrine of “containment” that would bear his name in a speech about the U.S. replacing the U.K. as an ally of anti-communist regimes in Greece and Turkey. His speech was inundated with exceptionalist language like the need “to maintain their free institutions and their national integrity against aggressive movements that seek to impose upon them totalitarian regimes.”61 Truman also explicitly depicted the world as divided between good and evil by noting that “nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life,” adding:

One way of life is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression. The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms.62

62 Ibid.
And it worked. The support for a hard line on Communism soared, mainly, some scholars argue, because of Truman’s use of an “ideological language [that] deeply resonated” with a broad spectrum of the American public. In the process, he also established a Manichaean rhetoric regarding communism and the Soviet Union that most U.S. politicians and others would follow for 40 years. One historian notes that already in 1947, “Republicans and Democrats shared a common vocabulary [and] believed they were in a battle to preserve the American way of life” and “Anticommunism quickly pervaded all areas of community life, from churches to schools.”

Fitting policies followed. A few weeks after his containment speech, Truman countered flaring fears apropos of Communist influence in the U.S. government by ordering all federal employees to swear “complete and unswerving loyalty to the United States.” As this attitude flowed down the political pyramid, it led to further events such as hearings about people’s political affiliations by the House Un-American Activities Committee; Attorney General Tom C. Clark saying, “Those who do not believe in the ideology of the United States shall not be allowed to stay in the United States;” and Texas Governor Allen Shivers (D) proposing making membership in the U.S. Communist Party a capital offense. In short, Truman helped incite a “Second Red Scare” that, amongst other things, in the first half of the 1950s would pave the way for Joseph McCarthy (see below). In addition, as seen, the anti-Communist credentials this gave Truman became handy in 1948, when he had to move left rhetorically to fend off not only

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64 Mead, “Tea Party and American Foreign Policy,” 35ff.
65 Leffler, *Soul of Mankind*, 72.
69 White, *Still Seeing Red*, 76.
70 Herman, *Joseph McCarthy*, 93-112.
Republican Thomas Dewey but a third-party challenge from FDR’s former Vice President and – according to many both Republicans and Democrats – Soviet advocator Henry Wallace.⁷¹

Furthermore, Truman’s reactions to the Soviet threat led to the founding of a national security state that some argue turned the U.S. into a militarized “garrison state.”⁷² And even if that claim certainly is exaggerated, the non-civilian part of the U.S. government was indeed restructured and started to grow, for a while almost exponentially. In only a few years, the armed forces were unified, the defense budget increased, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) created, and more.⁷³ Foreign policy as well experienced a speedy development toward a reliance on officially non-partisan experts like George Kennan (1904-2005), whose “Long Telegram” about the Soviet Union’s explosive merge of nationalism and Marxism in a way helped trigger this whole development, and the remains of the U.S. wartime propaganda machinery began to target the Soviets.⁷⁴

The Cold War also led to the Marshall Plan, which became a New/Fair Deal inspired effort to boost the Western European economy and neutralize what was seen as socio-economic breeding grounds for communism in countries like France and Italy. Truman made the case:

Our deepest concern with European recovery, however, is that it is essential to the maintenance of the civilization in which the American way of life is rooted. It is the only assurance of the continued independence and integrity of a group of nations who constitute a bulwark for the principles of freedom, justice and the dignity of the individual.⁷⁵

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⁷¹ White, Still Seeing Red, 54-64.
⁷⁴ Cull, Cold War, 22-80; White, Still Seeing Red, 26f.
The Marshall Plan became the U.S.’ first large-scale nation-building project (outside the developing world) by reforming what would become West Germany into a democratic, capitalistic U.S.-like federation in the heart of Europe – and in the face of the Soviet Union. This historic makeover was partly paralleled in neighboring Austria and on the other side of the globe in Japan and South Korea.\textsuperscript{76} And since these countries all became political and economic successes, they encouraged American Exceptionalist thinking by creating a belief that similar projects could be undertaken everywhere. Symptomatically, in 1949, Truman gave a speech in which he stated that the U.S. was effectually invincible:

I have confidence in the unlimited capacity and in the unlimited opportunities of the American economy and the American people. I have confidence in our ability to master the international problems which confront us and to achieve world peace. I have this confidence because of our achievements in the past and because of the present strength of our institutions. Above all, I am confident because I believe that Almighty God has set before this Nation the greatest task in the history of mankind, and that He will give us the wisdom and the strength to carry it out.\textsuperscript{77}

To summarize, after 1945, the foreign policy-military side of the U.S. Government was pushed through the same bureaucratization and professionalization process that its civilian counterpart had been more gently undergoing before 1900.\textsuperscript{78} Thus, the second half of Robert Nisbet’s welfare-warfare state took shape, and Truman personally drove this development by his exceptionalist oratory, combined with, according to some, stretching George Kennan’s and others’ evaluations of the Soviet Union beyond their own words.\textsuperscript{79} Moreover, Americans were emboldened to accept their President’s view because nearly all features of the Soviet Union

\textsuperscript{76} Herring, \textit{Colony to Superpower}, 611ff, 618f; Christopher J. Coyne, \textit{After War: The Political Economy of Exporting Democracy} (Stanford, CA: Stanford Economics and Finance, 2008), 118-135.
\textsuperscript{78} Herring, \textit{Colony to Superpower}, 611ff.
\textsuperscript{79} Beinart, \textit{Icarus Syndrome}, 110-119.
clashed with their own exceptionalist-based opinions about right and wrong, good and bad. And if by accident someone still missed it, their attention was immediately drawn to it.

**IN-HOUSE PROPAGANDA**

In 1947, Truman held an Independence Day address broadcasted nationwide from Thomas Jefferson’s *Monticello* that hailed the Declaration as an “expression of democratic philosophy” and equated it to the United Nations Charter. He stated that it was “not too much to expect that all nations should create [...] the requisites for the growth of worldwide harmony” and defined these basics to be that governments must “derive their just powers from the consent of the governed;” show “common respect for basic human rights;” accept “free and full exchange of knowledge, ideas, and information among the peoples of the earth;” and that all “nations shall devise their economic and financial policies to support a world economy.”

This was, of course, American Exceptionalism in the raw, and as the effects of Truman’s drumbeat continued to unfold, the mood of the country was transformed. That fall, “U.S. officials no longer felt they had the time to try to work out cooperative agreements” with the Soviets, and American society at large began to engage in exercises promoting its exceptional character. One example of this nationalist fervor is the 1949 Freedom Train. It was a red, white, and blue train making stops in more than 300 cities in all 48 states that displayed Americana and historical artifacts. It was accompanied by patriotic festivities, radio shows, comic books, and

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films. Hollywood, keen to refute its reputation as a Communist encampment, also partook in this development by “crank[ing] out hundreds of anti-Communist films.”

Seen in a broader context, after Nazism refined domestic propaganda into an art form, “inward” promotion by governments aimed toward their populations became natural during the Cold War, especially in the two superpowers. In fact, the whole period of 1947-1989 can be seen as one long publicity contest wherein the U.S. and Soviet rulers tried to convince international and national audiences of their superior qualities. However, as a democratic nation with vivid public debates often raging more about its vices than its virtues, the U.S. Government could never keep up with Communist hoopla in either volume or pomposity. However, America, as a country and a culture, like never before, “sold itself” to both friends and foes through an array of new technologies, art, movies, clothing, food, drinks, and so on. As a matter of fact, spontaneous Americanization of other countries became so intense that some (read: the French) soon began to moan about “Coca-colonization.” And in the 1980s, a Czechoslovakian would, in a way, more positively concur: “Coke equals America. America equals freedom.”

Since this nurtured national pride and a feeling of ideological righteousness, presidents from Truman onwards could rely on strong public support for a hard line against Communism. Indeed, the perceived antithetical nature of Americanism and Communism made American

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Exceptionalism nearly identical with anti-Communism as being a Communist was depicted as the very opposite of being an American. For instance, while Life Magazine stated, “While Americans have no doubt that to be a Communist is un-American, millions of Frenchmen do not consider it un-French. How can it be so?”\(^8\) Gallup asked Americans if “a man can believe in communism and still be a loyal American” (and nearly 90 percent answered no).\(^7\) Truman piloted this development with speeches, in which he educated the public about the Soviet foe, including its philosophical qualities. In one such speech, he depicted world peace as threatened by a system that was a complete opposite of everything America signified:

In the world today we are confronted with the danger that the rising demand of people everywhere for freedom and a better life may be corrupted and betrayed by the false promises of communism. In its ruthless struggle for power, communism seizes upon our imperfections, and takes advantage of the delays and setbacks which the democratic nations experience in their effort to secure a better life for their citizens. This challenge to us is more than a military challenge. It is a challenge to the honesty of our profession of the democratic faith; it is a challenge to the efficiency and stability of our economic system; it is a challenge to the willingness to work with other peoples for world peace and for world prosperity.\(^8\)

In this way nurturing the anti-communist meme, Truman established a view of America as not only an alternative model but a counterweight to Communism that would guide Americans’ opinions and steer U.S. foreign policy for over four decades.\(^9\) This was such a definitive break with the Founding Period that it justifies a small digression.

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\(^8\) Quote from Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, 379.
**HISTORIC THRESHOLD**

As seen, after its birth, America for a long time acted as European powers did in its drive to conquer and “civilize” new territories. But just after the U.S. began to stretch beyond the North American mainland in 1898, this development petered out as the last territory formally added to the U.S. became the Danish Virgin Islands in 1917. And after World War II, the country’s conduct changed even more dramatically when the Philippines was granted independence in 1946. Thereafter, the U.S. could position itself as a supporter of decolonization, like during the 1956 Suez Crisis when the U.S. refused to intervene (as a sign of rejection of continuous Western interference in the Third World). However, the endeavor to profile America as a champion of decolonization and the Third World generally failed because, among other things, the Soviets, on par with left-leaning academics like Noam Chomsky, depicted the country’s foreign policy as “neo-colonialist.”

Another way of describing this transformative development is that after America’s comet-like “Roman” expansion ended with the closing of the Frontier in the 1890s, the missionary drive of American Exceptionalism found new outlets. The Spanish-American War, Wilson’s attempt to reshape the world order, and Hoover’s, FDR’s, and others’ efforts to prompt the Americanization of other countries are examples of this. By assuming the role as warden of Western Civilization, the U.S. after World War II also tellingly abandoned its Romanesque ambitions for a more Athenian-like behavior that made it possible to pursue truly global

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91 Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 36. Since the Cold War realities forced the U.S. to behave in this way, Americans were often seen more as a colonial replacement power than a supporter of Third World countries. (In addition, the U.S. did annex the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands after seizing them from Japan in 1944. However, they were soon turned into a U.N. trust and then only administered by the U.S. from 1947 to 1986.)
objectives. In short, American politicians, like Pericles, began to structure their influence via political treaties, military alliances, economic incentives, and cultural influence rather than through immediate occupations and the creation of colonies.92

The historical price of these activities was that after World War II, the U.S. had “to bind itself to multilateral institutions that would manifestly limit its historic obsession with unfettered freedom of action.”93 Thus, Americans had to abandon their traditional isolationist-protectionist foreign policy. This process began with the Bretton Woods Agreement in 1944/4594 and was completed in the coming decade with the establishment of military alliances such as NATO in Europe and ANZUS in the Pacific Ocean. Also, in 1949 Truman formulated a Four Point Program, which was “a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available” to other people.95 However, it just turned into another U.S. aid program since another body had by then become the token for the new world order.

THE UNITED NATIONS

In 1945, Truman appointed FDR’s widow, Eleanor, a delegate to the U.N. General Assembly, and politicians of all brands were paying homage to this organization. This fixation depended on several factors. As FDR’s brainchild, many Democrats and ordinary Americans celebrated the U.N. as the beginning of a new era in world affairs. For others, the organization’s multilateral

93 Borgwardt, New Deal for the World, 10.
94 The Bretton Woods agreement included the formation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (The World Bank), which are still today important parts of the established international political and economic world order.
nature seemed like a logical continuation of the Allies’ cooperation during the World Wars. For
Progressives and the growing group of internationally-minded “modern” Republicans, the
ideological notions of the U.N. Charter were also attractive. However, one might dare to say that
the most important fact of all was that America – despite its enormous resources – could not
oppose the Soviet Union by itself.96

Still, despite the talk about the U.N. as a manifestation of a new multilateral world order,
a majority of Americans and their leaders would never accept anything other than a chief
international role for the U.S.97 In 1945, Truman said that “America has become one of the most
powerful forces for good on earth [and we] must keep it so.”98 And five years later, he openly
declared the U.S. to be the first among (un)equals:

We have a more productive economic system and a greater industrial potential than any
other nation on the globe. Our standard of living is an inspiration for all other peoples.
[...] Our tremendous strength has brought with it tremendous responsibilities. We have
moved from the outer edge to the center of world affairs. Other nations look to us for a
wise exercise of our economic and military strength, and for vigorous support of the
ideals of representative government and a free society. We will not fail them.99

Because of this, organizations such as NATO, IMF, the World Bank, and OECD, in
which membership was exclusive and America’s role preeminent, became more critical for U.S.
foreign policy than the U.N. This feeble relationship between rhetoric and reality became clear
on June 1, 1950, when Truman asked Congress for funding for global U.S. military actions
because “there is clear evidence that certain adherents to the [U.N.] Charter will not hesitate to

96 Herring, Colony to Superpower, 595-650; Gaddis, “Insecurities of victory” in Lacey, (ed.), The Truman
Presidency, 235-365.
97 Gaddis, “Insecurities of victory” and Robert A. Pollard, “The national security state reconsidered: Truman and
98 Harry S. Truman, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress,” (April 16, 1945) in APP, accessed August 1,
use force and to threaten the integrity of other countries.” He said, “Communist imperialism [must be met in] many forms – moral, political, economic, and military – because the communist challenge takes all those forms,” and he invited other countries to join a “concerted program” against Communism.100

Moreover, even though the U.N. rested upon American ideals in the form of the human rights doctrine, Truman positioned the U.S. not merely as a political and military substitute but an ideological auxiliary to the world organization. This was possible because of America’s domination in nearly all societal fields, from the economy, via science, to popular culture. However, it was ultimately conceivable only because the country’s self-image was deeply rooted in American Exceptionalism. Besides, over time, as the U.N. expanded its membership to include many new underdeveloped states, organizational shortcomings and corruption would make the body intolerable for many Americans.101 Already in his 1956 memoirs, Truman would conclude that the Soviets had turned the U.N. “into a propaganda sounding board.”102

THE KOREAN WAR

America’s resolve to be a substitute for the U.N. was tested only a few weeks after Truman’s speech cited above when North Korea suddenly invaded its southern neighbor. Truman immediately made it clear that he could not accept such an attack and acted swiftly both diplomatically and militarily. Thanks to a temporary Soviet blockade of the Security Council, he

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102 Quote from Dearborn, Exceptionalist-In-Chief, 174.
also managed to uphold the ensuing war’s image as an international “police operation” under the U.N.-flag. However, the view that America was not only politically prepared and militarily capable but morally obliged to act alone if necessary was now so manifest that Truman would have probably acted similarly even if the U.N. option had not been available.

Truman made this clear in a speech to Congress on July 19, in which he explained that “[t]he American people, together with other free peoples, seek a new era in world affairs. We seek a world where all men may live in peace and freedom, with steadily improving living conditions, under governments of their own free choice.”

He also echoed McKinley, assuring that U.S. actions were chaste: “For ourselves, we seek no territory or domination over others.” That evening, in another speech directed to the American people, he used similar language: “Our country stands before the world as an example of how free men, under God, can build a community of neighbors, working together for the good of all. That is the goal we seek not only for ourselves, but for all people.”

Truman continued to defend the Korean War and containment of Communism in similar ways until he left office. In 1951, he stated that America had to act because “the Russian Communist dictatorship [attempted] to take over the world, step by step.” The following year he warned that “[t]he things we believe in most deeply are under relentless attack.” And in his last State of the Union, Truman placed the battle against Communism in a historical perspective,

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103 Herring, Colony to Superpower, 639ff.
calling it “a struggle as old as recorded history; it is freedom versus tyranny.”108 In that speech, he again discriminated absolutely between Soviet and U.S. actions. While the former turned free nations “into colonies,” Americans were “working night and day to bring peace to the world and to spread the democratic ideals of justice and self-government to all people.”109

What is more, in his Farewell Address a few days later, Truman foretold victory not only in Korea but in the Cold War as a whole. America would win it, he said, not because of its material strengths but its ideological and spiritual supremacy:

The Communist world has great resources, and it looks strong. But there is a fatal flaw in their society. Theirs is a godless system, a system of slavery; there is no freedom in it, no consent. The Iron Curtain, the secret police, the constant purges, all these are symptoms of a great basic weakness – the rulers’ fear of their own people. In the long run the strength of our free society, and our ideals, will prevail over a system that has respect for neither God nor man.110

Truman also added that a post-Communist world under American leadership would enter “a new era – a wonderful golden age – an age when we can use the peaceful tools that science has forged for us to do away with poverty and human misery everywhere on earth.”111 Or, as John Winthrop had phrased it in 1630: “The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as his oune people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our wayes.”112 And this was a torch of freedom that Truman’s successor would pick up.

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111 Ibid.
112 Winthrop, “The City on a Hill.”
THE EISENHOWER ADMINISTRATION

There are many similarities between Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890-1969). Both were raised as Midwestern farm boys, sincerely religious, hard workers, and exceptionalists of the international kind. However, there were several differences between them in both style and substance.\(^{113}\) While Truman became a Progressive Democrat, Eisenhower evolved into a Conservative Republican (even if he often sounded more ideological than he was, especially in the domestic arena).\(^{114}\) A strong contrast from this study’s perspective is also that whereas Truman’s rhetorical strength was to make sense of political issues in folkish language, Eisenhower’s forte was to convey them in sober prose. Naturally, this made for two stylistically different presidencies, of which Eisenhower’s is noteworthy because of its dual character.

On the one hand, by portraying the Cold War as a “dark chamber of horrors,” Eisenhower emphasized the apocalyptic mood of the 1950s stemming from the risk of nuclear war.\(^{115}\) Also, by frequently contrasting American virtues with communist vices, he fortified Truman’s depiction of the Cold War as a bipolar conflict that showcased two ways of life and deepened it by depicting it as a clash between two philosophically incompatible systems.\(^{116}\) On the other hand, through his soothing personality, Eisenhower cultivated the optimism arising from that decade’s economic, technological, and scientific developments and so contributed to making it a “good feeling era.”\(^{117}\) And he accomplished both by using exceptionalist language.


\(^{115}\) After the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic device in 1949, a feeling of doom spread as both superpowers began building up nuclear stockpiles. The stakes were then made even higher with the introduction of the H-bomb in 1952 and the introduction of intercontinental missiles towards the end of the decade.

\(^{116}\) Leffler, *Soul for Mankind*, 149f; Herring, *Colony to Superpower*, 651ff.

\(^{117}\) Stuckey, *Defining Americans*, 242-287. Truman also talked about the philosophical incompatibility of the American and the Soviet ways of life, but Eisenhower’s more serious style and language arguably made an even bigger impression.
FOREIGN POLICY: APOCALYPSE ON HOLD

Eisenhower began his 1953 Inaugural Address by defying the custom of the moment by asking people to join him in a prayer wherein he asked God to give “us [...] the power to discern clearly right from wrong.” He then devoted his address to foreign policy, beginning with portraying the world situation as dire: “We sense with all our faculties that forces of good and evil are massed and armed and opposed as rarely before in history,” before posing the question of how far man had come in his “long pilgrimage from darkness toward the light? Are we nearing the light – a day of freedom and of peace for all mankind? Or are the shadows of another night closing in upon us?” He then declared that American virtues were the cure to the world’s challenges:

At such a time in history, we who are free must proclaim anew our faith. [...] It establishes, beyond debate, those gifts of the Creator that are man’s inalienable rights, and that make all men equal in His sight. In the light of this equality, we know that the virtues most cherished by free people – love of truth, pride of work, devotion to country – all are treasures equally precious in the lives of the most humble and of the most exalted.119

In this speech, Eisenhower also reinforced America’s righteousness purpose, without calling the Soviet Union by name, by outlining the evil nature of the free world’s nemesis:

The enemies of this faith know no god but force, no devotion but its use. They tutor men in treason. They feed upon the hunger of others. Whatever defies them, they torture, especially the truth. Here, then, is joined no argument between slightly differing philosophies. This conflict strikes directly at the faith of our fathers and the lives of our sons.120

Next, Eisenhower portrayed the Cold War as a spiritual conflict whose poles not only represented “Freedom [...] against slavery” but “lightness against the dark” and concluded that

119 Ibid.
120 Ibid.
“destiny has laid upon our country the responsibility of the free world’s leadership.” As shown, this had also been Truman’s view. However, by expressing himself so overtly, Eisenhower signaled that his administration would form its policies based on different principles than the outgoing one. Since Truman’s principal Cold War policymakers had all been staunch exceptionalists – Dean Acheson, for example, depicted the U.S. as “the locomotive at the head of the train of history”\footnote{Quote from Brooks, \textit{American Exceptionalism}, 3.} – on the ground, the effects of this shift would be limited. Still, repeated calls from the general for Americans to prepare themselves for war with sentences like “No person, no home, no community can be beyond the reach of this call” expanded Americans’ already grave sense of the present danger even further.

Striking a more optimistic tone toward the end of his address, Eisenhower turned to the missionary theme of American Exceptionalism, stating that “destiny has laid upon our country the responsibility of the free world’s leadership.” Amongst the responsibilities accompanying this role, he cited respect for “the identity and the special heritage of each nation” and promised that the U.S. under his leadership would never “impress upon another people our own cherished political and economic institutions.” However, on the last issue, he could be accused of double talk because he would often behave differently. In fact, under Eisenhower, America embarked on a mission to incite political change on a global scale, stretching from nation-building, e.g., in South Vietnam, via making covert operations a standard foreign policy tool, to boosting the country’s propaganda efforts to never seen peacetime highs.\footnote{Herring, \textit{Colony to Superpower}, 662.}

A chief occurrence in the latter’s growth was the merging in 1953 of existing activities into the United States Information Agency (USIA), which for over 40 years would work to

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{121}Quote from Brooks, \textit{American Exceptionalism}, 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{122}Herring, \textit{Colony to Superpower}, 662.
\end{itemize}
define the image of the U.S. abroad. Formally a neutral source of information under the slogan “Telling America’s story to the world,” it became a full-grown propaganda agency whose job was to draw specific attention to America “as a nation of affluence, progress, and personal fulfillment,” and to promote democracy throughout the world. Since these objectives augmented the ongoing, spontaneous Americanization of other countries, the USIA could successfully use “soft power” tools like literature, painting, architecture, music, and movies. However, some personalities played at least as much a critical role as the propaganda.

THE DULLEST OF DECADES

In 1950s U.S. politics, a central actor was Eisenhower’s Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles (1888-1959). He was an austere lawyer-politician who began his career as a legal counsel at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and developed into a modern internationalist Republican. However, Dulles was a devout exceptionalist, whose core belief was that America was a vital nation because she signified Freedom. Born into a clerical family claiming ancestry to Charlemagne, Dulles’ religiosity was as robust as was his trust in the American mission and his role in it: “This Nation was conceived with a sense of mission and dedicated to the extension of freedom throughout the world.” His piety, too, gave him a Manichean worldview, according to

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123 Cull, The Cold War, 82-104.
125 Kinzer, Overthrow, 111-117. Quote from Wilsey, American Exceptionalism, 119.
which the U.S. was God’s proxy and the Soviet Union the Devil’s because, “Communism starts with an atheistic, Godless premise [and] everything else flows from that premise.”

In 1950, Dulles revealed this mindset in his book War or Peace, an examination of world affairs and U.S. foreign policy. Its vantage point, which later guided him as Secretary of State, was that America was a noble experiment on the verge of going astray because materialism and “extreme individualism” had so blunted Westerners’ belief in the superiority of their system that peoples, instead of perceiving democracy and capitalism as desirable, risked turning in droves toward Communism. Accordingly, since only the U.S. could defeat Communism, a revival of Christian faith and American idealism was the world’s only hope, and Dulles believed the time was running out and “the luxury of ‘independence’” was over. Consequently, the U.S. had to take the lead and use its superpower status to do “what every Western leader, without regard to nation or party, recognizes ought to be done, but what will not be done unless there is friendly but firm outside pressure.”

Hence, Dulles’ sense of the Cold War was fateful even compared with Eisenhower’s, and under him, America broke definitively with John Quincy Adams’ spirit by going abroad in search of monsters to destroy, e.g., by staging a coup in Iran. Also, since his view of the Cold War was that of a struggle between good and evil, he deemed no price for victory too high and became the main promotor of Eisenhower’s New Look strategy, a policy aimed at securing world peace (until communism was defeated) through the threat of massive nuclear retaliation. This policy, which under his successor in the next administration would evolve into the Mutually

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127 Ibid, 253-261.
128 Ibid, 214f.
129 Wilsey, American Exceptionalism, 119ff, 127-140; Kinzer, Overthrow, 117-128.
Assured Destruction (MAD) doctrine, was the main reason for the air of doom that would not abate until communism fell in 1989.\(^{130}\)

Not surprisingly, Dulles’ fundamentalist belief in American Exceptionalism sometimes drove him to actions that turned out to be counterproductive. For instance, it was because of his declaration that the containment policy was spiritually bankrupt that Eisenhower publicly embraced a anti-communist rhetoric, which in combination with outlets such as Voice of America’s broadcasts, led to widespread protests throughout Eastern Europe and especially in Hungary in 1956. However, since no substantial support could be offered without the peril of a full-scale war, America could only watch as Soviet tanks rolled into that country and crushed all hopes of a quick breakdown of Communism.\(^{131}\)

Nonetheless, Dulles was an archetypical American optimist believing that the world under U.S. leadership would be a better place. In an interview, he said: “What we need to do is recapture the kind of crusading spirit of the early days of the Republic when we were certain that we had something better than anyone else and we knew the rest of the world needed it and wanted it and that we were going to carry it around the world.”^\(^{132}\) And to some degree, he managed to realize this vision. As Secretary of State, he played a vital role in carving out an Athenian-like global role for the U.S. and helped Eisenhower bolster America’s image as the leader of the Western world. At the same time, he could enjoy how the U.S. was experiencing an ideological reorientation and an intense religious revival.\(^{133}\) However, these developments were far from conclusive, so the despair marking world affairs spilled over into domestic politics.

\(^{130}\) Leffler, *Soul for Mankind*, 98ff, 133; Herring, *Colony to Superpower*, 660f.


\(^{132}\) Quote from White, *Still Seeing Red*, 122.

**McCarthyism**

In the 1950s, Joseph McCarthy (1908-1957) also put his mark on U.S. politics. A rough-and-tumble Republican Wisconsin Senator, whose way to infamy was paved by Truman’s second Red Scare, he used exceptionalist speaking points often. For example, in an epoch-making speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, on February 9, 1950, he echoed Truman and presaged Eisenhower by calling the Cold War a “showdown between the democratic Christian world and the communist atheistic world.” Like Secretary Dulles, he also depicted the situation as acute since America was “losing on every front” because of political blunders and communist infiltration of the U.S. He even sounded like John Winthrop when he said: “Ours could have been the honor of being a beacon in the desert of destruction, a shining, living proof that civilization was not yet ready to destroy itself. Unfortunately, we have failed miserably and tragically to arise to the opportunity.”

Furthermore, McCarthy’s impact upon U.S. political discourse in the 1950s and beyond made him an important thespian in the process of incorporating anti-communism with American Exceptionalism. The fact that not only Democrats and the media, but many in his own party, including President Eisenhower, detested him makes this a significant feat. However, it is first and foremost an indication of how powerful American Exceptionalism became in the mid-20th century, as the Soviet Union arose not only as a world power and external military threat but as an exceptionalist-minded adversary challenging the cogency of the U.S.’ nature. Thus, it is logical that exceptionalism in the 1950s got a domestic role it had never had before.

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DOMESTIC POLICY: HAPPY DAYS

At home, the “new normal” of the 1950s harkened back to a complex mix of the era’s prosperity, a lingering sense of national unity created by World War II, popular support for traditional values, a strong religious movement led by Billy Graham’s (1918-2018) “evangelical crusades,” and belief in the national mission to save the world from Communism, which many (with Graham) saw as “inspired, directed, and motivated by the Devil himself.”

Indicators of this development stretch from large-scale phenomena, such as the decade’s emphasis on the nuclear family and its traditional male-female breadwinner-homemaker division, to a multitude of smaller indicators, like 69 percent of Americans’ support for the addition of “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance. In fact, the feeling of pride and purpose emanating from this mix had earlier only been experienced in wartime and made “the Fifties” an icon for generations.

Since exceptionalist arguments in domestic politics thus far had been rare and employed mostly by Progressives, Eisenhower’s use of such to promote his policies marks a historic turning point. Explicitly, even if he was the epitome of a “modern Republican” with not only clear internationalist but also many liberal leanings, by sounding conservative and framing domestic issues as battles against ideas that threatened the unique nature of America, he did show Republicans how they could muster civil religion for their cause. Primarily he did so by arguing for getting the country back on track by relying on its own standards, rather than as Progressives relying on ideological blueprints of often foreign origin. Also, since the wealth of

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138 For a more detailed analysis about modern Republicanism, see White, Still Seeing Red, 82-89.
the decade rendered fidelity to Eisenhower’s ideas, Americans began to believe anew that it was the country’s character, not social and political engineering, that made it great.

The most important American standard for Eisenhower was, as it was for John Foster Dulles, Billy Graham, and others, freedom. His devotion to this subject was intense, and he touched upon it in nearly all of his major speeches. Evidently, “freedom” and “liberty” had been prime notions in U.S. civil religion’s parlance since the Founding Period, but it should be remembered that “equality” since Lincoln’s time had been hailed almost as consistently. But since equality was also a Communist buzzword, freedom gained renewed distinction during the Cold War, especially – but not only – on the right. Conservatives’ more extensive use of the term and ensuing capture of it also signaled the beginning of a long-term development that would have far-reaching political consequences.

Specifically, this development had started in the 1940s, but Eisenhower determined its outcome. His use of “freedom” is traceable back to his RNC Acceptance Speech on July 11, 1952. There he (prematurely) wrapped himself in the high priest’s cloak of American civil religion by stating that he did not accept the nomination above all to become president but resigned himself to the task after being “summoned [...] on the behalf of millions [...] to lead a great crusade – for Freedom in America and Freedom in the world.” He also raised himself and his candidacy above politics by appealing to American’s perfectionist bent, vowing, like Wilson, to purge politics of the “wastefulness, the arrogance and corruption in high places.” And the stakes could not have been higher:

We are now at a moment in history when, under God, this nation of ours has become the mightiest temporal power and the mightiest spiritual force on earth. The destiny of
mankind – the making of a world that will be fit for our children to live in – hangs in the balance on what we say and what we accomplish in these months ahead.\textsuperscript{139}

After assuming office, Eisenhower’s emphasis on freedom continued, and he tellingly never seemed to have felt obliged to expound on the concept’s deeper meaning. This indicates that he felt confident that most Americans still adhered to American Exceptionalism’s traditional “hard” form of the notion – freedom \textit{from} – rather than Progressive’s “soft” – freedom \textit{to} – definition of it. Such an analysis also fits with what is known about the most defining phenomenon of American politics in the 1950s – the birth of the Conservative Movement. This will be dealt with later, so a few examples of Eisenhower’s use of the notion of freedom will be sufficient here.\textsuperscript{140}

To start, it is noticeable that Eisenhower’s only direct reference to domestic conditions in his Inaugural Address was that America’s worldly greatness depended on “the creative magic of free labor and capital.” In a way, this reflects the lingering materialistic ethos of the Great Depression-New Deal period. However, although Eisenhower would often echo Wilson, FDR, and Truman’s emphasis on the bond between foreign and domestic policies, he distanced himself from them by arguing consistently, often using exceptionalism language, that what the U.S. economy needed was not more governance but market reforms, lower taxes, and less bureaucracy. In his first State of the Union, he said that “[t]he great economic strength of our democracy has developed in an atmosphere of freedom. The character of our people resists


artificial and arbitrary controls of any kind.” He also painted a difference from the New/Fair Deal-era by asserting that the essential nature of human society was not material but spiritual:

No government can inoculate its people against the fatal materialism that plagues our age. Happily, our [American] people, though blessed with more material goods than any people in history, have always reserved their first allegiance to the kingdom of the spirit, which is the true source of that freedom we value above all material things.

In the same way, Eisenhower bolstered freedom-based policies in the social arena. For instance, he saw private pension plans as a “new application of [the] old ideas of freedom” and played the anti-statist card when declaring himself “flatly opposed to the socialization of medicine [since] [t]he great need for hospital and medical services can be met by the initiative of private plans.” Similarly, in 1955, he enthusiastically endorsed the USIA’s launch of an international “People’s Capitalism” campaign depicting the U.S. as a classless society of thriving workers compared to the “slave societies” of the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China.

Three more observations concerning Eisenhower’s domestic use of exceptionalist rhetoric can be made. First, he became the first president to express grave concern for excessive bureaucratization, technocratic influence, and the intimate relations between government and big businesses. Here, Eisenhower’s warning in his Farewell Address about the power of “the military-industrial complex” is well known. Less observed is his matching warning (frequently omitted in both written and audiovisual excerpts) about “the equal and opposite danger that public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific-technological elite.”

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142 Ibid.
143 Ibid.
144 Belmonte, Selling the American Way, 131ff; Cull, Cold War, 104-129.
146 Ibid.
words, Eisenhower warned that military and civilian developments threatened Americans’ liberties. This was a unique aberration from the positivist-technocratic mindset and a starting point for many lines of critique that have since been used by both the left and right.

Second, after the Soviet satellite Sputnik’s launch in October 1957, America was mired in suspicion that the Russians had gained the upper hand in technology and that its nuclear rockets were a serious threat to national security. Hence, Sputnik became a point of shame for the positivist-technocratic elite that so-far had thought that America’s capitalist system had been sufficient to stay ahead scientifically. The U.S. government’s answer to this threat thus became truly American in scale but not in kind as Congress, with Eisenhower’s active support, allocated massive resources to close the gap. Among other things, large sums were put into the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA) and the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). Also, NASA was created, and during Eisenhower’s successor, the Moon Program instigated.

Third, by its timing, Eisenhower’s exceptionalist rhetoric became part of the phasing-out of age-old animosities between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Historically, the country’s Protestants had held both anti-Semitic prejudices and anti-Catholic biases. But as Americans in the 1930s confronted Fascism, a move away from such bigotries had begun, and as they in the 1950s they faced a new threat in Communism at the same time as knowledge about the Holocaust brought on an essential reduction of anti-Semitism, Catholics used civil religion, including its new anti-Communist add-on, to achieve full emancipation. For instance, Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York used the word Americanism “as if it were some venerable dogma of the Catholic Church,” and Joseph McCarthy, who was Catholic, became seen as a political

147 Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 35ff.
148 O’Brian, *God Land*, 34.
path maker. A broader Judeo-Christian identity, therefore, took form that became a new theological addition to American Exceptionalism parallel to anti-Communism becoming a political one. One case in point, during the 1960-64 election cycle, one Catholic and one Jew would run for the U.S. Presidency on exceptionalist and anti-Communist platforms, and one of them would even prevail over lingering prejudice by being elected.

For the first time in world history we have the abundance and the ability
to free every man from hopeless want, and to free every person to find fulfillment
in the works of his mind or the labor of his hands.

LYNDON B. JOHNSON (1964)

CHAPTER 5 |

A Defining Decade

The introduction of a welfare state and the rise to superpower status transformed America. At the same time, as people became accustomed to turning to Washington, D.C. for services and support, the politicians in that city recognized that they were presiding over the most powerful nation in history. However, due to cultural lag, good economic times, and peace (except for the Korean War 1950-53), most large-scale effects of this dual revolution did not begin to transpire until the 1960s, when the civilian and military wings of the U.S. government both became more fully engaged in their new roles. Then, however, change came rapidly. Moreover, several political occurrences and ideological shifts would contribute to make the U.S. a very different country in 1969 than it had been just a decade earlier. Since American Exceptionalism both influenced and was affected by these developments, this section will start with a background showing why the decade became a time of profound change.¹

As the world moved out of the long shadow of World War II, and Western Europe and some Asian nations joined America as truly modern societies, the 1960s became the first “modern” decade. While earlier epoch shifts at first had affected only smaller segments and/or the upper echelons of society, this time, life for the majority of ordinary people suddenly radically improved. As the post-war economic boom continued, higher wages, mass-produced consumer goods, and mass transportation all but eradicated absolute poverty, material scarcities, and other daunting inequalities. Moreover, novelties from color TVs to jet planes to contraceptives transformed the lives of hundreds of millions and began to challenge traditional habits, norms, and values on a grand scale – especially in the sprawling suburbs filled with Baby Boomers who were starting to come of age. And as the materially richest and militarily most powerful people ever, Americans felt more exceptional than ever before.

More specifically, during the first half of the 1960s, two significant political events pushed American Exceptionalism toward the center of political discourse. First, as the resolution of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis actually improved relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union and alleviated the most acute feelings of nuclear doom, the focus moved from crisis management towards what America could do to spread its ideals to avoid future incidents. Second, the easing of superpower tensions allowed for attention to swing back to domestic politics, which at the same time experienced a revival of confidence in technocratic governance that challenged what most Americans still saw as their country’s exceptional qualities.

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2 In 1961, Americans for the first time got more news from TV than from newspapers and radio. Ibid, 52.
This (re)emergence of a technocratic government depended on a multitude of causes. Amongst them were a reaction against the conservative mindset of the 1950s; continuous high economic growth; near-exponential expansion of bureaucracies, academia, and journalism; and parallel growth of both the administrative state and “big business.” This, in turn, led to the formation of a “New Class” consisting of well-educated and well-paid administrators, judges, professors, lawyers, reporters, editors, teachers, and others.3 And while many of these were still schooled in the positivist-technocratic mindset of the early 20th century, but now headed by a radical politically, culturally, and otherwise commanding elite, they – next to the plantation elite until the Civil War – became the closest America has ever come to a real leisure class and the Founders idea of a natural aristocracy governing the country.4

Specifically, driven by an accommodating belief in, as journalist Eric Severeid branded it “managerial liberalism”5 – which has been defined as an “ideology of a distinct class of men [whose goal is a] Faustian project aimed at subjugating and controlling the natural world, human nature, and human society by means of scientific technique in particular and rationality generally, while uprooting custom and banishing religion to the wholly private real”6 – the New Class had little patience with established political, social, and cultural traditions. Instead, they had a record high confidence in political-economic-social engineering and saw continuous high economic growth as a given that smartly used could resolve all problems. Hence, many of the

3 The label “New Class” is given different meanings by various authors. It is in this thesis used as an umbrella term for people in post-industrial societies which from generally positivist-technocratic viewpoints want to pursue “fundamental changes in the structure of our economy, society, polity, and culture.” From B. Bruce-Briggs (ed.), *The New Class?* (New Brunswick, Transaction Book 1979), 1-18, quote from ix.
5 White, *New Politics of Old Values*, 44.
6 Ibid, 79.
first generation of New Classers were Cold War Liberals and, as such, still firm believers in American Exceptionalism. This, however, would eventually change.

**NEW GATEKEEPERS**

All societies have “gatekeepers.” Historically, these censors have mainly been government officials and priests, but from the 1700s, a much wider group including, e.g., academics, peer reviewers, publishers, editors, and journalists formed, which for practical purposes held power to deem which ideas, values, and mores should be shared in public arenas. This de facto monopoly of ideas (never complete but always significant) would last until the 1990s when the Internet made possible “alternative media” that nowadays challenge established truths and paradigms regarding everything from the best way of growing tomatoes to the accuracy of reported election results. Needless to say, gatekeepers were, therefore, until recently pivotal – and are still very important – not only in areas like education but to politics and public discourse at large.

Consequently, as the New Class from the 1960s took over the administrative state, academies, media, and other (to borrow a term from other scholars) “commanding heights” and replaced older – more WASP, more Conservative⁸ – elites, they could start mustering large amounts of resources in support of each other’s careers as well as shared ideas. One way of doing this was by fielding theories within the “iron triangles”⁹ of politics, academia, and

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⁷ For example, see Pamela J. Shoemaker & Timothy Vos, *Gatekeeping Theory* (New York: Rutledge, 2009), 9-30. The term gatekeeping was initially used to describe and analyze the role of journalists, but it lends itself for the roll of other information focused professions also.

⁸ White, *The Values Divide*, 43ff.

⁹ The term “iron triangle” is normally used to describe the relationship among Congressional committees, bureaucracies, and interest groups, but it is well-suited for describing also the affiliations developing between politicians, academics, and journalists who – by basing their thinking on common postulates and principles – (un)consciously strive in the same direction.
domination that at once motivated and validated their goals and visions with scientific rather than ideological arguments. In addition, as the New Class began to dominate discourse hubs, its members could support their ideas and each other by hiring and cross-referencing each other. And to motivate their rule, they relied heavily upon sociology, which “seemed to offer evidence of the incapacity of the common people for self-rule, and of the related necessity for social-scientific managerial ‘experts’ [...] to replace venal elected politicians in public affairs.”

The New Class also used other theories to expand their power, like Walt Rostow’s (1916-2003) “modernization theory.” Presented in his *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1960), it depicts modernization as a five-stage development from primitive to modern welfare states. Not formally deterministic, but using the U.K. and the U.S. as archetypes, his theory shows modernization as a process propelled by free enterprise and free trade, and it was seen as an alternative to the communist command economy. However, Rostow also extolled political action to advance development. For example, he wanted to dismantle stifling social structures in agrarian societies and viewed governments as natural providers of “social overhead capital” like education, communications, and healthcare. Thus, Rostow provided Cold War Liberals with arguments for an active government at home and a “rationale for a more aggressive program of ‘nation-building’ designed to cure the economic and political woes afflicting transitional societies in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia.”

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Canadian economist John Kenneth Galbraith (1908-2006) offered a related theory. In *The Affluent Society* (1958), he argued that modern economies are not directed mainly by economic “laws” but by cultural conventions. Explicitly, he saw the Classic Liberal Economic Theory as being fundamental to capitalism only as a “conventional wisdom [...] made more or less identical with sound scholarship” that lived on because skepticism “is disqualified by [critics’] very tendency to go brashly from the old to the new.”

This postulate freed Galbraith to argue that the economic state of affairs does not set limits for modern society’s ambitions. Therefore, he wanted politicians to structure country’s economies not merely to counteract economic slumps but to support extensive welfare states, which he projected as the endpoint of political history.

As Rostow and Galbraith offered macro theories corroborating the welfare state, B. F. Skinner (1904-1990) offered an augmenting micro theory. In the 1960s, his *The Behavior of Organisms* (1938) and other works had become testaments amongst social scientists. The diverse nature of his field of behaviorism makes it impossible at this time to present his findings in detail. However, its core assumption is that humans are born “blank slates,” and from this derive models similar to “operant conditioning” that explain everything from altruistic reflexes to criminal behavior to mental retardation as effects of nurture (surrounding milieus) rather than nature (personal conditions and/or choices made under genetic influence). In a word, Skinner offered the malleable minds that positivists and technocrats needed to make their visions seem operational – and a view of human nature by and large opposite to the Founding Fathers.

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All told, after 1960, what the New Class could make use of is a revival of several philosophies already encountered in this analysis – historicism, positivism, technocracy – and their merging with behaviorism into a loose but still (or maybe because of that) compelling sociological model applicable on near-everything. Offering plenty of prospects for political meddling, this new paradigm also became popular on the left, where its impact was amplified by circumstances such as Galbraith being politically well-connected since the FDR administration and Rostow acting as a presidential aide 1961-1969. Moreover, since politicians, bureaucrats, and “experts” could uphold the U.S. as an example for resolving problems like poverty and unemployment, exceptionalist rhetoric helped convince many that the perfect future people had been talking about since the Enlightenment had finally arrived. And this had consequences.

INTELLECTUAL CONSEQUENCES

Since before 1900, Americans had like Westerners in general expressed a growing faith in the idea that a better society could be actively created if politicians just set bold goals and allocated adequate resources to bureaucrats to realize them. In the 1960s, soaring through the postwar era’s atmosphere of seemingly perpetual high economic growth, the ideological jet streams cultivated by scholars like Rostow, Galbraith, and Skinner, therefore, fashioned a semi-utopian perspective that in combination with America’s exceptionalist, think-big attitude, created a unique confidence in that nothing was impossible. As we will see below, this led to gargantuan undertakings such as the Great Society at home and a foreign policy leading to everything from highly ambitious aid programs to the Vietnam War.
A similar boldness permeated popular culture where everything from big hairdos to big cars became popular, and surges of futuristic themes, tastes, and visions were reared by real happenings as well as fictional novelties. For instance, the introduction of “supercomputers” and the Moon Program left people spellbound by Stanley Kubrick’s movie 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), and the television series Star Trek (1966-1969). The latter’s most famous character also suggestively became the steriley logical (i.e., positivist) Mr. Spock, a Vulcan who was always correct and puzzled by his emotion-driven human colleagues’ irrational behavior. Actually, this series became so popular that the following decade its fans would get the White House to interfere directly in the country’s real space program (see below).  

The reality, however, turned out to be thornier than either theory or fiction. Since political programs were carried out according to “scientific” plans and goals, instead of being dealt with as inimitable maneuvers, they often ran into difficulties. One example is Defense Secretary Robert McNamara (1916-2009), who persuaded himself and his colleagues that they could win the Vietnam War from Washington, D.C. by “comprehend[ing] what was happening on the ground by staring at a spreadsheet” and producing an accurate “body count.” Another case of micromanagement became the Great Society, whose goals – despite 22 trillion dollars spent to date – have not yet been met. Like the Moon Program, even more successful endeavors have also been questioned about their wasteful execution.

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Despite such snares, however, the ideological implication of the 1960s cannot be overstated. Most importantly, the positivistic-technocratic attitude marking both principal political actors and the mass of middle- and low-level officers in the administrative state, academia, and media came to play a primary role in the final formulation of modern liberalism, and, because of that, incidentally, American conservatism. Since both ideologies have long and partly elusive histories, no short recaps can ever do them justice.\textsuperscript{20} The following inquires will therefore focus on how a few specific ideas interacted with American Exceptionalism. The goal is only to show how U.S. politics was put on a new course that led to tensions and increased polarization by pitting two forms of exceptionalist thinking against each other.

\textbf{A Growing Divide}

As noted, from the beginning, freedom and equality were – next to the meme about a national mission – American Exceptionalism’s most imperative notions, and for a long time, they coexisted serenely. However, if freedom is defined negatively as “the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or action,”\textsuperscript{21} but equality is defined as parity of outcomes, a tension occurs between them. This is arguably what happened from the 1890s onwards as laws, taxes, and regulations aimed at “leveling the playing field” accumulated until they began to restrain freedom for everyone.\textsuperscript{22} However, because Americans prefer local and communitarian

\textsuperscript{20} For in-depth analysis of this subject, see Gerring, \textit{Party Ideologies}; Hans Noel, \textit{Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and Lowi, \textit{End of Liberalism}, all passim.


\textsuperscript{22} Exactly when this breaking point occurs is elusive since it is not necessarily an across-the-board development, i.e., various sectors and industries, depending on taxes and regulations, can be hit harder than others. To complicate things further, the breaking point is culturally given. It is generally higher in statist-collectivist countries like Sweden, were people are acculturated to governmental inference, than in anarchist-individualist nations like the U.S.
solutions over national and collective policies to meet societal needs, for a long time, this
development only slightly affected party politics.\textsuperscript{23}

The following contrast will help explain what then happened. In Europe, where
involuntary bodies like states, churches, city councils, and guilds had handled societal services
for hundreds or even thousands of years, early on people became accustomed to an intrusive
government; a development that from c. 1500 was enhanced ten-fold through massive wars, and
the bureaucratization needed to wage them.\textsuperscript{24} Hence, both an intuitive infrastructure and mental
readiness for public welfare systems were already in place, and the scale and scope of
government they necessitated would only mean more of the same. Thus, welfare states could
effortlessly be introduced – beginning with Germany in the 1870s – and they swiftly became
popular.\textsuperscript{25} On the other hand, in the anti-statist and individualistic America, perceptions of the
government’s proper place, role, and obligations were very different. Before U.S. politicians
could introduce even minor policy changes, they were therefore forced to overcome national
characteristics that people cherished as parts of their heritage.

The most specific crux for Progressives was the republican-communitarian spirit.
Because even if its focus on collaboration superficially resembles the collective organization of
things preferred by radicals, the notions are poles apart. In a word, while the former emphasizes
small autonomous communities, voluntarism, individual responsibility, and the family, the latter

\textsuperscript{23} In fact, the local/communitarian spirit is still today a vital part of popular culture as evidenced by Americans’
strong inclination (compared to Europeans) to volunteer, donate money to charities, etc. See Paul Bedard,
“Americans are world’s most charitable, top 1% provide 1/3rd of all donations,” (January 19, 2016) Washington
Examiner, accessed April 19, 2018, https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/americans-are-worlds-most-charitable-
top-1-provide-1-3rd-of-all-donations.
\textsuperscript{24} Porter, \textit{War}, 63-193. See also Thomas Ertman, \textit{Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval
and Early Modern Europe} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Ian Morris, \textit{War! What It Is Good
\textsuperscript{25} Hodgson, \textit{Myth of American Exceptionalism}, 78f; Diether Raff, \textit{A History of Germany: From the Medieval
relies on governmental action, large-scale operations, top-down management, regimentation, and standardization. Given that, in the U.S., Progressives were long forced to avoid exceptionalist rhetoric in relation to domestic politics not only because of ideological grievances but because they knew that such arguments would not work well for them. Thus, American conservatives would, compared to their European counterparts and despite the fact that Western societies in general can be said to have been pushed left by various modernizing trends and forces, retain a culturally-based upper hand on many issues.

The aforementioned formation of a broader Judeo-Christian self-identification also caused political polarization after World War II. As mainstream Protestantism waned, and since American Exceptionalism notions are open for shifting religious beliefs, everyone honoring the Flag, valuing the Constitution, respecting the President, and “believing in America,” etc., could now be deemed a “good American.” In fact, since worldly interpretations can also be made of most exceptionalist notions, even non-Christians and atheists could be deemed good Americans (even if this still today, in some quarters, is not seen as entirely self-evident). Hence, this widened the role of the concept by making adherence to it a marker for being a patriot. However, paradoxically, this “ecumenicalization” of American nationhood would at the same time speed up the division between left and right to a point where it began to undermine national unity.

The reason for this development shows the criticality of American Exceptionalism. In short, both sides have always wanted – and still want – both freedom and equality. But, after World War II, as conservatives began to uphold freedom as America’s prime virtue and liberals put an ever-greater emphasis on equality, the distinction between the parties moved into

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26 Pierard & Linder, *Civil Religion*, xi-xii.
metaphysics as they began to view each other as threats to their favored notion. Moreover, since accusing your opponent of deceiving the nation’s heritage in the realm of politics is a temptation often impossible to resist, in the 1960s, the alienation between Democrats and Republicans began to pull their old voter coalitions apart at the same time as races and other factions were pitted against each other for other reasons. As will be shown, this has turned party affiliation into an existential question that makes today’s situation comparable only with the hatred marking Europe’s class-based party systems in the early 1900s.\footnote{Lowi, \textit{End of Liberalism}, 271-294. Just as examples regarding today’s toxic political climate, it can be noted that in November 2018, 61 percent of Democrats saw Republicans as “racist/bigoted/sexist,” while 31 percent of Republicans said the same thing about Democrats. Moreover, 54 percent of Republicans deemed Democrats to be “spiteful” and 49 percent as “ignorant,” while 54 percent of Democrats said Republicans were ignorant and 44 percent spiteful. And it was a tie between people describing supporters of the other party as “evil.” Valerie Richardson, “Democrats label Republicans ‘racist/bigoted/sexist’ as political divide intensifies,” (November 13, 2018) in \textit{Washington Times}, accessed March 17, 2019, https://m.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/nov/13/democrats-label-republicans-racist-bigoted-sexist/.} Thus, let us here turn to one specific example of this overall development.

**THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

After Reconstruction, as repression returned to the South with Jim Crow and everyday racism continued to mark the North, most African Americans’ situation remained grim.\footnote{Rayford W. Logan, \textit{The Betrayal Of The Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes To Woodrow Wilson} (New York: Collier Books, 1965; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), passim.} Their situation improved somewhat as Presidents Harding, Coolidge, and later Truman took steps toward racial reconciliation, but overall remained so depressed that the Civil Rights Movement took off in the 1950s. Reasons for this timing were many. Amongst them was frustration with the lack of racial progress during the New/Fair Deal period; that racism after the defeat of fascism and with decolonization going on around the world became politically intolerable; that African American
GI’s after returning from World War II became victims of racist attacks; and that the Cold War turned international attention to the dissonance between American ideals and societal realities.\(^{29}\)

Another reason for the timing of the Civil Rights Movement’s formation is that its goal, the fulfillment of Thomas Jefferson’s word in the Declaration that “all men are created equal,” corresponded to President Eisenhower’s traditional freedom agenda. Its leader, Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), had a strong dedication to the founding principles of the nation and could echo Fredrick Douglass’ words from 90 years prior about equality but no privileges for blacks: “[I]f the Negro cannot stand on his own legs, let him fall.”\(^{30}\) Therefore, when speaking after the Rosa Parks incident in 1955, King too combined his Christian faith with his confidence in the values of the Declaration:

We are here in a general sense because first and foremost we are American citizens and we are determined to apply our citizenship to the fullness of its meaning. We are here also because of our love for democracy, because of our deep-seated belief that democracy transformed from thin paper to thick action is the greatest form of government on earth [...] If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong.\(^{31}\)

Hence, at this point, King stressed that African Americans’ only goal was to obtain the same freedom from political oppression that the country’s whites had declared for themselves in the summer of 1776: “There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life’s July and left standing amid the piercing chill of an alpine

\(^{29}\) Ibid, 67-89.


November.”  

He could, therefore, criticize black crime rates, convey that emancipation would require blacks’ self-improvement, and point out that assimilation into mainstream America would be both challenging and a lengthy process since they were now to be judged according to “white” standards: “In this day we are going to compete with people, not Negro people. So don’t set out to do a good Negro job. […] No matter what this job is, you must decide to do it well.” Despite this, King’s 1955 speech soared with optimism: “The annual income of the Negro is now at about seventeen billion dollars a year, more than the annual income of Canada, and more than all of the exports of the United States. We’ve come a long, long way.”

King’s approach made it possible for whites to support his fight, and nearly a decade later his optimistic spirit was still present in his August 28, 1963, *I Have a Dream* speech in Washington, D.C. What he said there about “the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence” can effortlessly be read as expressions of support for American Exceptionalism. However, by now, King also expressed frustration with things not progressing faster, thundering that the marchers had “come to this hallowed spot [Lincoln Memorial] to remind America of the fierce urgency of now.” He also warned that “those who hope that the Negro [only] needed to blow off steam and will now be content, will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual.”

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32 Ibid.
33 The full text of this speech, called “Some Things We Must Do” and delivered on 5 December, 1957, to the 2nd Annual Institute on Nonviolence, Montgomery, Alabama, can be found at Stanford: The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, accessed February 19, 2018, http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/some_things_we_must_do_address_delivered_at_the_second_annual_institute_on_/index.html.
34 Ibid. As a point of reference, it is worth noting that in 1960, Harlem’s per capita ranked among the five richest nations in the world. See Farber, *Age of Great Dreams*, 12.
Hence, King’s most famous speech reflected an ideological change of the Civil Rights Movement’s focus from requests of formal equality to demands for power achieved through the political process that would result in socioeconomic parity with white Americans. Or in other words, positive rights.\(^{37}\) Given most African Americans’ socioeconomic situation, this was a natural evolution, and it was driven not least by King’s personal vision, which combined Christian *agape* and universal moralism in ways that effectively made him a Social Democrat.\(^{38}\)

An additional reason for this shift was the rise of Malcolm X (1925-1965) who had challenged King’s leadership by stating things like, “It’ll be the ballot or the bullet,”\(^{39}\) and delivered what can be perceived as anti-American outbursts such as calling U.S. democracy for “nothing but disguised hypocrisy.”\(^{40}\) However, it was also certainly driven by the mounting belief of many in political, academic, and other circles about achieving positivist goals with technocratic means.\(^{41}\)

Whatever the main cause and after King’s death and the Civil Rights Movement’s following partial slide toward violence, this depleted its political capital enough for it to collapse as an independent force.\(^{42}\) Specifically, as the movement followed the broader historical arc of change toward equality of outcome, more moderate and conservative parts of the public began to lose faith in it and its bipartisan attraction faded.\(^{43}\) Instead, from the end of the 1960s, its


\(^{38}\) Ibid, 87-107; Myers, “Martin Luther King, passim; Cullen, *American Dream*, 126f.


\(^{40}\) Breitman (ed.), *Malcolm X Speaks*, 26. Notably, Malcolm X also tried to reframe the struggle for civil rights into a human rights issue to make it possible to turn to and get support from the U.N.; i.e., he tried to turn the world organization against its creator and ideological raw model (34ff).

\(^{41}\) Huntington, *Who Are We*, 146ff.


\(^{43}\) King, *Civil Rights*, 172-200. On Gallup’s question, “Do you think mass demonstrations by Negroes are more likely to HELP or more likely to HURT the Negro's cause for racial equality?” the number of respondents answering HELP fell from 27 in 1963 to 16 percent one year later. R.J. Reinhart, “Protests Seen as Harming Civil Rights Movement in the ‘60s,” (January 21, 2019) *Gallup Vault*, accessed January 23, 2019,
leadership ended up in an intimate (national) relationship with the Democratic Party, which this author contends hastened its turn from a negative freedom to a positive rights party. And at this time, this development had reached a critical tipping point.

THE CAMELOT YEARS

While running for the presidency in 1960, John F. Kennedy (1917-1963) personified the eclectic nature of the Democratic Party after 1898. He was a Northeastern patrician believer in an active-inclusive form of American Exceptionalism who positioned himself as a champion of “normal folk.” He also resembled FDR by being an advocate for an active federal government. On the other hand, JFK was younger, fiscally conservative, liberal on social and cultural issues but a strong believer in the essential soundness of capitalism, and he did not try to push through any radical economic or social reforms. In addition, he was a firmer anti-Communist and a more natural exceptionalist orator than FDR – when he chose to be.

Specifically, in contrast to today’s image of a persistently captivating speaker (shaped by a handful of highlight film clips), JFK’s speeches were often academic and technocratic. Even so, a few were in no small means because of their highbrow, sometimes lyrical exceptionalism so inimitable that they deeply affected both his party and the nation. For instance, when during the

44 Myers, Martin Luther King, 13.  
45 Barber, Presidential Character, 343-359; Herring, Colony to Superpower, 702ff.  
46 Dallek, An Unfinished Life, 142ff, 575-606.  
47 Since JFK’s tenure coincided with an ideological tipping point in the history of the Democratic Party, and his rhetoric became an active part of this event, it is often impossible to separate them analytically. His rhetoric also often makes it hard to isolate exceptionalist phrases from expressions reflecting his positivist-technocratic sentiment; a problem akin to that of distinguishing between exceptionalist and religious beliefs encountered earlier.
election campaign addressing lingering anti-Catholic sentiments, he set a standard for public scrutiny of presidential candidates’ religious views for decades:

[T]his is the kind of America for which our forefathers died – when they fled here to escape religious test oaths that denied office to members of less favored churches – when they fought for the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom – and when they fought at the shrine I visited [earlier] today, the Alamo. For side by side with Bowie and Crockett died McCafferty and Bailey and Carey – but no one knows whether they were Catholics or not. For there was no religious test at the Alamo.48

Furthermore, American Exceptionalism coxswained JFK’s foreign policy. For instance, when commenting on Latin America during the 1960 election campaign, he declared that the U.S. had a mission in the world: “Our ambassadors must be spokesmen for democracy, not supporters of tyrants [a]nd we must constantly press for free elections in any country where such elections are not held.”49 In his Inaugural Address, he elucidated his worldview further using exceptionalist poetry:

[The] same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe – the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God. We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans […] unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.50

Hence, the language JFK used to define his foreign policy resembled Eisenhower’s more than FDR’s, and the same goes for his anti-communism rhetoric. And by 1960, anti-communism had become such a patent part of Americanism that he hardly ever – despite his academic

mindset – felt obliged to ponder it philosophically. Instead, he used communism as a given evil. For example, in his 1962 State of the Union, he reassured Americans that they were fighting the same principled fight in the Cold War as they had done during the World Wars:

Since the close of the Second World War, a global civil war has divided and tormented mankind. But it is not our military might, or our higher standard of living, that has most distinguished us from our adversaries. It is our belief that the state is the servant of the citizen and not his master. [...] Yet our basic goal remains the same: a peaceful world community of free and independent states – free to choose their own future and their own system, so long as it does not threaten the freedom of others.

Later that year, in a speech at the University of California, Berkeley, he also said:

This emerging world is incompatible with the Communist world order. It will irresistibly burst the bonds of the Communist organization and the Communist ideology. And diversity and independence, far from being opposed to the American conception of world order, represent the very essence of our view of the future of the world.

On this subject, JFK would also deliver both politically and militarily; e.g., during the Cuban Missile Crisis and by forming the Green Berets to fight Communism in the Third World. Similarly, there was nothing soft about JFK’s rhetoric about a missile gap during the 1960 campaign, even if his military language was on specific points somewhat softer than his predecessors. For instance, he liked talking about a “flexible response” rather than “massive retaliation.” However, this was just talk since JFK was as “hawkish” as Truman and Eisenhower. Case in point, he not only risked nuclear war during the Bay of Pig incident but it was his Defense Secretary Robert McNamara that fully enunciated the strategy of MAD.

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54 Leffler, *For the Soul*, 190ff; Farber, *Age of Great Dreams*, 40-47.
Nevertheless, JFK’s anti-communism did contain a portion of posturing. This since he, like other Cold War Liberals, often seemingly felt a need to prove his anti-socialist credentials. His anti-communism also did have a subtler tone than his two predecessors. Above all, JFK often described the Cold War as at least as much an economic as an ideological conflict. This belief, perhaps stemming from his Progressive view of causation between material well-being and peace/freedom, also made him prone to praise the work of humanitarian groups such as USAID, whose “programs help people, and, by helping people, they help freedom” and the U.N., for which he borrowed Lincoln’s words “our last best hope” to describe. JFK also launched non-military projects to improve the U.S.’ international standing, like the Peace Corps, whose role was to offer technical assistance and carry “American idealism [to] the far corners of the earth,” and the Alliance for Progress, which was intended to revive the Good Neighbor policy towards Latin America and to shield it from Communism through economic development.

Another clear difference between JFK and his predecessors was his view of what the Cold War demanded of Americans. Because even though they had described Communism as a significant threat and admitted that the Cold War required great sacrifices, they never said that the country, its people, or values needed to change. On the contrary, according to both Truman and Eisenhower, Uncle Sam’s only chance to beat Uncle Joe was to stick to his guns. Conversely, JFK let the world know that America would reform to “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty” to fulfill its mission.

56 Ibid.
57 Quote from Dearborn, Exceptionalist-In-Chief, 186.
58 Dallek, An Unfinished Life, 338ff; Herring, Colony to Superpower, 711-719.
These latter words were a variant of the Progressive mantra that the U.S. needed reforms, and JFK would only be unusually successful in driving it home.\textsuperscript{59} However, before moving on to that, we shall end this part with noting that the rhetorical “soft underbelly” of JFK’s foreign policy in the early 1960s was a growing appendage to his traditional hardline Cold War liberalism. Already by 1966, Democrat Senator William Fulbright from Arkansas – who by then had beleaguered President Lyndon B. Johnson for two years about his Vietnam War policy – would make headlines with a book containing a complete rebuttal of the post-1898 exceptionalist mindset. He stated, for example, that he feared that the U.S. was “drifting into comments which, though generous and benevolent in intent, are so far-reaching as to exceed even America’s great capacities” because

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\begin{align*}
&\text{[\ldots] power tends to confuse itself with virtue and a great nation is particularly susceptible to the idea that its power is a sign of God’s favor, conferring upon it a special responsibility for other nations – to make them richer and happier and wiser, to remake them, that is, in its own shining image. Power confuses itself with virtue and tends also to take itself for omnipotence. Once imbued with the idea of a mission, a great nation easily assumes that it has the means as well as the duty to do God’s work. The Lord, after all, surely would not choose you as His agent and then deny you the sword with which to work His will.}\textsuperscript{60}
\end{align*}
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Indeed, Fulbright was a maverick Southern Democrat who, amongst other things, opposed civil rights legislation.\textsuperscript{61} Nevertheless, his moderate appraisal of Communism, revisionist view on the Cold War, admiration for various Third World “liberation movements,” calls for replacing bilateral aid with an international welfare system,\textsuperscript{62} and willingness to trace developing countries’ problems to Western actions made him a hero for a spectrum of people

\textsuperscript{59} Farber, \textit{Age of Great Dreams}, 31ff.
\textsuperscript{61} For a biographical and political portrait, see Randall Bennett Woods’ \textit{Fulbright: A Biography} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
\textsuperscript{62} “I suggest that we begin to replace bilateral foreign aid, which is analogous to private philanthropy, with an international program based on the same principle public responsibility which underlies progressive taxation and the social services we provide for our own people.” Ibid, 224.
stretching from American peace activists to Soviet propaganda officers. Yet, his passive form of American Exceptionalism had hardly been heard of after World War II, and many of his views would soon engulf the Democratic Party. Hence, JFK rhetorically and unintentionally prepared the ground for his party’s track towards a more typical (European) left-wing foreign policy. Moreover, since he simultaneously found a way to partly align his liberalism with the U.S. political tradition rhetorically, he would also posthumously become a vital figure for the final upending of his party’s domestic policies.

Finding a Way

As noted, Progressives’ reform ambitions were long impeded by Americans’ preference for exceptionalist notions and especially for communitarian solutions to societal issues. However, the support of – or at least acceptance of – collective solutions was gradually increasing, and JFK became the one who finally found a rhetorical model to break much of the remaining blockage. His best-known tweaking of collectivism to fit America’s heritage is the line from his Inaugural Address that stated, “ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.” However, a more elaborate example of his historic accomplishment was his successful invocation of the Frontier in support of both present reforms and future endeavors in his DNC Acceptance Speech six months earlier.

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63 JFK’s method had three purposes. First, he wanted to assure Americans through exceptionalist jargon that they can achieve anything by combining the country’s seemingly endless resources with hard work and positivist methods; second, muster support for collectivist projects by stroking American’s support for the notion of more equality; third, style such reforms as so self-evidently smart and desirable that only cold-hearted reactionaries could oppose them. Liberals still today use this rhetoric model and more recently Barack Obama has used it.

64 Kennedy, “Inaugural Address,” (January 20, 1961).
After first conventionally calling the Frontier a place where “the pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build a new world,” JFK spun this speech around the assertion that the redeeming of the West had been a result of collective striving more than individual efforts: “[The Pioneers’] motto was not ‘every man for himself’ – but ‘all for the common cause.’ They were determined to make that new world strong and free, to overcome its hazards and its hardships, to conquer the enemies that threatened from without and within.”

And after this partially correct but clear inversion of one of American Exceptionalism’s central themes, he turned the Frontier into a futuristic topic by adding the adjective “new” to the noun:

Today some would say that those struggles [of the old West] are all over – that all the horizons have been explored – that all the battles have been won – that there is no longer an American frontier. But [...] the problems are not all solved and the battles are not all won – and we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier – the frontier of the 1960’s – a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils – a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats.

Thus, what JFK did was to give up Wilson, FDR, and other earlier Progressives’ attempts to declare the Frontier period over. Instead, he altered it from a physical place in space and time to a perceptual place in the mind and appealed to America’s predilection for destiny, exploration, and hard work by offering a continuation of the historic journey begun by their ancestors:

[T]he New Frontier is here, whether we seek it or not. Beyond that frontier are the uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus. It would be easier to shrink back from that frontier, to look to the safe mediocrity of the past, to be lulled by good intentions and high rhetoric – and those who prefer that course should not cast their votes for me, regardless of party.

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66 Ibid. Kennedy had already used the metaphor “New frontiers” once, during the 1960 Presidential Campaign in an article in Life magazine, and he would use it again in a speech on June 7, 1961. Gamble, In Search of the City, 134ff.

67 Ibid.
Also, JFK linked the New Frontier to exceptionalist mythology by giving the nod to the idea of a national destiny in its modern form of standing up against totalitarianism:

For the harsh facts of the matter are that we stand on this frontier at a turning-point in history. We must prove all over again whether this nation – or any nation so conceived – can long endure – whether our society – with its freedom of choice, its breadth of opportunity, its range of alternatives – can compete with the single-minded advance of the Communist system.

Lastly, JFK appealed to America’s penchant for the dramatic by highlighting the significance of the decision voters would soon make: “All mankind waits upon our decision. A whole world looks to see what we will do. We cannot fail their trust, we cannot fail to try.”

This speech’s purely visionary nature represented a new kind – or at least a new level – of presidential rhetoric and it is unique in two ways. First, it meant the final internationalization, started by Wilson and FDR, of American Exceptionalism as a “process of forging an international symbolism” centered on the concept of human rights. Second, by offering a vision more daring (or at least more eloquent) than anyone before – except maybe for some of FDR’s most fanciful moments – this speech can be considered the point in U.S. history where the boldness of Rousseau finally bested the sagacity of the Founding Fathers. Because, what JFK did was to pressure his successors – even if the quality of their oratory has varied greatly – to offer their own grand visions about America’s future both at home and abroad. And one effect of this is that tall talk has become at least as important as president’s ability to present tangible policies.

Throughout his presidency, JFK cemented this new tone. For example, he began his 1962 State of the Union by categorizing himself and members of Congress as “custodians of the

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68 Ibid.
69 Novak, Choosing Our King, 111-122, quote from 113.
American heritage” and that “to improve it is the task of us all.” Like Wilson, FDR, and Truman, he also stressed that reforms at home were necessary because “if we cannot fulfill our own ideals here, we cannot expect others to accept them.” Moreover, since this pattern recurs in his two other State of the Union Addresses, they stand as foretokens not only of the final shift of the Democratic Party from an individualistic state-rights to a collectivistic welfare party but omens for the sociocultural sea of changes that the U.S. stood on the verge of going through.

Two more things should be noted. First, in a speech to the General Court of Massachusetts on January 9, 1961, it was JFK who (re)introduced the best-known exceptionalist phrase ever into American discourse:

In the task of forming my administration […] I have been guided by the standard John Winthrop set before his shipmates on the flagship Arbella three hundred and thirty-one years ago, as they, too, faced the task of building a new government on a perilous frontier. “We must always consider,” he said, “that we shall be as a city upon a hill – the eyes of all people are upon us.”

Second, JFK was wary about the impact of eight years of Eisenhower’s rhetoric and did try to recapture the word “freedom.” However, in this endeavor, he failed; partly because the Soviets made a big deal about economic and racial inequalities in American life, but mainly because he, like FDR and Truman, was every so often forced to use the term in its positive “rights” form to make it fit his agenda. An example of this is from a 1963 speech, in which he likened world peace to the contemporary situation in America’s inner cities, where “peace is not secure because freedom is incomplete.” And the most crucial effect of this failure was that the polarization of

71 Sorenson (ed.), Let the Word Go Forth, 57. Emphasis added. See also Gamble, In Search of the City, 133f.
U.S. politics between agents of equality and guardians of freedom would continue even after the former suddenly won a decisive victory over Americans’ traditional view of liberty.

AN EMPIRE OF EQUALITY

Figuratively, if Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson tilled the ground for modern liberalism, FDR and Harry Truman planted its seed, and the field was fertilized with JFK’s rhetorical ingenuity, Lyndon B. Johnson (1908-1973) was offered both to reap its fruits and stage a harvest fest. A raw political force by nature, this backwoods schoolteacher would manage to become one of the 20th century’s many presidents from modest backgrounds – and by taking the conclusive steps that upended American politics’ inner complexion from bottom-up, local, and communitarian to top-down, national, and collective, he also became one of the most important ones.73 Both his persona and accomplishments, therefore, deserve to be studied closely.

LBJ’s prime characteristic was his Herculean drive to get ahead in life and a mega-American (read: Texan) attitude to do things bigger, better, and faster. This drive served him well when hurled into the White House in November 1963.74 A typical example of his boldness is that he would postpone the escalation of the Vietnam War until after the 1964 election so he could run as a “peace candidate” against “warmonger” Barry Goldwater (see below).75 However, since LBJ seldom brooded over ideological details, at least in public, to recreate his worldview and ideological profile demand some puzzle work.

73 Ibid, 5-22.
75 Lawrence, Vietnam War, 85.
One thing that stands out about LBJ is his half-baked Kantian view of history. Specifically, he believed that developments were moving in forward, upward trajectories toward freedom, welfare, and equality but not that any spiritual force drove this development. It was therefore up to strongmen like himself to make history happen: “History is not made by nameless forces. History is made by men and women, by their governments and their nations.”76 This view is especially evident when it came to LBJ’s view of freedom: “History is on the side of freedom and is on the side of societies shaped from the genius of each people. History does not favor a single system or belief – unless force is used to make it so.”77 Thus, LBJ did not believe in a deterministic development nor any utopian end-stage. He reckoned instead that man’s struggle for a better world “is unending, for it is part of man’s ancient effort to master the passions of his mind, the demands of his spirit, the cruelties of nature.”78

Still, underneath this principally conservative view of the world, LBJ did house a conviction that there was something special with the U.S. because it was “the first nation in the history of the world to be founded with a purpose.”79 In his 1965 Inaugural Address, he said: “[W]e are a nation of believers. Underneath the clamor of building and the rush of our day’s pursuits, we are believers in justice and liberty and in our own union. We believe that every man must some day be free.”80 He also thought that this gave America a super strength:

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[T]hat is the mistake that our enemies have always made. In my lifetime, in depression and in war they have awaited our defeat. Each time, from the secret places of the American heart, came forth the faith that they could not see or that they could not even imagine. And it brought us victory. And it will again. For this is what America is all about. It is the uncrossed desert and the unclimbed ridge. It is the star that is not reached and the harvest that is sleeping in the unplowed ground. Is our world gone? We say farewell. Is a new world coming? We welcome it, and we will bend it to the hopes of man.\textsuperscript{81}

LBJ’s worldview was made more intricate by a conviction that the societal move forward, upwards toward higher stages of welfare, freedom, and equality only occurred if people followed certain moral codes. Explicitly, he believed that Americans, as the most moral people, had a duty to keep the whole world moving forward:

\begin{quote}
It is [...] our task to show that freedom from the control of other nations offers the surest road to progress, that history and experience testify to this truth. But it is not enough to call upon reason or point to examples. We must show it through action and we must show it through accomplishment.\textsuperscript{82}
\end{quote}

However, the main reason behind LBJ’s belief in man-made destinies and America’s greatness was his self-esteem and view of human nature, of which the first was as Texan in scale as the latter was harsh. When comparing himself to others, he normally perceived people as goodhearted and innovative but also weak and timid. Thus, he shared the Founding Fathers’ view of human nature as a mix of good and evil but differed from their verdict that people’s depraved sides could be balanced by constitutional arrangements (and their good sides sufficiently nurtured) enough to allow a classic bottom-up republican government. Instead, LBJ followed in Rousseau’s tradition and assumed that wisdom ultimately came from above.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
Consequently, LBJ considered the U.S. government to have an obligation to act as caretaker of the nation’s downtrodden and a federal welfare state both a necessity and a moral obligation. And he had an absolute belief in politics’ transformative power that equaled the blind faith in the marketplace often held by Classic Liberals. For instance, in 1968, he expressed that a Congressional housing bill would end racial acumen: “Now the Negro families no longer suffer the humiliation of being turned away because of their race [...] fair housing for all – all human beings who live in this country – is now a part of the American way of life.”

Furthermore, LBJ shared his predecessor’s unwavering belief that America was blessed with resources to “fix” everything from landing on the Moon to the total abolishment of poverty. All that was needed was for him as president to take the lead, push necessary legislation through Congress, and funnel adequate resources to bureaucrats to resolve the issues.

Clearly, this view did not match the Founding Father’s vision of America as an ordered arena of freedom set to allow individual self-realization, or even with the communitarian reading of John Locke. Instead, it was a combination of his strongman ideal and a Social Democratic view of the government’s role – plus a wish to trump FDR as the greatest reformer in U.S. history. At times, he revealed this tension between the U.S. tradition and his views, as in 1965, when speaking about securing voting rights for African Americans.

The essence of our American tradition of State and local governments is the belief expressed by Thomas Jefferson that Government is best which is closest to the people. Yet that belief is betrayed by those State and local officials who engage in denying the right of citizens to vote. Their actions serve only to assure that their State governments and local governments shall be remote from the people, least representative of the people’s will and least responsive to the people’s wishes.

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Later that year, LBJ went further in commencement remarks at Howard University, in which he proclaimed that voting rights were only the beginning and that negative freedoms were insufficient for creating “real” equality for African Americans: “We seek not just legal equity but human ability, not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result.” And he had a clear view of what this meant in terms of government responsibilities:

Jobs are part of the answer. They bring the income which permits a man to provide for his family. Decent homes in decent surroundings and a chance to learn – an equal chance to learn – are part of the answer. Welfare and social programs better designed to hold families together are part of the answer. Care for the sick is part of the answer. An understanding heart by all Americans is another big part of the answer. And to all of these fronts – and a dozen more – I will dedicate the expanding efforts of the Johnson administration.\(^{85}\)

To summarize, LBJ’s traits and ideological dispositions made him a natural candidate to take on the task to finally remake Thomas Jefferson’s Empire of Freedom into an Empire of Equality, and he showed that he intended to do so directly after JFK’s murder.

**CHANGING THE GAME**

LBJ apparently understood instinctively that the shock JFK’s assassination created offered an opportunity to push through changes that could affect U.S. history, politics, and society more than the New Deal. However, given the temporary nature of these circumstances, he also certainly realized that in the long-term he would have to rely on well-established themes and arguments. He also had to convince people that managerial liberalism could bring “redemption without sacrifice [and] fulfillment of moral sensibilities without personal pain.”\(^{86}\) To accomplish 

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\(^{86}\) Andrew, *Lyndon Johnson*, 9.
this, he took JFK’s rhetoric about the U.S. being the greatest and most prosperous country on Earth and ran with it. As a result, his rhetoric did not become original, but thanks to the pure personal force and types of arguments he put into defending his expansion of the federal government, American Exceptionalism finally assumed the same central role in domestic affairs as it had in foreign policy.

On literally the first day, LBJ singled out two issues to maximize his immediate political prospects: a tax cut (that he, like JFK before him, besides a bone to the middle class, saw as a way to long-term increase tax revenue) and civil rights legislation.\textsuperscript{87} The Kennedy administration had taken initiatives on both issues, but Southern Democrats and Midwestern Republicans had bogged down the bills in Congress.\textsuperscript{88} In a special address to that body on November 27, LBJ, therefore, said that it was time for “the ideals which [JFK] so nobly represented [to] be translated into effective action.” He also equated them to the country’s political mythology: “This is our challenge – not to hesitate, not to pause, not to turn about and linger over this evil moment, but to continue on our course so that we may fulfill the destiny that history has set for us.”\textsuperscript{89} Thus, what Progressives had wrestled with for decades and defined as small, necessary steps in the evolution of the Union – i.e., the building blocks of a welfare state – LBJ fixated as the nation’s God-given destiny. Writes one pundit, it was “a Promethean moment when everything seemed possible: the abolition of poverty, the overnight elimination of prejudice, unending economic expansion.”\textsuperscript{90}

Furthermore, American’s wish to honor a slain leader offered LBJ a window of opportunity to give his presidency a purpose of its own. The first sign of this came in December

\textsuperscript{87} Zelizer, \textit{Fierce Urgency of Now}, 1f; 61ff.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid, 11-60.
\textsuperscript{90} Frum, \textit{How We Got Here}, 3-11, quote from xxii.
1963, when he initiated his War on Poverty, before he, in the State of the Union on January 8, 1964, outlined a full-fledged program before that year’s General Election. Challenging the sitting Congress to go ahead and turn itself into “the best in the Nation’s history,” he said it could be

[...] known as the session which did more for civil rights than the last hundred sessions combined; as the session which enacted the most far-reaching tax cut of our time; as the session which declared all-out war on human poverty and unemployment in these United States; as the session which finally recognized the health needs of all our older citizens; as the session which reformed our tangled transportation and transit policies; as the session which achieved the most effective, efficient foreign aid program ever; and as the session which helped to build more homes, more schools, more libraries, and more hospitals than any single session of Congress in the history of our Republic.⁹¹

And he added: “All this and more can and must be done [...] by this summer, and it can be done without any increase in spending” and declared “unconditional war on poverty in America.”

After this early apex, LBJ’s speech moved onto a duller but so far unmatched “laundry list” of needs, demands, and goals ever presented by a sitting U.S. president. By containing everything from promises of new libraries to a complete abolishment of racism, the speech had similarities to the incessant lists of promises, pledges, and predictions accompanying the Soviet 5-year plans (which was somewhat of a time-typical habit of Western politicians, so he was not alone). In the end, for once hinting at a utopian spirit, LBJ even asked the country to join him “in working for a nation [...] that is free from want and a world that is free from hate – a world of peace and justice, and freedom and abundance, for our time and for all time to come.” However, before he could do this, he had to push JFK’s two bills through and get elected in his own right.

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A complication for LBJ in the spring of 1964 was that his political views as a Southerner by birth and a New Dealer by heart partially diverged from his party, or at least from the direction influential parts of it wanted to go. Most pointedly, his moderate “welfarism” had become a curate’s egg compared to the full-sized Social Democracy many younger Democrats by then started to embrace. In addition, unlike Keynesians similar to Galbraith but in line with Wilson, FDR, and Truman, he still believed in the fundamental soundness of capitalism, ascribed to the dogma of a balanced budget, and believed – as already hinted – in what later generations of Democrats would scorn as “trickle-down” or “supply-side economics.”

In other words, LBJ still represented the traditional liberal form of Americanism that focused on opportunity and hard work more than redistribution and tax-funded relief systems. He also wanted to be a president “who helped to feed the hungry” and “prepare[d] them to be taxpayers instead of tax-eaters.” However, his economic views were not rooted in any deep esteem or sentiment for American heritage. In fact, despite delivering statements like, “There is no asset more precious to freedom, there is no guarantee more vital to liberty than a robust American economy,” he saw a growing economy only as a means to reach political ends. Consequently, LBJ seldom mused over the subject even in his State of the Union Addresses, which accordingly, as has been seen, were filled with promises of reforms. Nor did he question

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92 Zelizer, *Fierce Urgency of Now*, 64-74.
93 When signing the 1964 Revenue Act, LBJ asserted that “We could have chosen to stimulate the economy through a higher level of Government spending. We doubted the wisdom of following that course. Instead we chose tax reduction and at the same time we made conscientious and earnest attempts to reduce Government expenditures and we are constantly looking at those expenditures.” Lyndon B. Johnson, “Radio and Television Remarks Upon Signing the Tax Bill,” (February 26, 1964), *APP*, accessed May 7, 2018, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/239810.
95 Ibid.
inflation driving deficit spending until it was too late.\textsuperscript{96} Hence, like many of his standpoints, LBJ umpired economic policies ultimately by how they serviced his goal to become a “great” president. An example of this pragmatic-cynical view is how he could first cheerfully hail the 1964 tax cuts with exceptionalist pomposity...

No economic system anywhere has ever had the success of the American economy. By placing maximum reliance on the initiative and the creative energies of individual businessmen and workers, we have created here in our land the most prosperous nation in the history of the world.\textsuperscript{97}

...only to make it clear that if they did not work, “the federal Government will [then] have to do for the economy what the economy should do for itself.”\textsuperscript{98}

There are some exceptions to this mindset, however, and for LBJ as a former schoolteacher, education was one of them. He believed that it was a crucial mechanism to make the American Dream a reality for millions of people.\textsuperscript{99} Another exception is that he was bothered by people’s still harsh portrayals of African Americans, and in this issue, he saw political advantages as well. As the Civil Rights Movement garnered public support for reform, he supported a Civil Rights Bill before JFK’s murder.\textsuperscript{100} He had done so in a speech at Gettysburg, where he, like Wilson, had called forth the ghosts of Union soldiers of its battlefield for his cause:

\textsuperscript{96} “High inflation was the first shock [of JFK’s tax reductions]. An initial boom (by 1969, unemployment was 3.5 percent) spawned a wage-price spiral. With government seeming to guarantee 4 percent unemployment, workers and businesses had little reason to restrain wages and prices. In 1960, inflation was 1 percent; by 1980, it was 13 percent. The economy became less stable. From 1969 to 1982, there were four recessions, as the Federal Reserve alternated between trying to push unemployment down and prevent inflation from going up. Only in the early 1980s did the Fed, under Paul Volcker and with Ronald Reagan’s support, crush inflationary psychology.” Quote from Robert Samuelson, “How JFK’s mistake led to the sequester mess,” (March 3, 2013) Washington Post, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/robert-samuelson-how-jfks-mistake-led-to-the-sequester-mess/2013/03/03/ca4ba654-82bf-11e2-a350-49866afab584_story.html. See also Zelizer, \textit{Fierce Urgency of Now}, 74-81.

\textsuperscript{97} Johnson, “Radio and Television Remarks Upon Signing the Tax Bill,” (February 26, 1964).

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{99} Zelizer, \textit{Fierce Urgency of Now}, 174-184.

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid, 28-46, 85-130.
As we [Americans] maintain the vigil of peace, we must remember that justice is a vigil, too – a vigil we must keep in our own streets and schools and among the lives of all our people – so that those who died here on their native soil shall not have died in vain. [...] The Negro today asks for justice. [...] The solution is in our hands. Unless we are willing to yield up our destiny of greatness among the civilizations of history, Americans – white and Negro together – must be about the business of resolving the challenge which confronts us now.\textsuperscript{101}

Given the congressional power of Southern Democrats, LBJ later used more suitable language in his special address to Congress and his first State of the Union. However, at the signing of the Civil Rights Bill on July 2, 1964, he did it again:

\begin{quote}
One hundred and eighty-eight years ago this week a small band of valiant men began a long struggle for freedom. They pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor not only to found a nation, but to forge an ideal of freedom – not only for political independence, but for personal liberty – not only to eliminate foreign rule, but to establish the rule of justice in the affairs of men. That struggle was a turning point in our history. Today in far corners of distant continents, the ideals of those American patriots still shape the struggles of men who hunger for freedom.\textsuperscript{102}
\end{quote}

Also, LBJ declared the treatment of African Americans a sin against the country’s creed:

\begin{quote}
We believe that all men are entitled to the blessings of liberty. Yet millions are being deprived of those blessings – not because of their own failures, but because of the color of their skin. The reasons are deeply imbedded in history and tradition and the nature of man. We can understand – without rancor or hatred – how this all happened. But it cannot continue. Our Constitution, the foundation of our Republic, forbids it. The principles of our freedom forbid it. Morality forbids it. And the law I will sign tonight forbids it.\textsuperscript{103}
\end{quote}

Nevertheless, as with the economy, LBJ’s commitment to the 1964 Civil Rights Bill did not seem to rest upon profound veneration for the Constitution. On the contrary, he was prepared – at least according to more stern interpretations of the texts’ original meanings – to go against it

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\textsuperscript{101} Lyndon B. Johnson, \textit{The Speeches of President Lyndon B. Johnson} (Filibust Publishing, 2015), 1f. \\
\textsuperscript{102} Lyndon B. Johnson, “Radio and Television Remarks Upon Signing the Civil Rights Bill” (July 2, 1964) \textit{APP}, accessed May 12, 2018, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/239092. \\
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
to reach his goal. Precisely, the following year, when speaking in favor of the subsequent Voting Rights Bill, LBJ told Congress that the right to vote “is no issue of States rights or national rights. There is only the struggle for human rights.”[^104] This could be interpreted as what the U.S. President said standing before the U.S. Congress was that he saw the concept of human rights as superior to the U.S. Constitution, and if so, this was not what the Founders had intended. George Washington had made it clear that the Constitution as it “at any time exists till changed by an explicit and authentic act of the whole people [must be] sacredly obligatory upon all.”[^105] Now, LBJ, in line with the idea of a “living” constitution, argued instead that this document’s words could be reinterpreted because “the time for waiting is gone.”[^106]

Thus, the argument can be made that this event marks the definitive divorce of the Declaration from the Constitution mentioned earlier. At a minimum, the moment must be said to reflect the shift in jurisprudence in favor of “loose constructionism” and the Warren and Berger Courts’ focus on ever-widening individual rights (that replaced the “liberal restraint” theory of people such as Felix Frankfurter). And its impact has been enormous. Because, even if the idea of a “living Constitution” dates back to Thomas Jefferson, the notion that the Constitution could be construed (in Wilson’s vocabulary) “according to the Darwinian principle”[^107] from the viewpoint of current values would probably have astounded the third president; especially if he – as a minimalist when it came to federal powers – had known that it was to make possible a great expansion of the federal government’s economic, social, and cultural influence.^[108]

[^105]: Washington, “Farewell Address” (September 19, 1796).
[^108]: In more detail, Wilson and others had come up with the term a “living Constitution” mainly to make easy reforms of the governing structure of America. However, many soon began to see a much wider use for it if applied to policy. This development started in the 1930s, as the theme of more equality began to gain traction within the
THE GREAT SOCIETY

As noted, in his 1964 State of the Union, LBJ laid down the premise for his War on Poverty by declaring that “[t]he richest Nation of earth can afford to win it.” In other words, in customary American-style, he considered victory as a given and no cost as too high, and following in the tradition of FDR and Truman, he branded his agenda the Great Society. When he first used this label in public on May 7, 1964, he explained it only as “a society where no child will go unfed, and no youngster will go unschooled,” but then explicated himself a few weeks later, in an exceptionalism-laden speech at the University of Michigan:

The purpose of protecting the life of our Nation and preserving the liberty of our citizens is to pursue the happiness of our people. Our success in that pursuit is the test of our success as a Nation. For a century we labored to settle and to subdue a continent. For half a century we called upon unbounded invention and untiring industry to create an order of plenty for all of our people. The challenge of the next half century is whether we have the wisdom to use that wealth to enrich and elevate our national life, and to advance the quality of our American civilization. [...] For in your time we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society.

Since the scale of political intrusion this demanded had never before been suggested, it did not fit the ethos of traditional American Exceptionalism. In a timely technocratic manner, LBJ therefore

judicial branch. Because of the severity of judicial vernacular, this development is hard to track rhetorically; at least for nonprofessionals. However, even a quick read of 20th century U.S. History makes it clear that as the theory of judicial restraint by then started to lose ground as focus shifted from individual to collective rights, which in the 1960s led the Supreme Court to become more compliant with Progressives. Contrariwise, as the risk for radical policies to be struck down by the Court, politicians and bureaucrats became more likely to present new ones. See Schwartz, History of the Supreme Court, 263-285; David M. O’Brien, Storm Center: The Supreme Court in American Politics (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011; 9th edition), 188f. See also Bradley C.S. Watson, Living Constitution, Dying Faith: Progressivism and the New Science of Jurisprudence (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2009), passim; Mary Ann Glendon, Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse (New York: The Free Press, 1991), passim.

promised to add flesh to his policy outline by gathering “the best thought and the broadest knowledge from all over the world” and to hold “a series of White House conferences and meetings [on how] to set our course toward the Great Society.”

The Great Society marks a watershed in U.S. history also because it rested upon replacing the old absolute concept of poverty with a new relative one. By doing so, LBJ moved from FDR’s “socially conservative welfare state [that] was a limited assignment” to cure temporary ills toward a “modern, egalitarian welfare state [that] is an open-ended commitment to growth in government” aiming to achieve permanently more than just equality of opportunity.

Liberals, who had often been wary of or even disliked JFK because of his conservative sides, were naturally thrilled by the Great Society, realizing it as a turning point beyond which there were no longer any significant roadblocks to turn America into a “normal” Western welfare state left. For that same reason, LBJ realized that the Great Society – despite his mass of exceptionalistic diction to sell it to the people – stood in such stark contrast to the U.S. political tradition that he needed to defend its organization using familiar language. In his University of Michigan speech, he therefore nodded the country’s anti-statist tradition by saying that “[t]he solution to problems does not rest on a massive program in Washington,” and to the country’s communitarian convention by promising to execute the Great Society through “new concepts of cooperation, a creative federalism, between the National Capital and the leaders of local communities.”

However, this model – which meant channeling federal money to grassroots organizations rather than to traditional state and local entities and then letting federal technocrats

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112 Ibid.
114 Johnson, “Remarks at the University of Michigan,” (May 22, 1964); see also Zelizer, *Fierce Urgency of Now*, 132.
supervise projects from D.C. – created widespread problems of waste, fraud, and corruption.\textsuperscript{115} It was, therefore, quickly aborted and replaced with traditional top-down structures. For instance, Medicare and Medicaid was directly created as wholesale federal programs.\textsuperscript{116} As well, by moving “a lot of decisions that had made in the democratic parts of American government and relocate[ing] them to the bureaucracy or the judiciary,”\textsuperscript{117} the Great Society paved the way for a new level of federal involvement in everyday life. And this was an opportunity to increase both their own and federal powers that was hastily seized upon by many members of the New Class. The importance of this moment in U.S. history and its effects needs to be specifically considered.

**AMERICAN MEGALOMANIA**

As the Great Society’s magnitude became clear, it became evident that the term’s adjective alluded as much to LBJ’s private ambitions as to U.S. political traditions. As it took center stage in the administration’s information strategy, his oratory in support of it stands unrivaled for a domestic initiative, showing the full force of American Exceptionalism and the country’s think-big tradition. For example, at a fundraising event in June 1964 in Detroit, Michigan, he boasted:

> We stand at the edge of the greatest era in the life of any nation. For the first time in world history we have the abundance and the ability to free every man from hopeless want, and to free every person to find fulfillment in the works of his mind or the labor of his hands. Even the greatest of all past civilizations existed on the exploitation of the misery of the many. This Nation, this people, this generation, has man’s first chance to create a Great Society: a society of success without squalor, beauty without barrenness, works of genius without the wretchedness of poverty.\textsuperscript{118}


\textsuperscript{116} Zelizer, *Fierce Urgency of New*, 184-201.


Still, with the 1964 election approaching, LBJ felt pressured to at least partly reconcile the Great Society with the country’s intellectual heritage. However, despite his bombastic language, he typically managed only to produce what can be deemed platitudes regarding American’s appreciation of being avant-garde and unafraid. Like in his DNC Acceptance Speech on August 27, when trying to redefine the notion of freedom to fit his plans, he said: “This Nation – this generation – in this hour, has man’s first chance to build the Great Society – a place where the meaning of man’s life matches the marvels of man’s labor.”

But, after also stating that “[t]he man who is hungry, who cannot find work or educate his children, who is bowed by want [...] is not fully free,” he could only fit the rights-based freedom that his Great Society was aspiring to create into the historically short annals of Progressivism:

For more than 30 years, from social security to the war against poverty, we have diligently worked to enlarge the freedom of man. And as a result, Americans tonight are freer to live as they want to live, to pursue their ambitions, to meet their desires, to raise their families than at any time in all of our glorious history.

In his Inaugural Address the following January, LBJ tried another angle by framing the story of America as a letter of intent or a contract that was still valid, even though the present was marked by “rapid and fantastic change”:

Our destiny in the midst of change will rest on the unchanged character of our people and on their faith. They came here – the exile and the stranger, brave but frightened – to find a place where a man could be his own man. They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind. And it binds us still. If we keep its terms we shall flourish.

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120 Ibid.
121 Lyndon B. Johnson, “The President’s Inaugural Address,” (January 20, 1965).
A few months later, he also approached the need for historic anchorage from the viewpoint of America’s revolutionary nature. But, when speaking at Howard University, he did so by throwing his support behind African Americans’ demands to move beyond the country’s traditional negative freedoms to achieve social, economic, and cultural equality. Consequently, arguably, he sounded more as a model European than a typical American:

Freedom is the right to share, share fully and equally, in American society – to vote, to hold a job, to enter a public place, to go to school. It is the right to be treated in every part of our national life as a person equal in dignity and promise to all others. But freedom is not enough. You do not wipe away the scars of centuries by saying: Now you are free to go where you want, and do as you desire, and choose the leaders you please.122

The importance of this last declaration hardly needs to be pointed out. Next to a few statements made by Bryan, Wilson, and FDR, it was the clearest example made to date about the Democratic Party’s break from central parts of American Exceptionalism and it would deeply affect a good portion of the public’s views on the federal government’s role. Or as noted by one scholar, even though “[i]t would be too much to say that the spirit of Locke and limited government was extinguished [it] clearly was overshadowed by a rival ethos that partook of the spirit of positive government”123 dominant in Europe. Hence, the Great Society, along with the Vietnam War, should be seen as a part of the era’s overall development through which the U.S. “embarked on a series of ventures that bespoke a conviction of limitless power at home as well as abroad.”124

To finish this section, LBJ’s rhetoric for the Great Society is historic in its pomposity. And even if it in the short term seemed ineffective – given that as the political truce after JFK’s

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123 Brooks, American Exceptionalism, 89.
124 Andrew, Lyndon Johnson, 83f.
death dissolved, a fierce opposition emerged to the Progressive paradigm as a whole – it was – as most parts of the Great Society survive to this day – successful in the long term. Certainly, historians have noted that this success depended greatly upon the fact that several views LBJ personally did not share – like poverty being a structural rather than an individual problem – became entrenched within the administrative state through the New Class.\textsuperscript{125} Nevertheless, LBJ, through his rhetoric, did change millions of Americans’ view of the need and rightfulness of more equality and cemented the use of exceptionalist language in domestic discourses. To prove this latter point, a look at some other uses of such vocabulary in the 1960s will be edifying.

SPACE COWBOYS

Space is quintessentially American – unlimited, uncharted, challenging, and there for the taking, just as North America had been. Thus, Americans became early space visionaries, like New England author Edward E. Hale, who in 1869 envisioned “how a satellite in polar orbit could be used as a navigational aid to ocean-going vessels,”\textsuperscript{126} and as the U.S. space program took shape, “the exploration of outer space was popularly described using language and archetypes borrowed from America’s own frontier mythology.”\textsuperscript{127} Also, NASA was created as an “open program” with near-full public insight in deliberate contrast to the secretive military Soviet space program. The agency has also since frequently tooled events to reflect the exceptionalist spirit, as when

\textsuperscript{125} For discussions about this see Patterson, \textit{America’s Struggle}, 115-141, 157-170; Andrew, \textit{Lyndon Johnson}, 183-199.


\textsuperscript{127} Scott & Jurek, \textit{Marketing the Moon}, 1-15.
Neil Armstrong’s broadcast from space before landing on the Moon in 1969 began with a picture of the Apollo 11 insignia with the American eagle spreading its wings over the lunar surface.\textsuperscript{128}

For this reason, the Space Program became an essential factor in American mythology and contributed to the partial reorientation of it away from the Founding Period and the Wild West toward the present and the future instigated by JFK. A sign of this is that science fiction in the 1960s bypassed Westerns as the most popular subject in films and television.\textsuperscript{129} Since then, these two themes have also often merged. For example, in comparison to a popular television Western of the time, the producers of Star Trek tried to sell the series as Wagon Train to the Stars.\textsuperscript{130} (In more modern times, Western movie icon Clint Eastwood has also starred in Space Cowboys, Star Wars’ lead Harrison Ford in Cowboy & Aliens, and NASA described the International Space Station as “a frontier outpost, similar to the forts (military and civil) established in the Westward expansion of the United States.”\textsuperscript{131}) Moreover, the public’s engagement has been fanciful. For instance, in 1976, when NASA named its Space Shuttles Columbia, Challenger, Discovery, Atlantis, and Endeavour, the White House, after a write-in campaign by “Trekkers,” would change the name of the first test vehicle from Constitution to Enterprise, the name of the TV-series flagship.\textsuperscript{132}

The exceptionalist nature of the Space Program is traceable in presidential speeches as well. In Houston in 1962, JFK nodded to American Exceptionalism by saying, “[w]e choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid, xii, 1; Launius, NASA, 34; Cull, The Cold War, 305f.
\textsuperscript{130} Scott & Jurek, Marketing the Moon, 3.
\textsuperscript{132} Launius, NASA, 111.
they are hard.” He also identified the Moon Program as a result of the national soul formed in the Colonial Era:

[T]he United States was not built by those who waited and rested and wished to look behind them. This country was conquered by those who moved forward – and so will space. William Bradford, speaking in 1630 of the founding of the Plymouth Bay Colony, said that all great and honorable actions are accompanied with great difficulties, and both must be enterprised and overcome with answerable courage.\(^\text{133}\)

In the same way, three years later, LBJ called astronauts “pioneers,” said that “many said about space what men probably said 500 years before about America itself – that the environment was hostile, that the climate was no good, that there was nothing there worth the trip anyway.” He also used the space program as proof of the supremacy of the U.S. system:

Only a few years ago, this great Nation was unmistakably behind in space. [...] But no such prophecies are heard today. Proceeding openly – openly admitting our failures, openly sharing and offering to share our successes – the United States of America has proceeded with the determination and the zeal that burns in the hearts of men who love liberty. And, today, we know that America's success is very great indeed.\(^\text{134}\)

All in all, like the Great Society and the Vietnam War, the Space Program reflects the American explorer and “think big” attitude as well as JFK and LBJ’s image of the U.S. as “a model for a society without limits, an ebullient and liberal technocracy.”\(^\text{135}\) There were even those who tried to give it a religious touch. After the first Moon landing, Richard Nixon called it “the greatest week in the history of the world since the Creation.”\(^\text{136}\) And after the 1986


\(^{135}\) Walter McDougall quoted in Farber, Age of Great Dreams, 239.

Challenger disaster, Ronald Reagan would quote a poem about dying while attempting to “touch
the face of God.” Nonetheless, in the second half of the 1960s, while Americans as citizens
took great pride in their astronauts, as voters, they began to lose faith not only in the man
heading both the Moon Program and the Great Society but Progressive policies in general.

MODERN CONSERVATISM

As LBJ extended the New/Fair Deal into a more European-like welfare state, the pressure for
clear ideological party lines mounted among liberals and conservatives and the partisan refining
process that had been ongoing since the 1890s intensified. For the Democrats, this development
ensued mainly from within as various bodies of the party and its foremost voter blocks continued
their slow but steady radicalization (this also goes for most of the party’s leadership, but not for
all of its presidential candidates). In contrast, after losing the White House in 1960, centrist
Republicans for the first time in part – and until the 1980s, temporarily – lost their advantage to
the Conservative Movement. This “New Right” had roots in the old Taft-wing of the party that
had lost its predominance to the “Eastern establishment” with Eisenhower and wanted the GOP
to offer more of “a choice, not an echo” by challenging the postwar consensus apropos of the
welfare state, the Cold War, and other issues. And even if the difference between the
movement and “Country Club Republicanism” is often exaggerated, it was rhetorically stark.

138 For a sum-up of the Democratic Party’s evolution during this time-period, see Jules Witcover, Party of the
People: A History of the Democrats (New York: Random House, 2003), 279-516. See also Zelizer, Fierce Urgency
of Now, 13-22.
139 Geoffrey Kabaservice, Rule and Ruin: The Downfall Of Moderation And The Destruction Of The Republican
140 The symbolic starting point of the Conservative Movement can be set to 1947, when the GOP leadership
essentially abandoned the party’s traditional isolationism (by backing the Truman Doctrine) and restated it as a force
The historical importance of this rhetoric shift cannot be exaggerated. Because, while modern liberalism supported a European-like welfare state and more equality, the Conservative Movement emphasized American Exceptionalism, specifically the notion of freedom, often in language unheard of before.¹⁴¹ For example, William F. Buckley Jr., one of the movements’ founders, wrote:

I will not cede more power to the state. I will not willingly cede more power to anyone, not to the state, not to General Motors, not to the CIO. I will hoard my power like a miser, resisting every effort to drain it away from me. I will then use my power, as I see fit. I mean to live my life an obedient man, but obedient to God, subservient to the wisdom of my ancestors; never to the authority of political truths arrived at yesterday at the voting booth. That is a program of sorts, is it not? It is certainly program enough to keep conservatives busy, and Liberals at bay. And the nation free.¹⁴²

As a consequence, the modern American right and left effectively became each other’s mirror images, reflecting the difference in which exceptional notion – freedom or equality – their voters amassed around. This also led to a change in voting patterns, which in turn augmented this development further. Briefly, as the Democrats became increasingly more dependent upon votes from Northern urban areas, the GOP base started to shift from moderate New England and protectionist-isolationist Midwestern states toward the traditionalist South and free-spirited West. Hence, while the basic anatomy of the Democratic Party’s New Deal coalition of blue-collar workers, blacks, Jews, and intellectuals survived this process, the GOP became diversified.

for individualism (by passing the Taft-Hartley Act, giving workers the right not to join a union). In the 1950s, the movement then engaged in ideological deliberations that led forward to the formation of a number of principles that in due course began to appear in organizations like the Young Americans for Freedom’s founding statement. It was filled with language such as “the Constitution of the United States is the best arrangement yet [to impede] the concentration and abuse of power” and “the forces of international Communism are, at present, the greatest single threat [and] the United States should stress victory over, rather than coexistence with, this menace.” See “The Sharon Statement,” in Gregory L. Schneider (ed.), Conservatism in America Since 1930 (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 239f. Quote from Phyllis Schlafly, “A Choice, Not an Echo,” in Ibid, 233. Also Garry Wills, Reagan’s America: Innocents at Home (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 339ff.
¹⁴¹ Gerring, Party Ideologies, 125-158.
Specifically, the Republican Party’s earlier reasonably homogeneous alliance of farmers, small-town dwellers, and businessmen gradually turned into an ideologically cacophonous group of traditionalists, libertarians, and anti-communists. This was essentially a negative “Leave me alone!” coalition held together by people’s belief in American Exceptionalism and anti-communist sentiments. And this amalgamation was soon to be even more diverse as a group of combative ideologues joined the party. As a group, they would profoundly affect the GOP’s ideological matrix and gain a tremendous influence over U.S. politics. In time, its members would help make American Exceptionalism a near-right-wing monopoly.

**NEOCONSERVATISM**

After being distressed by Stalin and Mao’s crimes and failures, a group of former left-wingers had become committed Cold War Liberals after World War II. And as they were now as exalted by democracy and capitalism as disgruntled with Communism, they became rousing devotees of American Exceptionalism. These born-again intellectuals therefore became so aghast over the 1960s emerging “counter-culture” and the budding “soft underbelly” of the Democrats’ foreign policy that they eventually decided to move on further and eventually joined the GOP. However, youthful ideals tend to create thought patterns that can survive ideological

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 conversions, and there exist two fundamental differences between Neoconservatives and “real” Conservatives that need to be scrutinized in this setting.

First, Neoconservatives tend to retain an idealistic, Rousseauian view of human nature. Explicitly, even if they see human nature as innate and flawed, they tend to consider human’s existential outlook as so centered upon a supreme longing for freedom that they disregard people’s diverse set of equally strong (or stronger) longings, e.g., for security, family, and community. Second, while conservatives stress society’s unique historical, cultural, and other conditions and appreciate traditions as accumulated, evolving quantities, neoconservatives – in line with Rousseau and philosophers such as Leo Strauss\textsuperscript{145} – mistrust traditions. Instead, they aspire to uncover what they deem natural laws and eternal truths. Also, since they, like Plato, often believe that Truth is only accessible through Logic for a select few (themselves), they “commit the grave error of viewing the state as their [potential] agent,”\textsuperscript{146} and become zealous in their thinking. In other words, one could say that neoconservatives, like Marxists, are elitists favoring clear-cut theories and prefer to reason in the abstract.\textsuperscript{147}

Some other impacts of these contrasts need to be pinpointed. First, concerning foreign policy, neoconservative’s belief in an overriding human longing for freedom makes them advocates of democratization of other countries while simultaneously relying on theories that


blind them to historical, cultural, and other obstacles confounding such processes. Also, a lingering Trotskyist inkling that the world can change rapidly for the better through military means makes some of them prone to spread democracy via military means led by a strong executive. However, this gun-ho gusto would not fully capture the GOP until the 1990s. Early or “first-generation” neoconservatives like Jeane Kirkpatrick (1926–2006) instead tended to be “ultra-realists” similar to John Foster Dulles and view the Cold War as such a defining historical struggle that it motivated discrimination between “authoritarians” and “totalitarians” and rationalized alliances with West-oriented Third World dictators.148

To define the differences between conservatives and neoconservatives in domestic politics is more complicated. To start, many neoconservatives are so focused on foreign affairs that they tend to just adopt standard right-wing stances on domestic issues and talk about them in stark and often exceptionalistic terms. Accordingly, they often sound like “real” Conservatives, as when Irving Kristol in 1976 outlined his view on the notion of equality:

Neoconservatism affirms the traditional American idea of equality, but rejects egalitarianism – the equality of condition for all citizens – as a proper goal for government to pursue. The equality proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence is an equality of natural rights, including the right to become unequal (within limits) in wealth, or public esteem, or influence. Without that right, equality becomes the enemy of liberty.149

Still, on many issues, Neoconservatives’ left-wing heritage shines through. For example, while conservatives deem constitutionalism, gentlemanliness, and “ordered liberty” requisites for a

sustainable economy, neoconservatives believe, like libertarians, in the simple “magic” of the market, free trade, and tax cuts.\textsuperscript{150}

This difference may sound academic, but over time this bent for theoretical orthodoxy helped make the GOP an ideologically rigid party. In short, neoconservatives, by joining “New Right” Republicans akin to Jack Kamp in their campaign for lower taxes, assisted in pushing the GOP from being a fiscally conservative party that favored low taxes but also balanced budgets. For example, as late as 1968, the party’s Congressional caucus could attempt to avoid inflation and close the budget deficit created by the Great Society and the Vietnam War by supporting a sizable tax hike suggested by LBJ. But, neoconservatives’ (and the New Right’s) bent for theoretical purity over responsible statesmanship after that nurtured a \textit{No More Taxes!} attitude that rendered such acts of demanding statecraft more difficult.\textsuperscript{151} In 1984, when President Reagan wanted to retain an income tax increase as a “last resort” to fight the deficit in that year’s campaign plank, he was steamrolled by the Republican National Convention.\textsuperscript{152}

Irving Kristol gave a reason for this neoconservative approach to the economy in a 1977 article which criticized that era’s dominant Keynesian theory for “showing clear signs of sclerosis, even senility” and supported instead the fledgling school of “supply-side fiscal policy,” which he presented as a Gordian knot that could resolve several problems. Its central belief is that tax cuts can stimulate the economy so much that unemployment and budget deficits, thanks

\textsuperscript{150} This trust goes down on Adam Smith’s vulgarization of Thomas Aquinas’ theory of economics that, by eliminating consumption and final distribution as variables, leaves Classical Liberal Economic Theory focusing exclusively on production and exchange. See John D. Mueller, \textit{Redeeming Economics: Rediscovering the Missing Element} (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2010), 1-132.

\textsuperscript{151} Zelizer, \textit{Fierce Urgency of New}, 263-302.

to growth and subsequent increases in tax revenues, disappear. Kristol also hoped that this dynamic would resolve the welfare state dilemma because:

Simply to reduce government expenditures [...] creates too many problems. (And a ruthless dismantling of the welfare state is, in any case, unthinkable.) It is only a substantial tax cut that will, in time, permit us to reduce the relative size of the public sector by an expansion of the private sector.

He also said: “Neoconservatism is not at all hostile to the idea of a welfare state, but it is critical of the Great Society version of this welfare state [and] to social programs that create vast and energetic bureaucracies ‘to solve social problems.’”

Because of views like this, neoconservatives are now and then given label “big government conservatives.” They also often support governmental programs and initiatives like George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act (2002), which radically increased the federal government’s powers, influence, and expenditures. Hence, it could be argued that neoconservatives are trying to reach liberal goals through conservative means. Perhaps, the chief change brought on by this is the loss of the GOP’s historic role as a guardian of balanced budgets and sound finances in general. Though, this change would take time; not least because the man who first understood the eclectic “new” GOP and managed to figure out how to animate its diverse parts refused to accept such ideological distortions.

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153 It can be noted that this school of thought was the result of a long-drawn ideological counter attack against Socialism that had been carried out largely “under the radar” since the publication of Friedrich von Hayek’s The Road to Selfdom (1944) until the “neoclassic” school of Liberal Economics started to get more public attention with Milton Friedman’s Capitalism and Freedom (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1962; reprint 2002) and then also a number of Nobel Prizes winners in Economics during the 1970s.
154 Kristol, Neoconservative Persuasion, 149, 154.
155 Ibid.
156 Hartman, War for the Soul, 216.
Barry Goldwater (1909-1998) was not an archetypal Country Club Republican. He was of Jewish descent, a hard-nosed ideologue, maverick, and, since Arizona was a territory at his birth, technically one of America’s last frontier politician. After joining the Senate in 1952, he made a name himself by criticizing the Eisenhower administration for being too liberal and calling the U.N. “a discussion forum” and “sacred cow.” Later, he also labeled LBJ “the Santa Claus of the free lunch [and] the government handout.” Still, his most stunning move was that he, as his party’s 1964 nominee, opposed both the Civil Rights Act and the Great Society as an improper limitation of state’s rights. This ensured Goldwater the epithet “Mr. Conservative,” and his nomination meant that, for the first time in decades, a major party candidate was “directly challenging the basic premise of the welfare state.”

Predictably, Goldwater’s rhetoric regularly vaulted into exceptionalist territory. He opened his RNC Acceptance Speech by placing the present in the long course of U.S. history and declared threats to the country’s exceptional character and freedom as the time’s foremost challenge:

The good Lord raised this mighty Republic to be a home for the brave and to flourish as the land of the free – not to stagnate in the swampland of collectivism – not to cringe before the bullying of Communism. The tide has been running against freedom. Our people have followed false prophets. We must and we shall return to proven ways – not because they are old, but because they are true. We must and we shall set the tides running again in the cause of freedom.

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159 Perlstein, Before the Storm, 363ff.  
160 Edwards, Conservative Revolution, 131.  
161 Goldwater, Where I Stand, 9.
Then Goldwater took his party’s freedom agenda, as it had been made distinct by Eisenhower, to its logical extreme by stating that freedoms dwindling at home had a broader meaning because the U.S.’s mission was to guide the world:

We Americans understand freedom. We have earned it, lived for it, and died for it. This nation and its people are freedom’s model in a doubting world. We can be freedom’s missionaries in a doubting world. But first we must renew freedom’s mission in our own hearts and in our own homes.\textsuperscript{162}

Despite this aggressive foreign policy rhetoric, though, Goldwater was not an early neoconservative. This is because he was not convinced of the existence of a universal and overpowering human longing for freedom:

I know that freedom is not the fruit of every soil. I know that our own freedom was achieved through centuries by the unremitting efforts of brave and wise men. I know that the road to freedom is a long and challenging road. I know that some men may walk away from it, that some men resist challenge – accepting the false security of governmental paternalism.\textsuperscript{163}

In opposition to what would become neoconservative strategy, when Goldwater turned to the home front, he also still charged that the menacing of America’s freedoms in the name of welfare benefits challenged both Man and the heavenly origin of the country:

Those who seek to live your lives for you, to take your liberties in return for relieving you of your responsibilities – those who elevate the state and downgrade the citizen – must see ultimately a world in which earthly power can be substituted for divine will. This Nation was founded upon the rejection of that notion and upon the acceptance of God as the author of freedom. Those who seek absolute power, even though they seek it to do what they regard as good, are simply demanding their right to enforce their own version of heaven on earth.\textsuperscript{164}

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid, 10.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid, 14.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid, 11.
Furthermore, Goldwater argued that Americans trading freedom for security were like “the very ones who always create the most hellish tyrannies,” and were guided by a false view of equality, which “rightly understood, as our founding fathers understood it, leads to liberty and to the emancipation of creative differences [but] [w]rongly understood, as it has been so tragically in our time, it leads first to conformity and then to despotism.”\(^\text{165}\) Hence, if anything else but a traditional conservative, Goldwater expressed libertarian sentiments. He also closed his speech with: “I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice [and] that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue!”

From that moment on, many wrote Goldwater off as an extremist. However, in hindsight, his rhetoric only illuminated the tension between traditional freedom and more equality of outcome growing since the late 1800s and foreshadowed today’s level of unprecedented ideological party polarization. Because, even after his devastating loss, the GOP establishment failed to stifle his ideological line in the long term.\(^\text{166}\) And even though the centrists would make a comeback in 1968 with Richard Nixon (and later Gerald Ford), Goldwater’s focus on freedom and clearer right-wing alternative had struck a chord with millions of Americans who felt that something was off base. Tellingly, terms like “crisis of confidence” and “credibility gap” were already in use at the time to describe citizens’ discontent. However, during the 1964 election campaign, it had not been Goldwater himself but a former FDR liberal that had best managed to give voice to this sense.

\(^{165}\) Ibid.
\(^{166}\) Kabaservice, Rule and Ruin, passim. For comparison, it is worth noting that to avoid similar electoral losses, The Conservative and Unionist Party (UK), Högerpartiet (Sweden), Høyre (Norway), and Conservative Folkeparti (Denmark) took more or less sharp “left-turns” in the late 1960s.
TIME FOR CHOOSING

On October 27, 1964, Ronald Reagan (1911-2004), a fading Democratic movie star, gave a televised stump speech to support Goldwater’s floundering campaign. In it, he began with criticizing the Great Society, the tax burden it imposed, and told Americans that “it’s time we ask ourselves if we still know the freedoms that were intended for us by the Founding Fathers.” He also appealed to the listeners’ sense of urgency by delivering a full-scale attack on the Progressive definition of equality: “We have so many people who can’t see a fat man standing beside a thin one without coming to the conclusion that the fat man got that way by taking advantage of the thin one.”

Reagan then employed both exceptionalist and Biblical language to underline the seriousness in the ways American society was threatened by moral and political decay. He criticized those who wanted “peace at any price” for wanting rather to “live on [their] knees than die on [their] feet” and declared that they “don’t speak for the rest of us.” And he continued:

You and I know and do not believe that life is so dear and peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery. If nothing in life is worth dying for, when did this begin – just in the face of this enemy? Or should Moses have told the children of Israel to live in slavery under the pharaohs? Should Christ have refused the cross? Should the patriots at Concord Bridge have thrown down their guns and refused to fire the shot heard ‘round the world”? The martyrs of history were not fools, and our honored dead who gave their lives to stop the advance of the Nazis didn’t die in vain. Where, then, is the road to peace? Well, it’s a simple answer after all. [...] There is a price we will not pay.”

168 Ibid.
Lastly, Reagan roused his viewers with a call to arms by borrowing a phrase from FDR: “You and I have a rendezvous with destiny. We will preserve for our children this, the last best hope of man on Earth, or we will sentence them to take the last step into a thousand years of darkness.”169

Thanks to Reagan’s performance and the exceptionalist nature of his message, he became Goldwater’s “ideological heir” and played a leading role in keeping the Conservative Movement going. The GOP’s big gains in the 1966 Midterms were namely only partly a natural rebound after the party’s 1964 shellacking. It was too a result of candidates running on platforms similar to Goldwater’s: among them Reagan himself, being elected Governor of California; Spiro Agnew (1918-1996) Governor of Maryland, and George H. W. Bush (1924-2018) a House representative from Texas. The election also helped make Richard Nixon, who campaigned widely for Republicans, the front-runner for the 1968 nomination. The pendulum would then also continue to swing toward the right as reactions against LBJ’s policies exploded during what can be described as the most jarring period in U.S. history since the Civil War.170

FOREIGN POLICY: APOCALYPSE NOW

LBJ once described his foreign policy ambitions as limited to those “in Washington’s time, to protect the life of our Nation, to preserve the liberty of our citizens, and to pursue the happiness

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of our people.”

However, since he was an internationalist believer in American Exceptionalism, sharing Wilson, FDR, Truman, Eisenhower, and JFK’s view of the world and the U.S.’s role in it, this was not factual. In his 1965 Inaugural Address, LBJ revealed that when it came to America’s global role, he, like Wilson, had a fundamentalist edge: “If American lives must end, and American treasure be spilled, in countries that we barely know, then that is the price that change has demanded of conviction and of our enduring covenant.” Later that year, LBJ also elucidated himself by stating that it was the U.S.’ “task to show that freedom from the control of other nations offers the surest road to progress,” and that “it is not enough to call upon reason or point to examples. We must show it through action, and we must show it through accomplishment.”

In other words, LBJ saw America’s role in the world as a given mission, not a choice, woven deeply into the fabric of the nation and naturally intertwined with its self-interest and national security. However, it should be kept in mind that his focus was domestic policy and that his views of what needed to be done in both fields were steered by his ambition to become a “great” president. It is therefore symptomatic that LBJ’s most crucial foreign policy decision was launched parallel with the Great Society program, and that they would both fail because of his conviction that the U.S. was so rich, so strong, and so right that it could not be unsuccessful.

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172 Zelizer, Fierce Urgency of Now, 71f. See also Leffler, For the Soul, 201-233.
173 Johnson, “The President’s Inaugural Address, (January 20, 1965).
175 Like other Progressive presidents, LBJ often used foreign policy as an argument to further his domestic agenda: “We must, of course, always be on guard against Communist subversion. But anticommunism alone will never suffice to ensure our liberty or never suffice to fulfill our dreams. That is going to take leadership [at home] dedicated to economic progress without uneconomic privilege, to social change which enhances social justice, to political reform which widens human freedom.” Johnson, “Remarks on Foreign Affairs,” (April 20, 1964).
Partly because of this, the amount of ink used to describe and explain, hail and condemn, excuse and defend America’s Vietnam involvement is astonishing. In June 2018, a “Vietnam War” Google search produced over 527,000,000 results, while “World War II” only generated c. 124,000,000. What makes the Vietnam War unique is also that it was directly related to LBJ’s belief in himself and American Exceptionalism – a dual faith making it impossible for him to understand that the U.S. could lose. Thus, between November 1964 and March 1965, he escalated U.S. military involvement in Vietnam while belittling the Vietnamese through comments like: “Armed hostility is futile. Our resources are equal to any challenge.”

However, the impact of American Exceptionalism upon LBJ’s Vietnam policy was already clear by April 1964, when he gave a full speech dealing with the war. It revealed his belief in U.S. superiority and indicated the strategy he would follow after the election:

> The situation in Viet-Nam is difficult. But there is an old American saying that “when the going gets tough, the tough get going.” [...] I have already ordered measures to step up the fighting capacity of the South Vietnamese forces, to help improve the welfare and the morale of their civilian population, to keep our forces at whatever level continued independence and freedom require. No negotiated settlement in Viet-Nam is possible, as long as the Communists hope to achieve victory by force.

Later that year, LBJ also explained why he deemed the Vietnam War necessary. “Because we fight for values and we fight for principles, rather than territory or colonies, our patience and our determination are unending.”

Besides fighting for high principles, other things influenced LBJ’s mind. As a New Dealer and Cold War Liberal, early on he had taken a hard stance on Communism to distance

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himself from the far left. And he on at least one occasion revealed that the war was as much about keeping the U.S. (and his own) anti-Communist credentials immaculate as about helping the South Vietnamese. In 1965, he described the war as crucial because China stood behind the Việt Cộng and wanted “to erode and to discredit America’s ability to help prevent Chinese domination over all of Asia. In this domination they shall never succeed.” Coincidentally or not, two weeks before saying this, LBJ had also sent U.S. troops to quell a revolt in the Dominican Republic where, “Communist leaders, many of them trained in Cuba, seeing a chance to increase disorder, to gain a foothold, joined the revolution.”

But, as the Vietnam engagement began to drag out over time, LBJ’s rhetoric changed. His initial reaction was to give longer speeches in which the themes of freedom and America’s moral cause began to disappear in clouds of details. That is, his messages started to mirror the flow of telemetric data fed to him by Defense Secretary McNamara, showing that all was going well. In several speeches, LBJ also began to pay greater attention to his resolve to place Vietnam in a historical context to show that the war was inevitable and honorable. For instance, he once compared it with America’s Revolutionary War:

Tonight Americans and Asians are dying [in Vietnam] for a world where each people may choose its own path to change. This is the principle for which our ancestors fought in the valleys of Pennsylvania. It is the principle for which our sons fight tonight in the jungles of Viet-Nam. Why must we take this painful road? Why must this Nation hazard its ease, and its interest, and its power for the sake of a people so far away? We fight because we must fight if we are to live in a world where every country can shape its own destiny. And only in such a world will our own freedom be finally secure.

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179 Zelizer, Fierce Urgency of Now, 22f.
182 Johnson, “Address at Johns Hopkins University” (April 7, 1965).
Moreover, in 1966, after citing JFK’s line about American preparedness to “bear any burden,” LBJ observed that the war was consistent with “the American tradition [...] proven on a hundred battlefields, rewarded by a progress at home that has no match in history, it beckons us forward tonight to the work of peace in Vietnam.”\(^{183}\) Around this time, he also began to mobilize American heroes to defend his actions, as after paying a visit to Andrew Jackson’s home:

> In our time, as in Andrew Jackson’s, freedom has its price. In our time, as in his, history conspires to test the American will. In our time, as in Jackson’s time, courage and vision, and the willingness to sacrifice, will sustain the cause of freedom. This generation of Americans is making its imprint on history. It is making it in the fierce hills and the sweltering jungles of Vietnam.”\(^{184}\)

However, as the Vietnam War turned into a quagmire, at the same time as inflation began to limit LBJ’s ability to pursue his domestic agenda, his use of exceptionalist themes to defend it lessened. It is hard to determine the reason but he may have begun to doubt both the war’s moral righteousness and political usefulness.\(^{185}\) In 1966, he began to complain about its escalating costs: “Because of Vietnam we cannot do all that we should, or all that we would like to do,” even though he still thought that “we can continue the Great Society while we fight in Vietnam.”\(^{186}\) The following year LBJ’s wariness then turned into bitterness when he was forced to ask Congress for a partial repeal of his 1964 tax reduction “to hold our budget deficit in fiscal 1968 within prudent limits and to give our country and to give our fighting men the help they need in this hour of trial.”\(^{187}\)

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\(^{185}\) Herring, *Colony to Superpower*, 751-759.


Furthermore, during his last years in office, LBJ even tried to diffuse the blame for the war. Earlier, he had often repeated that he was only fulfilling promises given to South Vietnam by Eisenhower and JFK. However, in 1967, he started with dispersing responsibility for the war onto the Presidents of the Philippines and South Korea, the Prime Ministers of Malaysia, New Zealand, and Singapore, and the Foreign Minister of Thailand.\(^\text{188}\) And in his last State of the Union, in 1969, he tried to blame the U.S. political system:

No one man or group of men made these commitments alone. Congress and the executive branch, with their checks and balances, reasoned together and finally wrote them into the law of the land. They now have all the moral force that the American political system can summon when it acts as one. They express America’s common determination to achieve goals. They imply action.\(^\text{189}\)

Now, after more than half a century of victories and successes, including winning two World Wars and holding Communism at bay through the Cold War, many Americans still believed that their country was unstoppable. The president’s inability to bring the Vietnam War to a successful end consequently led to doubt and distress. In 1970, people would still prize the opening scene of Francis Ford Coppola’s movie *Patton*, where the World War II general, on the eve of the Normandy landing in 1944, tells his troops that, “Americans love a winner. [...] That’s why Americans have never lost nor will ever lose a war; for the very idea of losing is hateful to an American.”\(^\text{190}\) By then, though, Americans’ support for the Vietnam War, and with it, LBJ’s credibility, had long fallen below 50 percent.\(^\text{191}\) On March 3, 1968, he had therefore begun a


\(^{191}\) Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 123ff. This drop happened after the Tet offensive in 1968 and his numbers never recovered.
speech by saying, “Tonight I want to speak to you of peace in Vietnam and Southeast Asia,” and ended it with, “Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President.”\textsuperscript{192}

To summarize, LBJ’s domestic and foreign policy is a textbook example of how American Exceptionalism, its notions, and addenda (especially anti-communism) can affect U.S. policy formation and politics at large. At home, talk about American greatness and exceptionality could still be used in the 1960s to drum up support both for reform and for war. However, only within certain limits. In LBJ’s case, exceptionalist arguments did not carry enough weight to motivate either the tax burden required to keep the Great Society going or support for a war that Americans, in the end, found neither moral nor necessary. Revealingly, the Vietnam War marked the Democrats so deeply that their 1968 election platform outright negated one essence of American Exceptionalism by promising to “Resist the temptation to try to mold the world, or any part of it, in our own image, or to become the self-appointed policeman of the world.”\textsuperscript{193}

The American spirit [...] is not the visitation of some ghost of the past; rather it is the affirmation of a deep national yearning that all of us feel today.

RICHARD NIXON (1968)

CHAPTER 6 |

Turning Tide

Around 1970, the dual nature of post-war U.S. society showed itself in stark colors. While Neil Armstrong demonstrated American economic and technological preeminence by walking on the Moon the year before, a plethora of social disorders was on display back home in the form of race riots, war protests, and drug epidemics. In other words, the U.S. was experiencing its first national crisis – besides the War of 1812 and the Civil War – not primarily conditioned by economic matters. In fact, the difference from the idyllic picture of America just five to six years earlier was so stark that many citizens’ belief in their country partly collapsed.¹ Moreover, since it was to get worse before it got better, pessimism about the world and the U.S. would linger thru the new decade.² However, at one point, the ideological deluge of the 1960s began to ebb.

Underlying the social and cultural unruliness of the time was the fact that America “without ever pausing to analyze the problems [...] had become a totally centralized industrial

² Hayward, *Age of Reagan*, 289-308.
Or put differently, the financial, administrative, and structural weight of the welfare-warfare state taking form after 1898 had simply been put on top of a framework of political, economic, and cultural institutions formed in 1789 to fit a politically decentralized, economically \textit{laissez-faire}, and socially and culturally agrarian Union. In addition, as the costs for the Great Society and the Vietnam War were added to this burden, the government began to run permanent budget deficits. Besides, from the mid-1960s, political tensions and social discontent were added to this as millions of Americans began to express a loss of faith in “the System.”

Furthermore, around 1970, numerous changes, of which only four can be specified here, exacerbated this situation. First, as the New Class increasingly took control over public institutions and private enterprises, including federal bureaucracies, universities, and media outlets, centralization took place, and regimentation sped up. Also, its members – as elites have always tended to do – began to float on top of “normal” society, increasing the risk for them through groupthink to accept and/or cling to sometimes flawed theories regarding the economy, social woes, and other issues. Thus, their rising stature amplified the age-old suspicion amongst Americans against politicians, bureaucrats, and “big business” and fashioned a growing divide between public and private culture. Consequently, one scholar would write in 1975: “There is no longer a Manifest Destiny or mission. We have not been immune to the corruption of power. We have not been the exception.”

Second, a broad and deep ideological shift took place within academia and media. Before World War II, these two segments of U.S. society had become increasingly secularized, and in

\begin{itemize}
\item Frum, \textit{How We Got Here}, 4f.
\item Hunter, \textit{Culture Wars}, 107-132.
\item Quote from McEvoy-Levy, \textit{American Exceptionalism}, 30.
\end{itemize}
the 1960s, they also started to become highly politicized. The main reason for academia’s leftward turn has already been implied: that because of “the technocratic turn,” it became a de facto part of the administrative state and a critical commanding height for the New Class. The media followed a different path but in the same direction, of which the most critical milestone was its reaction towards the dual drama of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. This development was complex and cannot be analyzed in detail, but what is essential is only that it took place and that it – because television during the 1960s and 1970s was the only institution Americans would show rising confidence in – mattered for political developments ever since.\(^7\)

Third, America’s Third Great Awakening occurred, which here will be used as an umbrella term for three parallel, partly interrelated trends. One, a rise in support for public and private secularism in the form of demands for a more stringent “firewall” between state and church. Two, a growing interest in Western societies’ fringe beliefs such as Paganism, Wicca, Buddhism, Yoga, and Hari Krishna fitting the broader New Age label. And third, weakening support for traditional “liberal” Protestant churches and subsequent growth of fundamentalist congregations.\(^8\) Of these, the last movement is the most significant since evangelicals would transform American political discourse by – for the first time since the Scopes Trial in 1925 – engaging themselves actively in protest against the sociocultural effects of the 1960s.\(^9\)

Furthermore, since the 1800s, patriotic pride and assimilation of immigrants had been the ideal, but the “liberal universalism” of “belief in the fundamental unity and sameness of all

\(^7\) Frum, *How We Got Here*, 35.


humanity” underwriting both had been challenged first by African Americans in the 1960s. They were told by friend and foe alike that instant change of their situation would happen by passing the 1964 Civil Rights Act. And when this did not happen, the Civil Rights movement splintered. As already noted, most joined the Democratic Party as a pressure group for more equality of outcome, but many also turned away from Americanism in favor of cultural tribalism, rejecting any further integration into “white America.” These people were soon joined by some American Indians, Italians, Poles, and others who also demanded that the U.S. turn from a “melting pot” to a “salad bowl” of distinct minorities. At the same time, others started to define themselves by gender, age, sexual orientation, and other factors rather than as Americans first.

Apart from fundamentalist Christianity, these trends were parts of a movement away from formal institutions and toward beliefs that to various extents rejected traditional America’s values, beliefs, and priorities. Therefore, they questioned the view of the U.S. as a God-given incubator of a new and better Man. However, another development partly counteracted this change. This was the “reddening of America,” which means that as the country’s economic center shifted from the Northeast/Midwest to the Sunbelt, the South’s political and cultural importance grew comparably. In short, as people and enterprises moved in, bringing electoral votes, congressional seats, and tax revenues with them, Southern (and Southwestern)

10 Morone, Hellfire Nation, Schulman, Seventies, 58.
11 Quote from White, New Politics, 65.
12 Patterson, America’s Struggle, 179f; Schulman, Seventies, 53-77; Hayward, Age of Reagan, 308-321; Huntington, Who Are We, 141-177. Reverend Jesse Jackson would a decade later give voice to this development: “America is not like a blanket – one piece of unbroken cloth, the same color, the same texture, the same size. America is more like a quilt: many patches, many pieces, many colors, many sizes, all woven and held together by a common thread. The white, the Hispanic, the black, the Arab, the Jew, the woman, the native American, the small farmer, the businessperson, the environmentalist, the peace activist, the young, the old, the lesbian, the gay, and the disabled make up the American quilt.” Jesse Jackson, “1984 Democratic National Convention Address” (18 July 1984) American Rhetoric, accessed October 8, 2018, https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jessejackson1984dnc.htm.
mannerisms like country music, cowboy boots, pickup trucks, and Southern food spread out. In time, this impelled the spread of “a new kind of conservatism [...] more populist, more middle class, more antiestablishment”\(^{14}\) and “a distinct southern republicanism, which opposed the Leviathan state and determined to concentrate power as close to home as possible.”\(^{15}\) Ultimately, these changes turned a cultural glow into a political bushfire.

**ORIGIN OF THE CULTURE WARS**

As previously noted, the importance of American Exceptionalism grew as the nation’s Protestant self-image diminished after World War II and expanded the latitude for those who could be deemed a “real American.” However, as the traditional rancor between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews lessened, a new rift between orthodox and reformist-minded believers of these three faiths (plus eventually also Mormons) emerged.\(^{16}\) Driving this development (that had roots in the culturally liberal 1920s) were, amongst other things, people’s reactions to the rushing pace of social and cultural change in the post-war period, and as orthodoxists and reformists of various beliefs found that they had more in common with each other (regarding how civil society at large should look and function) than with their fellows, they started to form two broad clusters.\(^{17}\)

In detail, while orthodoxists hold that the Bible and the Tanakh are the direct words of God and therefore must be taken literally, reformists argue that since humans have been involved in writing, transcribing, and editing them, they can at least partially be dealt with figuratively.


\(^{15}\) Genovese, *Southern Tradition*, 56.

\(^{16}\) This was not a completely new rift. It had roots stretching back to diverging support in the late 1800s amongst Christians and Jews for so-called Conservative and Reformist Darwinism. See Eric F. Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny* (New York: Vintage, 1952), 66-81.

Accordingly, while orthodoxists try to live strictly by Scripture, reformists allow themselves more flexible and even secular lifestyles. Thus, orthodoxists and reformists live in “separate and competing moral galax[ies],” driven apart by dogmas, and even if most people fall between these extremes, believers tend to lean in one direction or another. As a result, people amass in two camps whose attitudes shape their opinions not only on topics like premarital sex, abortion, and Darwinism but on political issues as well. Accordingly: while orthodoxists tend to be conservatives and tend to be more patriotic and vigorous supporters of American Exceptionalism, reformists lean towards liberalism.

To further clarify, this orthodox/reformist split was an outcome of “modernist” developments taking place across the Western world and beyond. However, because of left- and right-wing Americans’ unusually strong religiosity, its effects became more pronounced in the U.S. than in other Western countries. Therefore, as the country split into roughly equal-sized

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18 For example, is marriage a divine institution between a man and a woman? If so, homosexuality is a sin. Does life start at conception? Then, abortions equal murder. Were humans created on the sixth day in the image of God? If yes, they cannot have evolved through natural selection. Conversely, for reformists, orthodox positions like this often seem not only wrong but bigoted and must as such be intensely opposed. Thus, rather than leading to understanding, debates between orthodox and reformists are apt to intensify hostilities. See Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 67-134; Fowler et al, *Religion and Politics*, 319ff.
19 Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 128.
20 Ibid, 148-156. For example, while it easy to find reformist Christians who believe that Jesus died for their sins and accept the Darwinian theory of evolution, it is harder to come across orthodox believers in the story of Noah’s Ark who accept that the Earth is 4.8 billion years old.
21 In more detail. While orthodox people agree with Conservatives that humans are flawed, moral truths are constants, and customs, convention, and continuity are important, religious liberals concur with the left on things like the principal of human goodness, the prospect for moral progression, and the need for political actions to right societal wrongs. Such shared assumptions lead to agreement on specific issues as well. The economy is one example. The Christian Citizens’ Crusade once stated that “the American System of private enterprise [is] in accordance with the clear teachings of Scripture,” and reformists see minimum wages as “minimum justice” and welfare as a way “to move our government toward compassionate and sensible public policies.” Quotes from Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 115. See also Russel Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1953; reprint 2001), 3-11; James L. Guth, “The Religious Roots of Foreign Policy Exceptionalism,” in Hoover (ed.), *Religion and American Exceptionalism*, 74-82.
22 A few other Western countries experienced similar developments to the U.S. Most notably, in Spain, because of the Franco regime; in Poland, where the Catholic Church became the prime opponent to Communism; in Ireland, where Catholicism was an integrated part of people’s self-identification vis-à-vis the English; and in Italy, because of the Vatican. However, today, only Polish and to some extent Irish politics are still marked by this development.
orthodox and reformist camps, religion stayed politically paradigmatic and kept discourse relatively balanced between traditionalist and progressive ideas; e.g., by a long-term shift towards more Catholics voting Republican. Simultaneously, U.S. political debates would – given the combination of increased partisanship and Americans’ proclivity for perfection – drive many towards extremes. Therefore, political debates would often become more heated in America than elsewhere because “[t]here seemed to be no middle ground.”

Subsequently, American Exceptionalism became deeply entwined with politics during the 1970s, which in turn caused several events to happen. First, the advance of Progressive views at the expense of notions such as individual freedom and communitarianism inevitably made exceptionalism look ever more like a politically conservative concept. Second, anti-American sentiments spurred by the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal enhanced this process by turning exceptionalism into a subject of criticism and ridicule, especially amongst academicians. Third, because of orthodox influence, U.S. politics began to focus on “moral politics” and cultural subjects like abortion, prayer in school, and flag burning, and debates adjoining them were speckled with exceptionalist arguments. Fourth, new generations of more confrontational-minded Republicans, marked by the ideological rigidity of the Conservative Movement, and Democratic “Watergate Babies,” with views more in line with McGovern than FDR and a worldview steeled by the Vietnam-Watergate trauma, entered politics and laid the groundwork

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for today’s era of hyper-partisanship. Fifth, after Watergate, voters began to look for presidential candidates they thought had the right moral qualities for the office.

Furthermore, while Democrats suffered an increasing split between moderates and radicals, Ronald Reagan became the doyen of the “new,” more conservative GOP. He was after two terms as Governor of California 1967-1975 eyeing the presidency and, with help from the Religious Right, driving the party’s return after the Watergate scandal. We will thus return to him in the next chapter. Moreover, the 1970s gave birth to a small but forceful group of “polipastors” like Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, Jerry Farwell, and Pat Robertson. As preachers they could pontificate their opinions – including exceptionalist beliefs – with a fidelity most politicians could not. For instance, Robertson forecasted:

Either we will return to the moral integrity and original dreams of the founders of this nation [...] or we will give ourselves over more and more to hedonism, to all forms of destructive anti-social behavior, to political apathy, and ultimately to the forces of anarchy and disintegration that have throughout history gripped great empires and nations in their tragic and declining years.

Two more points shall be noted. First, because the debate escalated about which ideal was more essential and/or threatened – freedom or equality? – the bottom line of U.S. politics became: “Who is most American? Republicans, who prioritize freedom, or Democrats, who advocate equality?” Augmenting this process was a coinciding split between what scholars call uncritical “my country right or wrong” attitude and critical patriotism that every so often

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28 Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 112f.
borderlines anti-Americanism.\textsuperscript{29} As we will see later, together, these splits would turn into such explosive questions that they today by and large define U.S. politics.

Second, the political theater during the 1970s increasingly took the form of a triangle drama with a powerful, self-venerated, and semi-secluded secular elite (consisting mostly of liberal Democrats, but also moderate Republicans) at the top and a “silent majority” of religious-traditionalistic Americans, next to a smaller but vocal group of “counter cultures,” at the base. And the long-term winner of this development was to be the Conservative Movement.\textsuperscript{30} Its continuous post-1964 momentum was visible, for example, in Ronald Reagan’s near-toppling of President Ford in the GOP’s 1976 primary election (see below). However, given what had then just transpired in Washington, D.C., neither the Republican Party nor the nation was ready for what seemed to be such an ideological stalwart in the White House.

\textbf{The Janus Presidency}

Like his predecessor, Richard M. Nixon entered politics with a will to serve his country and to win personal respect and social veneration. However, while LBJ had been a straightforward person with clear goals, Nixon was complicated and operated more like a fox whose long-term goals seemed shrouded in mystery. His persona displayed a wide pallet of human virtues and vices by vacillating between being personally charming and ill-mannered, politically smooth and callous, ideologically weak and tenacious, academically brilliant and anti-intellectual. Sadly, he


lacked an antipode to the mistrustful streak that eventually got him into quite possibly the worst distress ever faced by a sitting U.S. President.\textsuperscript{31}

Likewise, Nixon’s philosophical principles are elusive, but his worldview can be outlined through a study of his policies, speeches, and writings. First, like LBJ, Nixon had an indeterminist view of history, seeing it as steered by “great men” rather than by spiritual forces or material structures. Second, he held a traditional view of Man having a dual nature of good qualities and bad impulses that needed to be cultivated and restrained, respectively. Third, he believed in timeless principles and values, as revealed in Christianity and Western culture. Fourth, he saw politics (including the Cold War) as a clash of values that ultimately could be won only in the realm of ideas. Fifth, his Quaker upbringing was perhaps responsible for making his priority not any exceptionalist notion, but a vision of “peace for America and the world.”\textsuperscript{32}

Since peace was Nixon’s lodestar, it deserves special attention. Its significance stands clear in sources such as the “First Annual Report to the Congress on United States Foreign Policy for the 1970’s.” This document specified that world peace required a U.S. foreign policy based on three principles – a partnership with like-minded countries, military superiority, and a readiness to negotiate that equated to the 19\textsuperscript{th}-century European form of balance-of-power Realpolitik.\textsuperscript{33} Still, the impact of American Exceptionalism shines through in his trust in a dialectic relationship between peace and freedom:

\begin{itemize}
\item Drew, \textit{Richard M. Nixon}, 60; Herring, \textit{Colony to Superpower}, 760ff.
\end{itemize}
Because man yearns for peace, when the people are free to choose their choice is more likely to be peace among nations; and because man yearns for freedom, when peace is secure the thrust of social evolution is toward greater freedom within nations. Essentially, peace is rooted in a sense of community: in a recognition of the common destiny of mankind, in a respect for the common dignity of mankind, and in the patterns of cooperation that make common enterprises possible.\(^\text{34}\)

Still, Nixon’s exceptionalist beliefs seem to have been moderate, and he used such jargon frugally.\(^\text{35}\) But when he did, he did so wisely, as in 1950, when in a speech to the House he had accounted for his role in revealing Alger Hiss to be a Soviet spy:

\> America today stands alone between Communism and the free nations of the world. We owe a solemn duty, not only to our own people but to free peoples everywhere on both sides of the iron curtain, to expose this sinister conspiracy for what it is, to roll back the Red tide which to date has swept everything before it, and to prove to people everywhere that the hope the world lies not in turning toward totalitarian dictatorship but in developing a strong, free, and intelligent democracy.\(^\text{36}\)

Furthermore, when exploiting exceptionalist language, Nixon tended to use it didactically, as in his first State of the Union:

\> Two hundred years ago this was a new nation of 3 million people, weak militarily, poor economically. But America meant something to the world then which could not be measured in dollars, something far more important than military might. Listen to President Thomas Jefferson in 1802: We act not “for ourselves alone, but for the whole human race.” We had a spiritual quality then which caught the imagination of millions of people in the world. Today, when we are the richest and strongest nation in the world, let it not be recorded that we lack the moral and spiritual idealism which made us the hope of the world at the time of our birth. The demands of us in 1976 are even greater than in 1776.\(^\text{37}\)
Another example of this habit occurred the following year when Nixon referred to the Statue of Liberty as a symbol for what he thought America meant to the world. “[It] is not its wealth, and not its power, but its spirit and purpose – a land that enshrines liberty and opportunity, and that has held out a hand of welcome to millions in search of a better and a fuller and, above all, a freer life.”

All the while, Nixon was no stranger to playing political hardball, and his favorite weapon of choice was anti-communism. For example, during his Senate campaign in 1950, he was dubbed “Tricky Dick” for distributing a flier stating that his opponent’s voting record was nearly identical to that of a New York Congressman believed to be a communist. Two years later, as Eisenhower’s attack dog, he delivered jabs to Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson for holding a “Ph.D. from Dean Acheson’s College of Cowardly Communist Containment.”

In addition, Nixon was a master of reading the electorate’s mood, and he could, when deeming it expedient, turn on a dime politically. For instance, in 1971, he moved from resisting to embracing wage and price controls to combat inflation in just eleven days.

**TWO ARTICLES**

A wholesome demonstration of Nixon’s dual political personality, his talent to move between populism and sophistication, and his skillful use of exceptionalist arguments are from October 1967. He was then positioning himself for a second presidential run and published two articles. The first was a Readers Digest piece entitled “What Has Happened to America,” in which he

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40 Quote from Ibid, xxvii; 19-59.

opined that the U.S. was suffering through an “armed insurrection [making it] the most lawless and violent [country] in the history of free peoples.” And he blamed the unruly situation on a disdain for the country’s traditional values:

The shocking crime and disorder in American life today flow in large measure from two fundamental changes that have occurred in the attitudes of many Americans. First, there is the permissiveness toward violation of the law and public order by those who agree with the cause in question. Second, there is the indulgence of crime because of sympathy for the past grievances of those who have become criminals.

Hence, Nixon placed the blame for the nation’s problems on its elite’s devotion to behaviorist and positivist theories about crime prevention and social engineering. Similarly, he attacked the lack of response to the mayhem: “Any system that fashions its safeguards for the innocent so broadly and haphazardly that they also provide haven from punishment for uncounted thousands of the guilty is a failure – an indictment, not an adornment, of a free society.”

In Foreign Affairs, Nixon’s second article “Asia after Vietnam,” addressed a different audience and applied a different tone. A erudite analysis of East Asia’s situation, it outlined an alternative to the conventional Manichean Cold War (and budding neoconservative) view of world affairs. He began with the argument that since Asia, besides China and Vietnam, moved in the right direction economically, LBJ’s Vietnam policy had become bankrupt. After predicting that “the United States [role] as a world policeman is likely to be limited in the future,” he delivered his main point:

Americans must recognize that [their] highly sophisticated, highly advanced political system, which required many centuries to develop in the West, may not be the best for other nations which have far different traditions and still are in an earlier stage of development. What matters is that these governments are consciously, deliberately and

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42 Perlstein, Richard Nixon, xxiii-xxiv.122; Frum, How We Got Here, 298f.
43 Ibid, 123.
44 Ibid, 125.
programmatically developing in the direction of greater liberty, greater abundance, broader choice and increased popular involvement in the process of government.\textsuperscript{45}

Thus, Nixon asked not for a to return to isolationism but for a more nuanced approach to international affairs and a limit to U.S. involvement overseas. This call for America to be a model for rather than an enforcer of democratic, capitalistic developments worldwide was possible the most candid expression of a passive form of American Exceptionalism from a major presidential contender since the 1920s. As president, Nixon would later claim the fact that “the United States no longer is in the position of complete preeminence or predominance [and this] is not a bad thing.”\textsuperscript{46} Thus, his article was not an opportunistic cry produced in hindsight of LBJ’s failed Vietnam policy, but a serious view based upon a lifetime of reflection. He had made similar statements during his first run for the presidency in 1960 before America had entered the Vietnam War.\textsuperscript{47} However, back then, he didn’t use as much exceptionalist semantics to explain himself, and Americans – who had yet to experience the full costs of their country’s military might – voted for JFK’s more daring style.

REFRAMING THE ISSUES

Eight years later, Nixon did better. During a well-disciplined presidential campaign, he fed the electorate so many well-cut pieces of exceptionalist red meat that he became “the quintessential

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\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 138. \\
high priest of American civil religion in its vaguest form.” A prime example is his 1968 RNC Acceptance Speech, which became one of his most exceptionalist speeches. It is of triple significance. First, it reflects that American Exceptionalism had moved to the center of American discourse. Second, it remodeled Republican policies and partly reframed public debates on several foreign and domestic issues for years to come. Third, Nixon broke with more than half a century of increasingly positivist-technocratic public discourse by debating issues in a vernacular, partly populist language.

On foreign policy, Nixon repeated his call from *Foreign Affairs* for a more realistic approach to world affairs and a scaling back of U.S. overseas operations. At the same time, however, he made it clear that he did not doubt that the U.S. had both the stamina and the resources to continue fighting in Vietnam or that the war’s motive was right. However, “We believe deeply in our ideas, but we believe they should travel on their own power and not on the power of our arms.” Also, Nixon stroked Conservatives’ sense for economic prudence by noting that “the time has come for other nations in the Free World to bear their fair share of the burden of defending peace and freedom around this world.”

After passing this minefield, Nixon moved onto the safer ground of domestic politics, saying that “[i]f we are to restore prestige and respect for America abroad, the place to begin is at home in the United States of America.” However, he did not, as Wilson, FDR, and others use this bridge to argue for new reforms. Instead, he used it to criticize the societal elite’s inability to

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make America live up to its ideals and appeal to Republicans anti-statism by promising “after a period of forty years when power has gone from the cities and the states to the government in Washington, D.C., it’s time to have power go back from Washington to the states and to the cities.”

Then, he stepped forward as a tribune for ordinary Americans:

[They] give drive to the spirit of America. They give lift to the American Dream. They give steel to the backbone of America. They are good people, they are decent people; they work, and they save, and they pay their taxes, and they care. [...] America is a great nation. And America is great because her people are great.

Towards the end of the speech, Nixon returned to the theme by talking about himself as a product of the American Dream. Contrasting his fate with that of a kid failing to break free from the “living nightmare of poverty, neglect and despair” of inner-city slums, he said:

I see another child tonight. He hears the train go by at night and he dreams of far away places where he’d like to go. It seems like an impossible dream. But he is helped on his journey through life. A father who had to go to work before he finished the sixth grade, sacrificed everything he had so that his sons could go to college. A gentle, Quaker mother, with a passionate concern for peace, quietly wept when he went to war but she understood why he had to go. A great teacher, a remarkable football coach, an inspirational minister encouraged him on his way. A courageous wife and loyal children stood by him in victory and also defeat. And in his chosen profession of politics, first there were scores, then hundreds, then thousands, and finally millions worked for his success. And tonight he stands before you – nominated for President of the United States of America.

In this way, by making American Exceptionalism and the Culture Wars themes of his campaign, Nixon concluded the GOP’s takeover as the country’s populist party and changed both the form and content for numerous discourses. For instance, by appealing to “the silent majority” in vernacular language, he broke away from established perspectives about law and

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52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
order and talked tough on crime by stressing the need to punish rather than reform criminals.

Nixon also drew links between race, crime, and urban development in ways liberals either could not or would not:

For too long, white America has sought to buy off the Negro – and to buy off its own sense of guilt – with ever more programs of welfare, of public housing, of payments to the poor, but not for anything except for keeping out of sight: payments that perpetuated poverty, and that kept the endless, dismal cycle of dependency spinning from generation to generation. Our task – our challenge – is to break this cycle of dependency, and the time to begin is now. The way to do it is not with more of the same, but by helping bring to the ghetto the light of hope and pride and self-respect.\textsuperscript{54}

Moreover, distancing himself from the standard discourse, Nixon signaled that conservative ideals and policies were necessary to protect American culture. During the 1968 election campaign, for example, he ended another speech on legal issues – which for a “normal” contemporary politician certainly would have meant calls for more resources and reforms – with an appeal for a return to America’s communitarian roots:

The sources of moral and civic order are in the family, the church, the school and the community. Have these – let us ask ourselves – have these been doing the best they can to preserve the old and valued standards in this nation? I don’t think so. If violence is met with indifference or appeasement, if the individual is no longer responsible for his actions, if a fog of permissiveness blurs our moral vision, if there has been an erosion of respect and decency, if there is too little concern about the social causes of disorder – then fundamental sources of order bear some of the responsibility. And so I say – In every family let us renew our commitment to the traditional American standards.\textsuperscript{55}

Nonetheless, Nixon’s populism was moderate and – since the Democrats identified more closely than ever with the positivistic-technocratic paradigm of “managerial liberalism” – sensible. He


could therefore present a sweeping new view on what America needed without, as Goldwater four years earlier, being directly accused of right-wing radicalism.

A NEW VISION

In the popular mind, the 1960s was a time when people wanted to “make peace, not war.” However, it was far from peaceful, and “hippies” were seen by many Americans as an irritating anomaly or worse. For example, in 1968, many applauded when the Chicago police beat violent protesters outside that year’s Democratic National Convention. Two years later, Joe and Jane Sixpack’s opinion about draft dodgers, flag burners, and “bums” in general had galvanized to a point where only 11 percent blamed the soldiers when the National Guard shot dead four rioting students at Kent State University. And when other students protested these shootings in the streets of New York, around two hundred “hard hats” (construction workers) mobilized by the AFL-CIO became heroes for beating them while chanting patriotic slogans like “All the way, USA!” and “USA! Love it or leave it!”

Evidently, America stood at a crossroads, and in the societal atmosphere created by war protesters and other alleged rabble-rousers, Nixon could use his humble origins to become a crusader for “normal folks” by speaking bluntly. However, since he also needed a more solemn vision for his presidency, he delivered more highbrow orations from time to time. A month before the election, he gave a speech on “The American Spirit” at William and Mary University in Williamsburg, Virginia. Standing in the Great Hall, where both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson had taken their meals as students, he said:

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56 Hayward, Age of Reagan, 215ff; Linfield, Freedom Under Fire, 119; Perlstein, Nixonland, 311ff, 487-498.
When we recall the days of our Revolution, we think of the phrase “the spirit of ’76.” That is not just a slogan; there was a real “spirit of ’76.” That spirit was the driving force within most Americans of that revolutionary era. I believe that a nation, like a person, has a spirit. I believe that a national spirit comes to the fore in times of national crisis. I believe that each time a national spirit makes itself felt, it speaks to its own time with a different message directed to the problems of that time. That is why a searching look at the American spirit is needed today.  

After a recital of events in U.S. history like the Civil War, where Nixon saw that this spirit stirred the nation, he declared the present a similar moment since the “underlying reason for the feeling of emptiness in so many hearts today stems from the loss of personal freedom.” However, he then added that “the American spirit is reappearing now to demand the return of that personal freedom.” His remarks also defined freedom nearly identically with the one incorporated in American Exceptionalism since 1776:

Personal freedom, to me, is at the root of human dignity. Personal freedom is room to turn around in life. It is the right to grow in your own way, to learn what is not yet being taught; it is both the right to privacy and the right to participate. Personal freedom is not a license to disrupt, but it is a liberty to dissent; not a duty to destroy, but an obligation to challenge. Personal freedom will not ensure that every man will get all he desires; it will ensure that every man will get all he deserves.

Still, when describing this loss of freedom, Nixon softened his analysis:

Where did we begin to trade away our personal freedom? Some would say we lost our way when we began our ever-expanding welfare programs. Others would say we lost our way when we took on the responsibility of helping to defend the free world. I don’t agree. [...] We were right to want to help the poor, the sick, the unemployed, the elderly. We were right to want to help advance the cause of democracy around the world.

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58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
Thus, Nixon declared the day for steadfast opposition to the welfare state (and traditional isolationism) over. Instead, the way forward was welfare reform that aspired to repair what Progressives had wrecked in their quest to create ever more equality:

Welfare is too important to be left to the Welfare Staters. We are going to change our welfare system to make it lit the American system, to provide each person with a means of escape from welfare into dignity. This is not an impossible dream. America needs it: with leadership that understands the American spirit, America is going to get it.\textsuperscript{60}

In sum, Nixon’s Williamsburg speech stands as a symbol both for his dual private as well as political personality and the twin nature of American society on the eve of the 1970s. What is more, it is a forerunner to the hailing of traditional freedom that would transform politics not only in the U.S. but throughout the West during the 1970s and 1980s.\textsuperscript{61} Besides, it attempts to find a way to break with nearly 40 years of Progressive dominance by accepting FDR’s basic thesis that the “Machine era” demands high levels of political involvement in private affairs. He was not, however, prepared also to accept FDR’s and other liberals’ methods.

\textbf{WELFARE REFORM}

In 1969, in a largely forgotten move today, Nixon proposed replacing the whole New Deal/Great Society welfare apparatus with a minimum income system.\textsuperscript{62} This was the first of what would become a modern Republican – and sometimes also a Democratic – staple promise to curtail federal spending, fraud, and abuse. When presenting his plan, Nixon called the present system “a colossal failure,” “a welfare quagmire,” “a monster,” “morally wrong,” and alluded to the

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} David Boaz (ed.), \textit{Toward Liberty: The Idea That is Changing the World} (Washington, D.C., 2002), passim.
\textsuperscript{62} Schulman, \textit{Seventies}, 32ff.
American tradition by professing that “if we take the route of the permanent handout, the American character will itself be impoverished.” Furthermore, even after failing to push his plan through, he continued arguing for welfare reform by appealing to exceptionalist sentiments. In 1971, for example, he called the welfare state “completely foreign to the American experience” because “[p]eople came to America because they wanted to determine their own future rather than to live in a country where others determined their future for them.”

Underlying Nixon’s welfare reform was New Federalism, which was a model for transferring welfare issues to the state and local levels through block grants and revenue sharing. His ambition was to change the country’s political dynamic by “shifting money and support from the northeastern elites to the nation’s heartland.” He defended this approach by saying that the Founders “gave us a constitution of balanced powers, of unity with diversity” but:

For almost two centuries since – and dramatically in the 1930’s – at those great turning points when the question has been between the States and the Federal Government, that question has been resolved in favor of a stronger central Federal Government. [...] The time has now come in America to reverse the flow of power and resources from the States and communities to Washington, and start power and resources flowing back from Washington to the States and communities and, more important, to the people all across America.

Besides welfare reform, New Federalism guided some of Nixon’s other policies as well. Among them were cultural appropriations, where the ambition was to shift “the emphasis from avant-garde forms of artistic expressions to more popular and populist forms: representational painting, commemorative sculptures, folklore, folk art, folk music.” Moreover, even if, for

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65 Schulman, Seventies, 32ff.
67 Ibid.
reasons that will be discussed below, it turned out to be impossible for Nixon to change course in this and other areas, the sheer ambition to end the New Deal/Great Society itself had a considerable impact. By breaking with the post-war consensus, it created a new, disjointed political discourse.

**POLITICAL LIMBO**

Around 1970, a majority of Americans still opposed the idea of a federal welfare state. Even so, as people during the coming decade developed a proclivity for lower taxes and less bureaucracy, not only did most now base their retirement on projected Social Security benefits, but millions became dependent on food stamps, three million were working directly as federal employees, and nearly everyone relished national endeavors like the Space Program. Hence, the Democrats and the New Class could put a halt not only to an overhaul of the welfare system but to stop nearly-all kinds of changes. In fact, the “consensus” paradigm remained so strong that spending within existing welfare systems under Nixon increased $80 billion. Thus, his administration “consolidated the administrative state of the Great society [as] Eisenhower [had] consolidated the New Deal.”

That the nation passed a tipping point in the early 1970s is shown in that the presidential campaign in 1972 reflected deepening ideological differences between the parties. Running on a more conservative program than four years earlier, Nixon branded his Democrat opponent

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68 During the 1960s, when many Americans gained their firsthand experience of a federal welfare state, support for it was cut almost in half. The support for making “sure every American had an adequate job and income” dropped from 59 percent in 1961 to 31 percent in 1969. Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 198. See also Patterson, *America’s Struggle*, 171-184.
69 Patterson, *America’s Struggle*, 192-198. Needless to say, the resistance to change was also institutionalized within the bureaucracy itself. For an analysis of this phenomena, see Pierson’s *Politics in Time*, passim.
George McGovern (1922-2012) as a “New Class candidate” and emphasized that he sought amnesty for draft dodgers, legalized abortions, and Senator Fulbright’s foreign policy. In his RNC Acceptance Speech, Nixon reached out to all citizens...

I ask you to join us as members of a new American majority bound together by our common ideals. I ask everyone listening to me tonight – Democrats, Republicans, independents, to join our new majority – not on the basis of the party label you wear in your lapel, but on the basis of what you believe in your hearts.

...and expounded on what he saw as ideological detractors of America:

It has become fashionable in recent years to point up what is wrong with what is called the American system. The critics contend it is so unfair, so corrupt, so unjust, that we should tear it down and substitute something else in its place. I totally disagree. I believe in the American system. I have traveled to 80 countries in the past 25 years, and I have seen Communist systems, I have seen Socialist systems, I have seen systems that are half Socialist and half free. Every time I come home to America, I realize how fortunate we are to live in this great and good country.

In contrast, McGovern took the opposite tone. In his DNC Acceptance Speech, even he tried to deviate from the positivist-technological paradigm and described his primary win as “the people’s nomination.” However, he then pledged to bring “a new period of important and hopeful change in America, a period comparable to those eras that unleashed such remarkable ferment in the period of Jefferson and Jackson and Roosevelt.” He also promised new liberal programs, e.g., national health insurance, and used radical figures of speech, such as ending a “system of economic controls in which labor is depressed, but prices and corporate profit run

71 Kevin P. Phillips, “Political Responses to the New Class,” in Bruce-Briggs (ed.), New Class, 139-145.
73 Ibid.
sky-high.” And in this clear choice between left and right, voters picked both. When going to the voting booth, they rejected McGovern in a landslide but sent Democratic majorities, of which most (non-Southern) members were bent on continuing the Progressive project, back to Congress.76

**DOUBLESPEAK**

To maneuver in this new environment, political actors were doomed to engage in “deliberately euphemistic, ambiguous, and obscure language,” or doublespeak.77 A cynic may say that this was nothing new, but from the early 1970s onwards, voters’ demand for liberal goods and conservative ends arguably turned U.S. politics into a dysfunctional mélange. In a few words, while Democrats were forced to ensure that reforms could be carried out without higher taxes, Republicans had to guarantee that lower taxes (and high defense expenditures) would not threaten existing welfare systems.78 Hence, deficit spending became the norm. Also, even if Americans’ fresh memories of the Great Society in some ways gave the GOP a stronger hand, the party was nevertheless forced to swim upstream on most “big government” issues.

For example, distressed by a mixture of high inflation, high unemployment, and stagnant demand, “stagflation,” Nixon stayed within the Keynesian paradigm by stating things like “We are all Keynesians now,” and “By spending as if we were at full employment, we will help to

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75 Ibid.
76 White, *Breach of Faith*, 169-187. In 1972, Congressional Democrats were elected on a party plank demanding not only continuous Progressive reforms but also a full-scale reconstruction of the “the social, political and economic relationship throughout the entire society in order to ensure the equitable distribution of wealth and power.”
78 This has not been an exclusively American development, but European’s acceptance for high tax rates has moderated their indebtedness process. See The World Factbook, CIA, accessed October 29, 2018, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2186rank.html.
bring about full employment.” Similarly, he never dared to abandon the language of more equality entirely and could often compete with LBJ in the length of wish lists of increased spending. In 1972, for example, he criticized Congress for not acting on his administration’s

[...] programs to improve life for the aging; to combat crime and drug abuse; to improve health services and to ensure that no one will be denied needed health care because of inability to pay; to protect workers’ pension rights; to promote equal opportunity for members of minorities, and others who have been left behind; to expand consumer protection; to improve the environment; to revitalize rural America; to help the cities; to launch new initiatives in education; to improve transportation, and to put an end to costly labor tie-ups in transportation.

However, the par excellence of modern doublespeak in Nixon’s Washington, D.C., became environmental policy. Since Theodore Roosevelt, presidents pursued conservation policies, but by the 1960s, pollution and other problems had made “environmentalism” a salient political subject. This development is symbolized by Rachel Carson’s alarmistic book *Silent Spring*, which became a bestseller in 1962. Environmental problems also won attention because they often touched on themes central to the national mythology, such as fertile soil, grand rivers, virgin woods, and flourishing wildlife, including the bald eagle. Therefore, LBJ had turned environmental policy into a full-fledged positivistic-technocratic policy field motivated by political goals, driven by bureaucrats, and transfixed on government action.

Subsequently, Nixon was forced to deal vigorously with the environment, and sometimes he tried to use it as a unifying subject as parts of the older consensus eroded: “Restoring nature to its natural state is a cause beyond party and beyond factions.” Yet even though he talked the

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talk, Nixon tried to balance ecological concerns and economic needs. He did so by using a typically American, optimistic tone and expressed his belief in continuous progress rather than dystopian demands for the abandonment of modern society’s “unnatural” ways. His policies also fell within the national tradition by using mechanisms like fees more than direct bans. Still, despite wins such as the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), many of Nixon’s policies were often described as insufficient and ever more radical demands – arguably rooted in Americans’ affection for perfectionist goals and belief in technocratic methods – have since been made by various environmental movements.83

Two more observations regarding Nixon’s rhetoric can be made. First, his exceptionalist argumentation concerning the Vietnam War was consistent but narrow. His vow to achieve “peace with honor” confined his actions, and, like JFK and LBJ, he was convinced that a one-sided U.S. withdrawal would be used against him for being “soft on Communism.” Consequently, he often said things like, “A nation cannot remain great if it betrays its allies and lets down its friends.”84 All the same, historians agree that Nixon’s objective was to end the war as soon as possible because he saw it as an obstacle for his realist policy and ambition to build “a peaceful international order based on cooperative relations among the great powers.”85 Arguably, a partial motivation for this goal was his passive form of American Exceptionalism.

Second, Nixon never seems to have used exceptionalist arguments to defend himself during the Watergate scandal.86 The nearest he came was when addressing the nation to clarify

85 Lawrence, Vietnam War, 138.
his involvement, saying that it was “the [American] system that has brought the facts to light and that will bring those guilty to justice.”\textsuperscript{87} Some of his adversaries, however, did use exceptionalist language. For example, Democratic House Representative Charles Rangel from New York said: “Some say this is a sad day in America’s history. I think it could perhaps be one of our brightest days. It could be really a test of the strength of our Constitution, because what I think it means to most Americans is that when this or any other President violates his sacred oath of office, the people are not left helpless.”\textsuperscript{88} Also, after Nixon’s resignation, his successor would use plenty of exceptionalist language in his effort to heal the nation.

\[\text{“A FORD, NOT A LINCOLN”}\]

Former football player, lawyer, and amateur photo model Gerald R. Ford was a down-to-earth, religious, and soft-spoken “Middle American at ease with himself and the enduring values of our Constitution.”\textsuperscript{89} That is, he was just what the country needed after the dual trauma of Vietnam and Watergate. As seen earlier, Ford was originally an American Firster but had become an internationalist “modern Republican” during World War II and an “Eisenhower Conservative” in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{90} Hence, he was ideologically a near-Nixon clone and would continue his policies both at home and abroad.\textsuperscript{91} However, Ford was a more religious and emotive believer in American

\textsuperscript{90} Brinkley, Gerald R. Ford, 1-13; Barber, Presidential Character, 388-395. For modern Republicanism, see White, Still Seeing Red, 82ff.
\textsuperscript{91} Hayward, Age of Reagan, 395-446.
Exceptionalism than his predecessor. As a result, he managed to reconcile the country by using patriotic oratory to point out that Americans still had much in common despite war and scandal.92

Assuming office on August 9, 1974, Ford began his Inaugural Address by referencing U.S. history to legitimize his “accidental” presidency: “The oath that I have taken is the same oath that was taken by George Washington and by every President under the Constitution.”93 He also stated that America had survived Watergate thanks to its combination of earthly strength and divine grace:

My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is over. Our Constitution works; our great Republic is a government of laws and not of men. Here the people rule. But there is a higher Power, by whatever name we honor Him, who ordains not only righteousness but love, not only justice but mercy.

This kind of language was not a one-time incident. A month later, Ford turned anew to both the Constitution and God when defending his pardon of Nixon:

I have promised to uphold the Constitution, to do what is right as God gives me to see the right, and to do the very best that I can for America. I have asked your help and your prayers, not only when I became President but many times since. The Constitution is the supreme law of our land and it governs our actions as citizens. Only the laws of God, which govern our consciences, are superior to it. As we are a nation under God, so I am sworn to uphold our laws with the help of God.94

Such intensive religious-exceptionalist language had perhaps not been heard from a U.S. President since the 1800s, at least during peacetime. At the same time, Ford was wary of never overstepping the boundary to demagogy. For instance, the following October, when presenting

92 For example, “Ford spent most nights during his first week as leader of the free world at his house in suburban Alexandria, Virginia. News photographers clicked away madly early his first full day as president when Ford came out on his front step in his pajamas to get the morning paper.” Brinkley, Gerald R. Ford, 65.
his Whip Inflation Now (WIN) program tooled to curtail inflationary consumer spending, he did not offer any explicit exceptionalist argument to support it.\(^9_5\)

The WIN-campaign is worth mentioning for another reason. Its failure stands as a sign of how America’s communitarianism in the 1970s was increasingly suppressed by atomistic individualism and a focus on \textit{rights} that “[i]n tandem with consumerism and a normal dislike of inconvenience [...] promotes the short-run over the long-term, crisis intervention over preventive measures, and particular interests over common good.”\(^9_6\) In more detail, communitarian views, virtues, and habits had declined since the 1800s, especially during the Gilded Age and the 1920s. This was partly a result of the nation’s increasing ethnic heterogeneity loosening the country’s Anglo-Saxon bonds of history and culture. And even if this development had been partly reversed by the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War, it had increased again in the 1960s before formally exploding during “The Great Rebellion” of the 1970s. At this point, scores of people joined in on old demands for a new, Rousseauian world where “human beings could make their own choices, unpressured by the conventions of society.”\(^9_7\)

Since the broader public’s attitudes were affected in smaller but similar ways, the results of this shift were many. We will return to some of the effects later, but one early sign was, as indicated above, Americans’ reactions to Ford’s WIN-campaign. For example, only a few years earlier, to conserve energy, over 90 percent of the country’s gas stations had voluntarily stopped selling gas on weekends. Now, the campaign became a theme of sarcasm amongst both talk show hosts and Americans in general, some of whom wore WIN buttons upside down and said

\(^9_6\) Glendon, \textit{Rights Talk}, xi.
\(^9_7\) Frum, \textit{How We Got Here}, 57-65, quote from 62.
that NIM meant “No Immediate Miracles.” Clearly, even if the campaign was poorly organized, “[s]omewhere after World War II it seemed the nation had lost its capacity for self-sacrifice in the broader interest, no matter how worthy and smart the cause – and effects – might be.”

This failure aside, though, Ford’s presidential rhetoric was generally successful. He honestly believed in the transformative power of words, especially so using exceptionalist arguments, and he managed them intelligently. For example, in 1975, despite harsh criticism and widespread fears that the so-called Helsinki Accords would cement the Soviet Union’s grip over Eastern Europe, e.g., by accepting post-World War II borders, Ford signed the agreement:

> When two centuries ago the United States of America issued a declaration of high principles, the cynics and doubters of that day jeered and scoffed. Yet 11 long years later, our independence was won and the stability of our Republic was really achieved through the incorporation of the same principles in our Constitution. But those principles, though they are still being perfected, remain the guiding lights of an American policy. And the American people are still dedicated, as they were then, to a decent respect for the opinions of mankind and to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all peoples everywhere.

And on this issue, Ford’s optimism was proper. The Accords’ language on human rights quickly became a rallying point for dissidents in Communist countries who used the agreement to track human rights violations and draw international attention to them. As a result, the Soviet system was finally being measured according to Western standards. And when it failed to live up to them, at the same time as Communism’s economic flaws became obvious, e.g., through bread lines in central Moscow, Soviet propaganda of being an “alternative” form of democracy and “human alternative” to capitalism began to fall apart. Ford’s support for the Helsinki Accords

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98 Brinkley, Gerald R. Ford, 77. See also Frum, How We Got Here, 318f.
(and the American Exceptionalist ideals they rested on) thus became the start of “the destruction, the elimination of the Soviet Union.”

Another contribution by Ford to the evolution of American Exceptionalism’s political use came on the 1976 Bicentennial Celebration of the American Revolution. He wanted to use this occasion to “make America once again and for centuries more to come what it has so long been – a stronghold and a beacon-light of liberty for the whole world.” Ford also used exceptionalist language to draw attention to themes like the need for national renewal and American values’ significance. Like on July 4, at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, when he hailed the founding principles of the country and declared that the Pioneers’ experiences were still essential to the body politic of America:

The American pioneers knew that in their wilderness homes they could not be colonials ruled by a distant government. They had assurance that in due course they could govern themselves as full citizens of equal States. This political guarantee made all the risks and all the sacrifices worthwhile. Their children and future generations would have all the rights of Washington, Jackson, and Lincoln. So do we, and more so.

Overall, the Bicentennial allowed for a much-needed patriotic extravaganza and contained plenty of activities akin to parades, fireworks, and a new Freedom Train, this time carrying items ranging from George Washington’s draft of the Constitution to Moon rocks.

Since 1976 was a presidential election year, Ford naturally also used Bicentennial occurrences to forward his own needs. As noted earlier, for decades, Republicans had criticized

the welfare state for excesses, waste, and negative side effects but shunned criticizing its goals and objectives. Now, a new tone was heard from the Conservative Movement and the Religious Right, and Ford, in his 1976 State of the Union, cautiously echoed them:

We thought we could transform the country through massive national programs, but often the programs did not work. Too often they only made things worse. In our rush to accomplish great deeds quickly, we trampled on sound principles of restraint and endangered the rights of individuals. [...] The time has now come for a fundamentally different approach for a new realism that is true to the great principles upon which this Nation was founded.  

With this speech, Ford helped set a new standard for the Republican critique of Democrats.

Earlier detailed-oriented criticisms were now on the national level succeeded by exceptionalist-laden jeremiads blaming America’s problems on undesirable effects and the ultimate ambitions of liberal policies. And there was a good reason for this: at this time Ford knew that Ronald Reagan, who was the true master of this rhetoric form, would challenge him for the nomination.

Furthermore, Ford’s rhetoric change had two side effects. First, it accelerated the breakdown for the old “all-encompassing tent” party model with room for sizable minorities of Conservative Democrats and Liberal Republicans, turning the period of 1975-1995 into an interval of ideological purification both within and between the parties. Second, as already mentioned, because of American Exceptionalism’s notions of personal freedom, limited

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105 Today, this development may seem ordained because of the growing ideological distance between Democrats and Republicans, and to some extent it was. However, it can be observed that right-wing parties across the Western world – among them the Christian Democrats in West Germany and the Moderate Party in Sweden – in the late 1970s would make similar right-wing policy turns without changing their rhetoric nearly as drastically. Part of this depended on the more general support for the welfare state in these countries, so it is reasonable to assume that American Exceptionalism and the orthodox religious influence described earlier swayed many Republicans to make an uncommonly sharp right turn, both politically and rhetorically.

government, and free enterprise, and the GOP’s more frequent use of them as big political sticks, exceptionalism truly began to appear to be a politically conservative concept. From the mid-1970s, it is often hard to separate exceptionalist rhetoric from GOP talking points.

One example of this was from the 1976 campaign when Ford talked to farmers about why U.S. agriculture produced surpluses while the Soviet Union failed to feed its population:

> You have been so successful because you’ve used your own ingenuity, your own inventiveness, your own initiative to produce the finest and the most abundant food and fiber throughout the world. If you are to continue meeting the needs of this country and our trading partners throughout the world, you must continue to have this kind of freedom – freedom from the meddling hand and the long arm of an arbitrary, autocratic government.107

Historically, such a comment was hardly unique, and if delivered by FDR, Truman, JFK, or LBJ (or even Jimmy Carter), it would not be noteworthy. However, it is more difficult to imagine it coming from a George McGovern since many Democrats in the 1970s went so far left on various issues that they effectively dissociated themselves from exceptionalist themes and sentiments. As a point of fact, the Democratic Platform from 1976 stated that Ford’s free-market agricultural policy caused “high food prices, unstable farm income, windfalls for commodity speculators and multinational corporations, and confrontations between farmer and consumer” and demanded extensive political, bureaucratic interference to correct its flaws and failures.108 However, this was considered so radical that it led to an election so close that a switch of 3,687 votes in Hawaii and 5,559 votes in Ohio would have won Ford four full years in the White House.109 However, a Conservative Democrat, removed from his party’s radical wing, beat him at the finish line.

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Arguably, that Jimmy Carter won the Democratic Party’s nomination in 1976 depended foremost on the nation’s need for an “anti-Nixon” who could convincingly tell Americans that he – like George Washington in the cherry tree tale – would never tell them a lie. Carter also turned out to be a sincere politician who did not hesitate to tell harsh truths even to his disadvantage. However, of equal or even greater importance was that he came from a traditional southern family, was a fiscal conservative, and a born-again Christian.\footnote{Barber, \textit{Presidential Character}, 400-436.} In this way, reverberating his party’s declining Conservative wing, he was seen as electable for Southern Conservatives, which temporarily stopped the GOP’s advances throughout the region.\footnote{Julian E. Zelizer, \textit{Jimmy Carter} (New York: Times Books, 2019), 49f; Booth Fowler et al, \textit{Religion and Politics}, 172f; Schulman, \textit{Seventies}, 121f. Symptomatically, one of Carter’s main primary opponents was Henry “Scoop” Jackson, one of the party’s last Cold War “hawks” but also a typical New Dealer.}

Still, Carter’s ideological profile was unorthodox, and on the question of whether he was a liberal or a conservative, he retorted: “I’m a more complicated person than that.”\footnote{Zelizer, \textit{Jimmy Carter}, 19.} Like Wilson, he was also overly confident in his intellectual abilities; his Progressivism, like JFK’s, was selective; and his Conservatism, like Hoover’s, uneven (even if his views on basics like human nature did reflect Middle America more than societal elites). Carter could therefore say things like “Government cannot solve our problems, it can’t set our goals, it cannot define our vision [...] eliminate poverty or [...] mandate goodness”\footnote{Jimmy Carter, “The State of the Union Address Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress,” (January 19, 1978) \textit{APP}, accessed August 19, 2018, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/245063.} but also, “We can have an America
where freedom, on the one hand, and equality, on the other hand, are mutually supportive and not in conflict,” seemingly without ever pondering the dissonance between such statements.

This is probably because Carter, again like Hoover, was an engineer and by both heart and mind, therefore, a technocrat who viewed the world through theoretical academic filters rather than practical political lenses. This qualified Carter’s exceptionalist views, and his Americanism seems unreserved only when it came to the nation’s origin:

America’s birth opened a new chapter in mankind’s history. Ours was the first nation to dedicate itself clearly to basic moral and philosophical principles: that all people are created equal and endowed with inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and that the power of government is derived from the consent of the governed. This national commitment was a singular act of wisdom and courage, and it brought the best and the bravest from other nations to our shores. It was a revolutionary development that captured the imagination of mankind.

Likewise, despite being a heartfelt patriot, Carter regularly praised historical U.S. achievements, but almost always with caveats like “we cannot dwell upon remembered glory.” Expectedly, this also affected his policies.

**FOREIGN POLICY**

Carter wanted to restore the “moral compass” of U.S. foreign policy by basing it upon America’s founding principles and on a “firm commitment to human rights.” He thought that the

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115 Leffler, *For the Soul*, 259ff.


country’s creed made it “a pioneer in shaping more decent and just relations among people and among societies;” wanted to promote democracy abroad without military interventions; and believed in “a sustained architectural effort to shape an international framework of peace within which our own ideals gradually can become a global reality.”

Thus, Carter wanted Wilson and FDR’s visions of the world to come true by way of JFK’s “soft underbelly” policies. And this desire was timely. By the late 1970s, the human rights variant of American Exceptionalism had gained a central role in world politics, e.g., through the U.N., the Helsinki Accord, and other similar institutions and treaties.

Despite this promising starting point, Carter’s foreign policy results were meager. He scored only two successes with the Panama Canal Treaty and the Camp David Agreement, neither of which had anything to do with human rights. One reason for this was that the Soviet Union described the “Western form” of human rights as part of a plot to subvert its empire. Yet, it can be argued that Carter hampered himself by promoting human rights and following his pragmatic instincts at the same time. For example, to support Iran, he censured his critique of the Shah’s human rights record, only to see this policy contributing to the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the ensuing hostage crisis. Similarly, Carter attempted to secure détente by muting criticism of “internal affairs” in Communist countries, yet at the same time, he criticized such crimes in U.S.-friendly countries such as South Africa. As well, Carter, like once Wilson and Truman, arrogantly declared the U.S. the natural umpire in the area of human rights: “We do not

119 Ibid.
120 Dearborn, Exceptionalist-in-Chief, 118-130.
121 Hahn, Crisis and Crossfire, 61ff.
122 Herring, Colony to Superpower, 831ff, 845ff; Walker, National Security, 177-191; White, Still Seeing Red, 184.
123 Cull, The Cold War, 386ff; Herring, Colony to Superpower, 847ff; Little, American Orientalism, 223ff; Hahn, Crisis and Crossfire, 69-76.
124 Herring, Colony to Superpower, 852ff; Zelizer, Jimmy Carter, 61-87.
seek to intimidate, but it is clear that a world which others can dominate with impunity would be inhospitable to decency and a threat to the well-being of all people.”

Furthermore, Carter’s foreign policy failures – together with the Iranian hostage crisis – created two imperative domestic effects. First, his human-rights focus brought to a close the Democratic Party’s turning away from “hawkish” Cold War Liberalism toward a “softer” foreign policy, which in turn made foreign policy a nearly clear-cut left-right issue. Second, by convincing millions of Americans that his kind of foreign policy was at best dysfunctional, Carter’s failures persuaded many moderate Republicans and Independents to embrace his successor-to-be’s more aggressive foreign policy. Still, foreign policy was arguably not the only or even main reason for the bottom falling out of his presidency. It was instead his handling of domestic issues and, most of all, his break with some of American Exceptionalism’s most sacred beliefs.

THE MALAISE SPEECH

In the 1970s, the burdens of the Great Society and the Vietnam War, together with skyrocketing energy costs, added to the pain of stagflation, which remained a haunting phenomenon throughout the 1970s. Also, since the stagflation combination of high unemployment and high inflation, according to Keynesian theory could simply not occur, in July 1979, Carter, the technocrat, retreated to Camp David with a group of economists and other experts (including

126 Frum, How We Got Here, 309ff.
127 Friedman, Neoconservative Revolution, 137-160.
Robert Bellah, the instituting scholar of American Exceptionalism) to analyze the situation.¹²⁸

And after a ten-day conclave, Carter, the president, appeared on TV with a pitiless “malaise speech” that explained why America, this time, was unable to lift itself by the bootstraps.¹²⁹

The magnitude of Carter’s failure at this point can only be appreciated by considering American Exceptionalism. In 1979, for over 200 years, Americans had been told that their country was remarkable, and a special badge of pride had been put on the fact that they were richer than other peoples because of their unmatched work ethic, supreme ingenuity, and endless optimism. Just a few years earlier, this combo had literally taken Americans to the Moon and back again, but now the president told them that their country suffered from

[...] a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our Nation. The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America.¹³⁰

Carter also said the cause of this predicament was not primarily an economic, but a moral and spiritual crisis...

In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we’ve discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We’ve learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Pierard & Linder, Civil Religion, 243f.
¹²⁹ Zelizer, Jimmy Carter, 96ff.
¹³¹ Ibid.
...and that this consumerism fouled the American spirit and transformed the U.S. into just another worldly power which threatened the country’s historic mission:

Our progress has been part of the living history of America, even the world. We always believed that we were part of a great movement of humanity itself called democracy, involved in the search for freedom, and that belief has always strengthened us in our purpose. But just as we are losing our confidence in the future, we are also beginning to close the door on our past.\(^\text{132}\)

Hence, Carter warned, America stood at a fork in the road:

There are two paths to choose. One is a path [...] that leads to fragmentation and self-interest. Down that road lies a mistaken idea of freedom, the right to grasp for ourselves some advantage over others. That path would be one of constant conflict between narrow interests ending in chaos and immobility. It is a certain route to failure. All the traditions of our past, all the lessons of our heritage, all the promises of our future point to another path, the path of common purpose and the restoration of American values. That path leads to true freedom for our Nation and ourselves.\(^\text{133}\)

This speech contains rebuffs to Americans’ traditional self-image on all levels – individually, nationally, and internationally. Numerous observations could therefore be made about it, but three will have to suffice. First, besides reflecting the period’s general pessimism, Carter’s analysis of the U.S.’ problems was ideologically conservative. Second, questioning Americans’ view of personal freedom as primarily the liberty to pursue individual fortune, he blamed them collectively for the nation’s despair. Third, questioning if the nation was still “the best country in the world,” he challenged the very essence of American Exceptionalism. In other words, what Carter essentially told his people was that they, by turning into a bunch of egotists, had unraveled the republican ethos and wrecked the delicate balance between material whips and spiritual carrots so prudently comprised by the Founding Fathers.

\(^{132}\) Ibid.
\(^{133}\) Ibid.
Remarkably, this message resonated with Americans at first. Since many agreed with Carter that something was profoundly wrong, good reviews poured in from the media, and his poll numbers jumped ten percent overnight. However, the first backlash came only two days later when he asked his whole Cabinet to resign. This brought back the feeling of national confusion and political disarray and caused many to lose whatever confidence they had left in Carter’s ability to lead them out of the situation he described. And a second, even more demoralizing, collapse set in as people began to realize Carter had told them “what they did not want to hear – that they would have to renounce their profligate lifestyles.”

The final result of this Carter’s most famous speech was, therefore, not only a new, permanent downturn in his poll numbers but a decline in Americans’ already historically low trust in politicians and their ability to take care of things and reasoning along these lines, many began to take matters concerning their lives into their own hands. However, most seem to have done so not by returning to communitarian patterns and solutions but by taking care of themselves, their needs and problems individually, which, in turn, upended the financial and political order that had taken form since the 1930s. Moreover, this shift was actively cultivated by the man who would oust Carter from office. And he would do so by making greater use of exceptionalist rhetoric than Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln combined.

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134 Pierard & Linder, *Civil Religion*, 255.
Freedom leads to prosperity. Freedom replaces the ancient hatreds among the nations with comity and peace. Freedom is the victor.

RONALD REAGAN (1987)

CHAPTER 7 |

An Exceptionalist Presidency

In America, the 1980s became defined by ideas, moods, and developments many times opposite to the ones marking the previous decade. Good economic times dissolved the gloom of the 1970s and created a vivid optimism rivaling the 1920s. New goods, services, and habits like “eating out” transformed private life, while novelties such as fax machines and cell phones made business easier. Also, lowered taxes and deregulations made it possible for millions to seek fortunes as entrepreneurs and invest in real estate and the stock market. In other words, the 1980s offered a long time in the making broad but shallow reaction against the post-war era’s collectivist mentality and turned more Americans into intrepid individualists. At the same time, many social problems persisted. Crime, drugs, and AIDS plagued the country’s big cities, and deindustrialization created the Rustbelt from Boston to Chicago.

Furthermore, innovations like cable TV, the PC, the VCR, the Walkman, and video games detached people from collective media outlets such as cinema, radio, and the “big three”
televisions. Still, even though the globalization of news and pop culture brought on by CNN and MTV accelerated the Americanization of the world, it merely foretold the global information explosion of the 1990s.\(^1\) Moreover, it was still mostly a one-way street so far as the foreign influx of both goods and ideas into the U.S. was limited. At home, “the Eighties” thus stands out as the last decade when most Americans still clung to one mainstream culture.\(^2\) On the other hand, increasing immigration from Latin America – picking up speed after a policy change in 1965 – began to challenge the nation’s WASP culture.\(^3\) However, by voting with large margins for Ronald Reagan in both 1980 and 1984, Americans said, not so fast.

**AN AMERICAN LIFE**

Somebody once called Reagan a life-size Norman Rockwell painting. There is some validity to that statement. Indeed, after growing up in a lower-income home with an alcoholic father drifting between towns looking for jobs, to make consecutive successful careers as a radio sports commentator, movie star, TV host, and governor before becoming one of America’s most influential presidents is a remarkable personal story. Moreover, Reagan’s background, his personality and careers, as well as his characteristic optimism and unshakable trust in American Exceptionalism, are inseparable from his ideological beliefs and political skills.\(^4\) Three aspects are especially important to note.

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4. Next to George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and JFK, Reagan is one of the most scrutinized U.S. Presidents. The literature about him and his policies abound. However, a large number of books are so biased both for and against him and his policies that their academic value is low. Because of this, in this thesis,
First, the Reagan family’s struggles during the Great Depression made young Ronald a “Roosevelt liberal.” However, his upbringing in small, socially and culturally tight-knit Midwestern towns frontloaded his mind with traditionalist views and values that – together with his encounter with Communists in Hollywood and the realization around 1950 that he as an actor had been “living in a tinsel factory” – put him on track to become a conservative. In a few words, as he began to view his rise from rags to riches as proof of the U.S. model’s supremacy, he concluded that making the New Deal permanent was as grave a threat to freedom at home as communism was abroad. Reagan’s political transformation thus mirrors the distancing of modern liberalism from American Exceptionalism, and after changing parties in 1962, he would forever insist that: “I didn’t leave the Democratic Party, the Democratic Party left me.”

A second key to Reagan is his religiosity. He was raised in a Disciples of Christ church (whose founder had talked about America as a world savior already in the 1830s) and became a steadfast, if a bit eccentric, believer in a generic form of Christianity. Amongst the many memes inserted in his childhood mind, the one about Godless communism being an evil system stands out. Consequently, after growing up, Reagan, like Dwight Eisenhower, John Foster Dulles, and other contemporaries, came to view the post-WWII world as a Manichean drama wherein

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biographical and other basic facts about Reagan have been gathered from the following books only: Lou Cannon, President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime (New York: Public Affairs, 2000); Wills, Reagan’s America, passim; Kengor, God and Ronald Reagan, passim; Gil Troy, Morning In America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); White, New Politics, 7-22.

7 Byrne, Ronald Reagan, 1-19.
8 Smith, Faith & The Presidency, 325-363; Kengor, God and Ronald Reagan, 1-40; Garrison, Empire of Ideals, 119.
America was God’s agent, Russia the Devil’s, and the Cold War a holy war between them. In 1957, when speaking at his alma mater Eureka College in Illinois, he defined the latter as:

[A] simple struggle between those of us who believe that man has the dignity and sacred right and the ability to choose and shape his own destiny and those who do not so believe. This irreconcilable conflict is between those who believe in the sanctity of individual freedom and those who believe in the supremacy of the state.

Over the years, Reagan would often expound on related themes. For example, he deemed Americans to be outstanding people. As president, he would state:

We stand for freedom in the world. We see the gulags and the prisons, those places where man is not free to do work of his choosing and profit from his labor, places where the freedom to worship God has been extinguished and where souls have withered. But we’re blessed by God with the right to say of our country: This is where freedom is. This is the land of limitless possibilities.

In other words, Reagan’s Christianity blended with his exceptionalist beliefs so entirely that they became one. In time, he also convinced himself that God destined him to revive the American spirit and aid the West to “transcend Communism.”

The third factor is Reagan’s radio, movie, and TV experiences, which turned him into a master orator. He talked using a mix of highbrow prose and a down-to-earth vernacular and often drove home his talking points with humor and edifying stories. This, together with what was for modern discourses an atypically inductive style of reasoning, led some to think that he was an

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13 Garrison, Empire of Ideals, 154.
14 Kengor, God and Ronald Reagan, 17-113, 139-181.
“amiable dunce” that just assumed things without processing them analytically. However, Reagan was a reflective person and well-read in many historical, theological, and other subjects. In addition, as a promoter for War Bonds during World War II and later an envoy for General Electric, he became a first-rate stump speaker and debater. For example, in 1984, he would wave off the question of whether he was too old to seek reelection with: “I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent’s youth and inexperience.” Still, Reagan was not a standard conservative.

A COMPOUNDED WORLDVIEW

Reagan’s imagination encompassed at least two dissonant parts. First, as a Christian, Reagan accepted the “ethical duality” of human nature but presumed its virtuous side to be dominant. He also believed that all people were basically the same. These assessments were Rousseauian in nature but not in origin. In his mind, since they were derived from a belief that since freedom is God’s gift to Man, anything restricting it could be dubious at best and democracy “is just a political reading of the Bible.” The imperative arising from these postulates was austere: that people everywhere honestly longed for and deserved to live in freedom, and that freedom leads to peace. In 1985, he would express himself as follows:

16 Wills, Reagan’s America, 332-338.
19 Kengor, God and Ronald Reagan, 101-113; Garrison, Empire of Ideals, 101-106.
Freedom and democracy are the best guarantors of peace. History has shown that democratic nations do not start wars. The rights of the individual and the rule of law are as fundamental to peace as arms control. A government which does not respect its citizens’ rights and its international commitments to protect those rights is not likely to respect its other international undertakings.20

In other words, on these specific points, Reagan was foreshadowing the theoretically rigid worldview of the “mature” neoconservative movement that would flourish in the 1990s and beyond. As president, several times he would express this view’s ultimate declaration of faith. For instance, in 1982, he told the British Parliament: “It would be cultural condescension, or worse, to say that any people prefer dictatorship to democracy.”21

On the other hand, on the related question of whether God directed history and its stride towards democracy, something else, or nothing at all, evidence points to Reagan being an indeterminist, like LBJ and Nixon. Amongst other things, though he often talked about “America’s destiny” and hailed freedom and democracy as goals for human history, he sounded different when reasoning about underlying issues: “[D]emocracy is not a fragile flower [but] it needs cultivating. If the rest of this century is to witness the gradual growth of freedom and democratic ideals, we must take actions to assist the campaign for democracy.”22 Also: “History is no captive of some inevitable force. History is made by men and women of vision and courage.”23

Furthermore, Reagan had a futuristic mindset that, in combination with his view on human nature, gave him a jarring optimism. In 1985, he decreed it a given that, “[t]here are no

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22 Reagan, “Address to Members of the British Parliament,” (June 08, 1982).
constraints on the human mind, no walls around the human spirit, no barriers to our progress except those we ourselves erect.”\textsuperscript{24} Specifically, Reagan viewed technical, medical, and other advances as highways to a near-Utopian future where people would live longer, better, and freer lives on both Earth and in Space (which was one of his favorite topics). Thus, he saw no limits to what Americans could do if unfettered from taxes, regulations, and other constrictions.\textsuperscript{25} In his Inaugural Address, he stated that the nation’s problems “will go away because we as Americans have the capacity now, as we’ve had in the past, to do whatever needs to be done to preserve this last and greatest bastion of freedom.”\textsuperscript{26}

This aptitude for daydreaming makes it possible to question Reagan’s status as a “true” Conservative, and one author calls him instead “essentially a rightwing liberal, indeed a progressive.”\textsuperscript{27} However, since his views of human nature, the primacy of liberty, and the potential for progress probably stemmed more from the Reformation’s idea about earthly progress than from the Enlightenment’s idea about a \textit{Homo Libertas}, this is arguably a bridge too far. Instead, since de Tocqueville and others wrote early on about Americans’ optimism, and the \textit{Überoptimismus} during Reagan youth in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century survived into the modern era, buoyancy like Reagan’s (and like FDR, JFK, and others) should be deemed an imperative quality of American Exceptionalism on par with freedom and equality, rather than a neoconservative

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\textsuperscript{25} Garrison, \textit{An Empire of Ideals}, 45-52, 139-153; Stuckey, \textit{Playing the Game}, 60f; see also White, \textit{Obama’s America}, 185-191.
\textsuperscript{27} Genovese, \textit{Southern Tradition}, 82.
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trait. And whatever the source of Reagan’s optimism, in reaction to the melancholic 1970s, most Americans liked it.

**CHANGING THE TUNE**

Moderating the ideological fervor that had colored his 1964 Goldwater speech, when seeking the presidency in 1980, Reagan used exceptionalist oratory to transcend the feeling of *malaise* and promoted policies that would get “government off our backs, out of our pockets, and back to the standards of excellence once envisioned by the Founding Fathers.” Because of this, it can be argued that he, next to JFK and Donald Trump (see below), is one of few modern U.S. President who managed to win the White House by appealing at least as much to Americans’ hearts as to their brains, wallets, and/or stomachs. One way to approach Reagan’s use of exceptionalism is therefore to recall how JFK applied such rhetoric. However, Reagan’s use of the concept went further and was far more sophisticated.

The reason for this was personal conviction, style, and skill, as well as political circumstances. In a nutshell, Reagan’s political imagination was as gaudy as his belief in America’s exceptional nature was strong. Also, he was running at a moment in time when he

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30 FDR and his 1940 and 1944 victories could arguably also be included in this group, but he has been excluded since his 1932 and 1936 campaigns built on promises to improve the U.S. economy (stomachs, wallets) and not on appealing to exceptionalist sentiments (hearts).
could claim that liberal policies were failing on all fronts, and the Democratic Party had a lackluster mouthpiece in Jimmy Carter. Consequently, Reagan could emphasize broad exceptionalist principles and apply them to a range of topics – and he did so “nearly every time he appeared behind a microphone.”

For instance, when Reagan announced his candidacy in November 1979, he did it as an unwavering believer in America: “To me our country is a living, breathing presence, unimpressed by what others say is impossible, proud of its own success, generous, yes and naive, sometimes wrong, never mean and always impatient to provide a better life for its people in a framework of a basic fairness and freedom.” And after delivering a list of problems he was running to correct, he said:

[T]here remains the greatness of our people, our capacity for dreaming up fantastic deeds and bringing them off to the surprise of an unbelieving world. When Washington’s men were freezing at Valley Forge, Tom Paine told his fellow Americans: “We have it in our power to begin the world over again,” we still have that power.

By the same token, Reagan made his RNC Acceptance Speech, titled “Time to Recapture Our Destiny,” strongly exceptionalist and based it “upon the power of nostalgic myth-making to define not only the recent past, but also the present and future.” After accepting the nomination, he instantly struck an exceptionalist tone when blaming Carter and Democrats in Congress for the “unprecedented calamity which has befallen us”:

They say that the United States has had its day in the sun; that our nation has passed its zenith. They expect you to tell your children that the American people no longer have the will to cope with their problems; that the future will be one of sacrifice and few opportunities.

31 Wilsey, American Exceptionalism, 148.
33 Ibid.
34 Michael Dwyer, “‘Fixing’ the Fifties: Alex P. Keaton and Marty McFly,” in Moffitt & Campbell (ed.), 1980s, 212ff.
My fellow citizens, I utterly reject that view. The American people, the most generous on
earth, who created the highest standard of living, are not going to accept the notion that
we can only make a better world for others by moving backwards ourselves. Those who
believe we can have no business leading the nation. [...] We need rebirth of the American
tradition of leadership at every level of government and in private life as well.³⁵

Reagan then turned to history for proof that Americans handled previous challenges by standing
firm in the country’s original values and virtues:

Three hundred and sixty years ago, in 1620, a group of families dared to cross a mighty
ocean to build a future for themselves in a new world. When they arrived at Plymouth,
Massachusetts, they formed what they called a “compact”; an agreement among
themselves to build a community and abide by its laws. The single act – the voluntary
binding together of free people to live under the law – set the pattern for what was to
come. A century and a half later, the descendants of those people pledged their lives, their
fortunes and their sacred honor to found this nation. Some forfeited their fortunes and
their lives; none sacrificed honor. Four score and seven years later, Abraham Lincoln
called upon the people of all America to renew their dedication and their commitment to
a government of, for and by the people. Isn’t it once again time to renew our compact of
freedom; to pledge to each other all that is best in our lives; all that gives meaning to
them – for the sake of this, our beloved and blessed land?³⁶

Drawing the essence from this exposé, he too sounded his signature exceptionalist-conservative
tone when stating that the way forward was a return to the nation’s creed:

Let us pledge to restore, in our time, the American spirit of voluntary service, of
cooperation, of private and community initiative; a spirit that flows like a deep and
mighty river through the history of our nation. As your nominee, I pledge to restore to the
federal government the capacity to do the people’s work without dominating their lives.³⁷

Furthermore, Reagan implied that Carter’s policies lacked exceptional qualities by
offering “only the same tired proposals for more government tinkering, more meddling and more
control – all of which led us to this state in the first place.” Instead, he promised to restore the

³⁵ Ronald Reagan, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in
³⁶ Ibid.
³⁷ Ibid.
economic system of the Founders that “for more than 200 years [has] helped us master a continent, create a previously undreamed-of prosperity for our people and has fed millions of others around the globe” and could “continue to serve us in the future if our government will stop ignoring the basic values on which it was built and stop betraying the trust and good will of the American worker who keep it going.” And before turning to foreign policy, he added, in what can be called a form of progressive right-wing rhetoric: “For those who have abandoned hope, we’ll restore hope and we’ll welcome them into a great national crusade to make America great again!”

Since Reagan’s use of American Exceptionalism during the fall campaign followed the model of his Announcement and RNC Acceptance Speeches, only a few more examples need to be cited here. Overall, he focused on Carter’s performance apropos of the economy and foreign policy and criticized him in sweeping terms. Also, as a former actor, he excelled in picking the right settings. For example, he gave his Labor Day rally in Liberty Park on the Jersey side of New York with the Statue of Liberty as a backdrop:

Through this “Golden Door,” under the gaze of that “Mother of Exiles,” have come millions of men and women, who first stepped foot on American soil right there, on Ellis Island, so close to the Statue of Liberty. These families came here to work. They came to build. Others came to America in different ways, from other lands, under different, often harrowing conditions, but this place symbolizes what they all managed to build, no matter where they came from or how they came or how much they suffered. [...] They came from different lands but they shared the same values, the same dream.

Reagan then delivered his main attack by hitting at Carter’s malaise speech...

Today a President of the United States would have us believe that dream is over or at least in need of change. Jimmy Carter’s Administration tells us that the descendants of

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38 Ibid.
those who sacrificed to start again in this land of freedom may have to abandon the dream that drew their ancestors to a new life in a new land. The Carter record is a litany of despair, of broken promises, of sacred trusts abandoned and forgotten.\footnote{Ibid.}

...before concluding:

I want more than anything I’ve ever wanted, to have an administration that will, through its actions, at home and in the international arena, let millions of people know that Miss Liberty still “Lifts her lamp beside the golden door.” Through our international broadcasting stations – the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and the others – let us send, loud and clear, the message that this generation of Americans intends to keep that lamp shining; that this dream, this last best hope of man on earth, this nation under God, shall not perish from the earth. [...] Let us pledge to each other, with this Great Lady looking on, that we can, and so help us God, we will make America great again.\footnote{Ibid.}

After beating Carter in a debate by asking the American voter, “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” Reagan moved toward a landslide victory.\footnote{In 1980, Reagan won only 50.7 percent of the popular vote but a landslide of 489 electoral votes. This huge discrepancy was because John Anderson, a centrist Republican, siphoned off 6.6 percent running as an independent, leaving Carter with 41 percent and 89 electoral votes.} In an Election Eve Address, he made his final argument by saying that “Americans today, just as they did 200 years ago, feel burdened, stifled and sometimes even oppressed by government that has grown too large, too bureaucratic, too wasteful, too unresponsive, too uncaring about people and their problems.”\footnote{Ronald Reagan, “Election Eve Address ‘A Vision for America,’” (November 3, 1980) \textit{APP}, accessed March 12, 2019, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/285591.} This speech also contains two more examples of Reagan’s rhetorical specialties. First, as he had done for over a decade, he used “a city on a hill” as a metaphor for America and its God-given mission:

I know I have told before of the moment in 1630 when the tiny ship Arabella bearing settlers to the New World lay off the Massachusetts coast. To the little bank of settlers gathered on the deck John Winthrop said: “We shall be a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story
and a byword through the world.” Well, America became more than “a story,” or a “byword” – more than a sterile footnote in history. I have quoted John Winthrop’s words more than once on the campaign trail this year – for I believe that Americans in 1980 are every bit as committed to that vision of a shining “city on a hill,” as were those long ago settlers.44

Second, Reagan demonstrated his firm understanding of the power of the past and how he used sentimentalism to move his audiences. And as so often before, he did so by relating a contemporary happening to the Wild West:

Last year I lost a friend who was more than a symbol of the Hollywood dream industry; to millions he was a symbol of our country itself. And when he died, the headlines seemed to convey all the doubt about America, all the nostalgia for a seemingly lost past. “The Last American Hero,” said one headline, “Mr. America dies,” said another. Well, I knew John Wayne well, and no one would have been angrier at being called the “last American hero.” Just before his death, he said in his own blunt way, “Just give the American people a good cause, and there’s nothing they can’t lick.” Duke Wayne did not believe that our country was ready for the dust bin of history, and if we’ll just think about it, we too will know it isn’t.45

For younger people, this anecdote perhaps needs an explanation. Through over 80 Western movies, in which he usually played a terse but honest and upright hero, John Wayne had become synonymous with the Frontier and everything good it represented: manhood, bravery, heroism, optimism, hope, sweet success for the diligent, tough justice for the depraved, etc. Thus, by evoking Wayne as a personal friend, Reagan drew The Duke’s posthumous endorsement for his White House bid. And he knew what he was doing. When he a few years later opened an exhibition on the American cowboy, he explained:

This exhibit explores both the reality and the myth of the American West. And both are important. Here are more than the bits and pieces of a rough and gritty life, but the tangible remnants of a national legend. Among the horsehair lassoes and Remington

44 Ibid. As noted earlier, the term “city on a hill” had been reintroduced into U.S. political discourse by JFK, but it was Reagan as candidate and president who was to make it a staple. Of 26 mentions noted by APP predating January 20, 1989, 23 belong to Reagan, with JFK, LBJ, and Carter listed for one each.
sculptures and Gene Autry songs is a part of our national identity. Tails of Wild West men and women from Kit Carson to Wild Bill Hickok to Calamity Jane to Annie Oakley are woven into the dreams of our youths and the standards we aim to live by in our adult lives. Ideals of courageous and self-reliant heroes, both men and women, are the stuff of Western lore.\textsuperscript{46}

To summarize, even though the economy and foreign policy were decisive factors in the 1980 election, Reagan’s optimism and exceptionalist beliefs made him a strong candidate, and his rhetoric was essential to his victory.\textsuperscript{47} Proof lies in Reagan’s appeal to three previously resolutely Democratic but sternly patriotic groups: blue-collar workers, Catholics, and evangelicals. The emergence of these “Reagan Democrats” and the partial collapse of FDR’s New Deal coalition they created was complex, but that he spoke their political, religious, and emotional lingo better than Carter seems clear.\textsuperscript{48} In addition, Republicans could celebrate winning 33 new seats in the House, 12 seats in the Senate (flipping the chamber to the GOP for the first time since 1954), and hundreds of state and local seats and offices across the country.\textsuperscript{49}

\textbf{President Reagan}

After his election, Reagan used plenty of exceptionalist language to keep his homey style and continued to pick impressive stage settings.\textsuperscript{50} For example, in 1981, he became the first president to be sworn in at the West Front of the Capitol overlooking the National Mall toward the

\textsuperscript{47} Stuckey, \textit{Playing the Game}, 96. For a more detailed account of the importance of values and emotions in the 1980 campaign and for its result, see White, \textit{New Politics}, 37-55.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid, 145-162.
Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln monuments, and in his Inaugural Address he delivered this exceptionalist ode:

Directly in front of me, the monument to a monumental man, George Washington, father of our country. A man of humility who came to greatness reluctantly. He led America out of revolutionary victory into infant nationhood. Off to one side, the stately memorial to Thomas Jefferson. The Declaration of Independence flames with his eloquence. And then, beyond the Reflecting Pool, the dignified columns of the Lincoln Memorial. Whoever would understand in his heart the meaning of America will find it in the life of Abraham Lincoln. Beyond those monuments to heroism is the Potomac River, and on the far shore the sloping hills of Arlington National Cemetery, with its row upon row of simple white markers bearing crosses or Stars of David. They add up to only a tiny fraction of the price that has been paid for our freedom.\(^{51}\)

Reagan also included another nod to exceptionalist themes:

If we look to the answer as to why for so many years we achieved so much, prospered as no other people on Earth, it was because here in this land we unleashed the energy and individual genius of man to a greater extent than has ever been done before. Freedom and the dignity of the individual have been more available and assured here than in any other place on Earth. [...] It is time for us to realize that we’re too great a nation to limit ourselves to small dreams.\(^{52}\)

Likewise, Reagan continued his habit of telling stories and cracking jokes. For example, he used both to continue the GOP’s appropriation of American Exceptionalism by giving “the L-word” a negative connotation. In 1984, he jested that “we could say [Liberals] spend money like drunken sailors, but that would be unfair to drunken sailors, because the sailors are spending their own money.”\(^{53}\) And it worked. By the end of Reagan’s tenure, the term *liberal* had turned into a political mark of Cain associated with “profligacy, spinelessness, malevolence, masochism, elitism, fantasy, anarchy, idealism, softness, irresponsibility, and


\(^{52}\) Ibid.

sanctimoniousness.” Moreover, as reflected in another Reagan comment from 1984, Democrats could be depicted as “going so far left they’ve left America,” and liberal ideas were slowly but methodically branded as un-American. As a result, the GOP would, in the next decade, achieve a nearly complete rhetorical appropriation of American Exceptionalism. We will return to this in the next chapter.

NEW FEDERALISM: PART II

Moving on to specific policy areas, we shall begin at the highest level of political imports and notice that Reagan’s view of an inherent tension between freedom and political power made him “true to the Lockean tradition of American liberalism.” In his first Inaugural Address, he broke with a century of positivist-technocratic belief when saying that “government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.” He also challenged the Progressive paradigm by reminding the public “that the Federal Government did not create the States; the States created the Federal Government.” However, mindful of Nixon’s failure to roll back federal powers because of Democratic and bureaucratic resistance, Reagan applied a dual strategy: political reforms and nominations of conservative judges. Specifically, the latter’s task was intended to narrow the political sphere by challenging the “living constitution” notion and overturning earlier liberal rulings on issues such as school busing, affirmative action, and free abortions.

54 Quote from Kazin, Populist Persuasion, 246.
55 Abramson, Aldrich & Rohde, Change and Continuity, 56.
In support of both tactics, Reagan systematically hailed the origin, nature, and function of the U.S.’s political system. For example, in his 1985 State of the Union, he said:

We honor the giants of our history not by going back but forward to the dreams their vision foresaw. My fellow citizens, this nation is poised for greatness. The time has come to proceed toward a great new challenge – a second American Revolution of hope and opportunity; a revolution carrying us to new heights of progress by pushing back frontiers of knowledge and space; a revolution of spirit that taps the soul of America, enabling us to summon greater strength than we’ve ever known; and a revolution that carries beyond our shores the golden promise of human freedom in a world of peace.

Here, special attention should be paid to the term “second American Revolution” as an example of how Reagan used positively charged terms from U.S. history to support his policies. Likewise, he often struck an exceptionalist note by venerating the Founding Fathers, whom he portrayed as saints whose deeds were so far unsurpassed in the passage of human history:

This Nation was born when a band of men, the Founding Fathers, a group so unique we’ve never seen their like since, rose to such selfless heights. Lawyers, tradesmen, merchants, farmers – 56 men achieved security and standing in life but valued freedom more. They pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. Sixteen of them gave their lives. Most gave their fortunes. All preserved their sacred honor. They gave us more than a nation. They brought to all mankind for the first time the concept that man was born free, that each of us has inalienable rights, ours by the grace of God, and that government was created by us for our convenience, having only the powers that we choose to give it.

As could be expected, Reagan showed a special appreciation for George Washington. For instance, in 1982, when celebrating the 250th anniversary of the first president’s birth at Mount Vernon, he declared:

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60 Garrison, Empire of Ideals, 84ff, 92-99.
We come filled with pride and gratitude to honor George Washington, Father of our Country, knowing that because of what he did, we’re free and we’re Americans. [...] His love was liberty, and his trust was in the people. He believed they were dependable and right-minded and he believed that a leader’s responsibility is to bring out their best qualities.  

However, since Washington, like John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and other Federalists had been less vocal on the need to limiting the federal government, to buttress his vision for downsizing the government, Reagan most frequently cited Thomas Jefferson. In 1982, Reagan procured him as a promoter for his attempt to strengthen states’ rights and the independence of counties, school districts, churches, and families:

Thomas Jefferson said, ‘I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves...’ And that conviction is embodied in our 10th amendment – the Federal Government will do only those things called for in the Constitution, and all others shall remain with the States or the people.

A month later, Reagan invoked Jefferson again when defending the country’s system of division of powers and checks and balances:

Thomas Jefferson also knew that too much government threatened human rights. “What has destroyed liberty and the rights of man in every government that has ever existed under the Sun?” he asked. And he answered, “The generalizing and concentrating all cares and powers into one body.” Limited government, in a sound Federal system with essential powers properly distributed among local, State, and national bodies was his goal.  

Naturally, when it came to constitutional issues, Reagan also relentlessly evoked the Declaration, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights and promoted them as the nation’s defining

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64 Garrison, Empire of Ideals, 67-83.
documents. For example, several times, he used the Constitution to disparage secularists’ attempts to exclude religion from public schools:

> To those who cite the first amendment as reason for excluding God from more and more of our institutions and everyday life, may I just point out, the first amendment of the Constitution was not written to protect the people of this country from religious values – it was written to protect religious values from government tyranny.\(^67\)

Additionally, Reagan described the ideals conveyed in these documents as universal truths, as when telling the American Bar Association:

> We must preserve the noble promise of the American dream for every man, woman, and child in this land. And, make no mistake, we can preserve it, and we will. That promise was not created by America. It was given to America as a gift from a loving God – a gift proudly recognized by the language of liberty in the world’s greatest charters of freedom, our Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.\(^68\)

Finally, when it came to federalism and related issues, Reagan could lean towards (and spin) public support for many of his initiatives. Because, after the Great Society’s failures and the stagflation in the 1970s, the public mood had changed radically. In 1981, one poll showed that 83 percent of Americans agreed with Reagan’s inaugural proclamation that the U.S. Government should be curbed, and two years later almost as many, 79 percent, expressed support for his New Federalism initiative.\(^69\) Nevertheless, just like for Nixon, bureaucratic and New Class resistance would stop most of his initiatives in social and cultural areas. However, when it came to the economy, he managed to stage a small revolution.


\(^{69}\) White, \textit{New Politics}, 131f.
Realizing that only public optimism could break the paralyzing atmosphere of malaise, Reagan sold his economic policy as a plan that the Founding Fathers would approve. And, certainly, tax cuts and deregulation programs can be deemed to be in line with their general view. However, since “supply-side” theory and free trade stood contrary to Hamiltonian budget discipline and neomercantilism, Reagan could seldom define or directly defend his economic policy with either historical examples or more explicit exceptionalist arguments. Instead, he had to associate laissez-faire with most people’s vague image of early America as a low tax/free-market heaven. And like LBJ had done with the Great Society, he did so by stretching his rhetoric thin:

Well, I have some good news for you. [...] we are changing the direction of America. We’re putting her back on the course of hope that was charted by our Founding Fathers. We’ve begun to handcuff the big spenders, to get the Federal Government off your backs, promote economic recovery, and put you, the people, back in charge of your country again. With your support [...] we’re clearing away the economic wreckage that was dumped in our laps.

Moreover, since Reagan’s economic policy temporarily hurt millions before it yielded favorable results, he had to ask for patience. Here, he could lean on Americans’ optimism, aptness for experimentation, and large-scale thinking and reassure them that his plan would let “the American spirit” loose:

To many of us now, computers, silicon chips, data processing, cybernetics, and all the other innovations of the dawning high technology age are as mystifying as the workings of the combustion engine must have been when that first Model T rattled down Main Street, U.S.A. But as surely as America’s pioneer spirit made us the industrial giant of the 20th century, the same pioneer spirit today is opening up on another vast front of opportunity, the frontier of high technology. In conquering the frontier we cannot write

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70 For a critical analysis of Reagan’s economic policy, see Mueller, Redeeming Economics, passim.
off our traditional industries, but we must develop the skills and industries that will make us a pioneer of tomorrow.\(^{72}\)

In other words, by alluding to JFK’s New Frontier theme, Reagan reversed FDR’s focus away from the “physics” (materialistic) side of the American Dream, which had been dominating since the 1930s, back to its spiritual-metaphysical side that had been more common earlier.\(^{73}\)

Even so, when faced with criticism, because of a hard recession sparked by his policy to combat inflation Reagan could only offer optimistic cheerleading: “Send away the handwringers and doubting Thomases and bring on the capitalists and entrepreneurs. Once again free enterprise is breathing life into our economy and we will not tolerate a return to the old ways of profligate spending and taxing that threatened to snuff it out.”\(^{74}\) However, because Americans by now had grown accustomed to governmental efforts like job training programs, this was for many not enough. Therefore, the GOP was delivered a blow in the 1982 midterms, which coincided with the bottom of the recession triggered by Reagan’s monetary policy. Just two months later, Reagan also got his lowest approval rating ever. In January 1983, he stood at 35 percent, not far above Jimmy Carter’s all-time low in July 1979.\(^{75}\) And at that moment, the international situation seemed, if possible, even gloomier.


\(^{73}\) See Michael C. Kimmage, “The Politics of the American Dream, 1980 to 2008” in White & Hanson, American Dream, 33f. See also Wills, Reagan’s America, 429-439.


FOREIGN POLICY

By 1980, for decades Reagan had spoken starkly about the Soviet Union. For example, in 1963, he had predicted that head-on economic and technological competition with the Soviets would mean victory over communism “based on the belief (supported so far by all evidence) that in an all-out race our system is stronger, and eventually the enemy gives up the race as a hopeless cause.”76 True to his habit, Reagan had also long dismissed established views of the Cold War with puns like, “Détente – isn’t that what a farmer has with his turkey – until Thanksgiving Day?”77 Moreover, it is noticeable that Reagan often allowed America to appear only as the unspoken reverse of the Soviet Union. As when he stated that “Communism is neither an eco[nomic] or pol[itical system] – it is a form of insanity – a temporary aberration which will one day disappear from the earth because it is contrary to human nature.”78

Accordingly, when Carter’s foreign policy collapsed in 1979 due to the Iranian hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Reagan appeared vindicated and the man for the presidency.79 Running with this advantage, he had used his 1980 RNC Acceptance Speech to accuse Carter of “weakness, indecision, mediocrity and incompetence,” and reinforced the exceptionalist tone of his campaign:

The time is now, my fellow Americans, to recapture our destiny, to take it into our own hands [...] Can we doubt that only a Divine Providence placed this land, this island of freedom, here as a refuge for all those people in the world who yearn to breathe freely: Jews and Christians enduring persecution behind the Iron Curtain, the boat people of

Southeast Asia, of Cuba and Haiti, the victims of drought and famine in Africa, the freedom fighters of Afghanistan and our own countrymen held in savage captivity.  

Once in office, Reagan lived up to his image as an unbending anti-communist by markedly raising the defense budget and giving speeches wherein he challenged the Soviet Union more strongly than any previous president. In 1983, he would oust Grenada’s Marxist regime not only to help U.S. citizens on the island but “to help in the restoration of [that country’s] democratic institutions.” And in 1986, he bombed Libya after its dictator Muammar Gaddafi staged a terror attack in Europe that cost one American life and injured several others. Still, Reagan never risked large-scale war. Behind his rhetoric, from the beginning his foreign policy was built on “restraint, flexibility, realism, and openness to dialog – especially with the Soviet Union.” In January 1984, he would also change his public attitude towards Moscow from condemnation and confrontation to invitations for dialog and cooperation. To understand how he could make such a radical shift, we must again look at Regan’s worldview.

“THE LAST STAND ON EARTH”

As noted, Reagan possibly held a more active-inclusive form of American Exceptionalism than any president before him. Therefore, it is not surprising that even though he quoted the Founders in support of his foreign policy, it had “much more in common with foreign policy ideas of

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82 Herring, Colony to Superpower, 876ff.
83 Garrison, Empire of Ideals, 100.
American progressives, especially Woodrow Wilson, than with the views expressed by leading figures in the early American republic.”\textsuperscript{85} In his 1964 Goldwater speech, for example, he had made it clear that he saw America’s role was to act as both a beacon and a haven of freedom:

Not too long ago two friends of mine were talking to a Cuban refugee, a businessman who had escaped from Castro, and in the midst of his story one of my friends turned to the other and said, “We don’t know how lucky we are.” And the Cuban stopped and said, “How lucky you are! I had someplace to escape to.” In that sentence he told us the entire story. If we lose freedom here, there is no place to escape to. This is the last stand on Earth.\textsuperscript{86}

So even if Reagan’s vision of the world superficially resembled FDR’s internationalized, human rights-focused form of American Exceptionalism, it was bolder. Because, while other post-1945 presidents had only aspired only to create a Wilsonian international system under partial control of the U.N., Reagan envisioned something closer to Kant’s world community of constitutional republics living in peace because of people’s love of freedom and economic interdependence.\textsuperscript{87}

Given this, it is not surprising that one of Reagan’s favorite quotes was Thomas Paine’s, “We have it in our power to begin the world over again.” And the keys to fathom how he, as a conservative, could believe in such a buoyant dictum are, first, his belief in freedom as God’s gift to Man and view that all people want to live in free, U.S.-like societies. And, second, his view of freedom was so deeply rooted in American Exceptionalism that it effectively excluded FDR’s freedoms from want and fear in his perception of human rights. He once declared:

[S]o-called economic and social rights belong to an essentially different category from civil and political rights. The economic and social conditions in any society are constantly changing—new social groupings constantly taking shape, as yours did, new markets forming as old markets disappear. And yet there’s nothing shifting about civil and political rights.

\textsuperscript{85} Garrison, Empire of Ideals, 101, 115ff.
\textsuperscript{86} Reagan, “Address on Behalf of Senator Barry Goldwater” (October 27, 1964).
\textsuperscript{87} Kant, Toward Perpetual Peace, 67-109. See also Garrison, Empire of Ideals, 124-138; Herring, Colony to Superpower, 862-869.
like freedom of speech or worship; they are constant and immutable, forever basic to the dignity of each human being. They are fundamental – fundamental to everything.  

This limited form of human rights possessed two advantages. It made it difficult for Reagan’s opponents to relativize communism’s political crimes by referencing them with such regimes’ (alleged) progress in fields like health care. It made also it easier for him to portray the Cold War as an ideological rather than a traditional geopolitical conflict. And this strategy would pay off, but only after years of tension with Moscow. He first needed to place the U.S. in a strong bargaining position before he could extend an olive branch to the enemy.

**The Evil Empire**

During the 1980 primary season, Reagan promised to launch a campaign to “convince the world of the superiority of the American system.” However, in his first Inaugural Address, he stated that “the will and moral courage of free men and women [...] is a weapon our adversaries in today’s world do not have.” When hearing this, many probably assumed that as President Reagan would curtail his anti-communism. A week later, though, he set the real tone for his first term when answering a question about his view of the objectives of the Soviet leadership:

I don’t have to think of an answer as to what I think their intentions are; they have repeated it. I know of no leader of the Soviet Union since the revolution, and including the present leadership, that has not more than once repeated in the various Communist congresses they hold their determination that their goal must be the promotion of world revolution and a one-world Socialist or Communist state, whichever word you want to use. Now, as long as they do that and as long as they, at the same time, have openly and publicly declared that the only morality they recognize is what will further their cause, meaning

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89 Quote from Cull, *Cold War*, 399.
they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat, in order to attain that, and that is moral, not immoral, and we operate on a different set of standards, I think when you do business with them, even at a detente, you keep that in mind.\textsuperscript{91}

Taking the Soviets at their word in this way shocked notables of foreign policy, academics, journalists, Democrats, and even many establishment Republicans and helped reignite what some historians call the Second Cold War. But Reagan had not misspoken. After recovering from an attempt on his life on March 30, 1981, he embarked on what turned into a three-year-long verbal crusade in which he often trumped both Truman and Eisenhower’s exacting tone by saying things like communism was “an aberration. It’s not a normal way of living for human beings.”\textsuperscript{92} He also saw to it that his campaign was paralleled with a blaze of U.S. anti-Soviet propaganda regarding the situations in Poland and Afghanistan (among others).\textsuperscript{93}

The prime event in Reagan’s crusade came the following year when he, symbolically as the leader of a breakaway colony in a speech to the British Parliament, asked the West to unite and aim for total political victory in the Cold War. Imagining that a “democratic revolution was gathering new strength” around the world, he styled the present as a historic opportunity “to foster the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, and universities, which allows a people to choose their own way to develop their own culture, to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means.” In essence, this was no harsher or different from what most U.S. presidents since Wilson had said. What set Reagan apart was that

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\textsuperscript{93} Cull, Cold War, 399-441.
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he added that the “march of freedom and democracy [...] will leave Marxism-Leninism on the 
ash heap of history.”

Of course, it’s notable that Reagan, in one of his most distinguished anti-communist 
speeches, did not use exceptionalist language and once again let his country appear merely as a 
tacit mirror image of the enemy. The reason for it this time is apparently not only that he counted 
on everyone knowing that America stood for opposite beliefs and values to the Soviet Union, but 
that he also wanted the project to fight against communism to be a joint venture between all free 
people. Also, even if the practical outcome of this speech only resulted in the National 
Endowment for Democracy (NED) – a U.S. government-funded organization intending to 
promote democracy abroad – at home Reagan honed his tone in more potent ways. Like in early 
March 1983, when in front of the Convention of National Evangelicals he addressed the fact that 
many Christians opposed his nuclear policy and supported one-sided Western disarmament:

[L]et us pray for the salvation of all of those who live in that totalitarian darkness-pray they will discover the joy of knowing God. But until they do, let us be aware that while they preach the supremacy of the state, declare its omnipotence over individual man, and predict its eventual domination of all peoples on the Earth, they are the focus of evil in the modern world. [...] So, in your discussions of the nuclear freeze proposals, I urge you to beware the temptation of pride – the temptation of blithely declaring yourselves above it all and label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil.

This escalation of rhetoric from the political categories of free and unfree into the 
religious realm of good and evil should not – especially given the context – have shocked
anybody. Nevertheless, it did, and the overwhelmingly negative body of reactions – “the worst presidential speech ever;” “outrageous;” “primitive”\textsuperscript{96} – show how public discourse had changed since the 1950s when such language had been commonplace. Still, as we will see, thanks to enduring exceptionalist sentiments amongst ordinary Americans, it worked.\textsuperscript{97} And Reagan was not done. Two weeks later, he upped the ante with Moscow further, all the way into space.

\textbf{“STAR WARS”}

On March 23, 1983, when Reagan presented the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), missile defense was not a new concept. The idea was as old as Hitler’s V-2 rocket during World War II, and in the 1950s and 1960s the U.S. had tested several anti-missile systems similar to the Sentinel program. However, none of them had worked properly, and after Nixon signed the ABM treaty in 1972, the idea had faded from the public’s mind. However, Reagan never gave up on it since he viewed missile defense primarily as a moral matter, not a military one. Therefore, he considered the exploration of every idea, however far-fetched, about defending America and other free countries from nuclear blackmail as an ethical responsibility.\textsuperscript{98}

With SDI, Reagan added to the arms race and his verbal crusade an economic and technical challenge that both he and the Soviets knew the country’s rheumatoid system could never meet. Exactly how much it contributed to the final collapse of Communism is debatable, but his message was clear:

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96 Hayward, \textit{The Age of Reagan}, 288f.
97 According to a 1983 poll, over 80 percent of Americans believed that the U.S. had a “special role” in world affairs. See McEvoy, \textit{American Exceptionalism}, 31.
\end{flushright}
What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant U.S. retaliation to deter a Soviet attack, that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies? I know this is a formidable, technical task, one that may not be accomplished before the end of this century. Yet, current technology has attained a level of sophistication where it’s reasonable for us to begin this effort. It will take years, probably decades of effort on many fronts. There will be failures and setbacks, just as there will be successes and breakthroughs. And as we proceed, we must remain constant in preserving the nuclear deterrent and maintaining a solid capability for flexible response. But isn’t it worth every investment necessary to free the world from the threat of nuclear war? We know it is.99

At face value, the above passage does not contain any direct exceptionalist themes or expressions. However, it implies several such facets. Most basically, SDI was “Reaganesque” because it was “optimistic in the extreme, built on faith in American accomplishments, and it looks to the future and a better world.”100 It was also quintessentially exceptionalist by provoking Americans’ attitude of “If anyone can do it, it is us!” and him stating “such a technological advance [is] possible, in large part, because Americans were free to conduct research and develop technology without interference from an intrusive government like the Soviet Union.”101

Furthermore, since the Soviet Union was still perceived as a permanent entity on the world stage, most people could only envision two futures. The first was an everlastingly edgy state of world affairs where the superpowers endangered human extinction by nuclear Holocaust and the second a world where the control of atomic weapons was abandoned or at least handed over to some form of world government or organization (which effectively meant the U.N.).102 For some Americans, SDI therefore seemed to be a reckless idea that would “militarize space” and increase instability, while it for others, for whom none of these alternatives were tolerable,

100 Stuckey, Playing the Game, 49.
101 Garrison, Empire of Ideals, 128.
102 Linenthal, Symbolic Defense, 2.
offered a way to safety and sustained independence. In truth, by offering an escape from the world’s evils, SDI apparently may have even restored the option of isolationism. Because of this, the idea became “a crucial element in the program for cultural restoration of the New Right, for it promised to bring to life the peaceful, secure, ‘Main Street’ America whose passing he had decried.”

Thus, SDI instantly became a partisan affair. However, the recognized picture of dovish Democrats and hawkish Republicans was upturned as conservative SDI-supporters suddenly appeared as peace-minded visionaries next to liberal advocates for continued nuclear deterrence. For example, while Republican pundit Phyllis Schlafly (1924-2016) stated that SDI was a “drama of the battle between good and evil, and of the triumphs of good over evil through adventure, courage, and confrontation,” Democratic Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy (1932-2009) tried to discredit it as a “reckless Star Wars scheme.” Comments like Kennedy’s proved counterproductive, however. After two years of intense debate where many experts called SDI “a delusion,” “a pipe dream,” and “a crackpot scheme,” at least half the U.S. population still supported it; arguably as a possible move away from the Damoclean sword of Soviet nukes under which they had been living since the 1950s.

Finally, because support for SDI in this way became an apparent pro-American position and opponents looked like naysayers, pessimists, and potential anti-Americans, it became a moral position as well. As a consequence, the debate spilled over into other realms, including religion. For example, over 2,000 Christian priests and ministers and Jewish rabbis signed a pro-

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103 Ibid, 9.
105 Quote from Ibid, 15.
107 For example, William J. Buckley Jr. accused opponents of SDI of “doing the work of the Soviet Union.” Quote from Ibid, 43.
SDI “Clergy Statement,” and politicians and others could be heard putting forward references such as the walls of Jerusalem and Luke 11:12, which states, “If a strong man shall keep his house well-guarded, he shall live in peace.” The prevalent mentality, therefore, became that “Americans could, if motivated by the pioneer spirit of the nation’s ancestors, take fate in their own hands and escape from the rabid condition in which the liberal doctrine of MAD had placed the world.”

THE TURNAROUND

With his anti-communist credentials confirmed, a military buildup in the making, and the genie of SDI unbottled, Reagan could begin dealing seriously with the Soviet Union. Or put differently, as only Nixon could go to China, so only Reagan could now go to Moscow. And in truth, his steadfast belief in American ideals arguably made it possible for him to strike deals with communist leaders’ others couldn’t have done. In addition, all he needed to do for it to work rhetorically was to move the focus from what divided nations politically to what he believed unified all people individually: freedom. And coincidentally, a similar shift occurred in Moscow when Mikhail Gorbachev (b. 1931) became the Soviet Premier in 1985 and began “focusing on the humanistic values of communism” to ease tensions with the West.

Reagan launched his new policy line against the Soviets in his 1984 State of the Union, in which, after some standard election-year talk about the economy and the need for a strong defense, he hastily turned to global affairs. After stating that “[t]he future is best decided by

108 Ibid, 66f, quote from 67.
109 Ibid, 117.
110 Leffler, For the Soul, 418.
ballots, not bullets,” and “it is democracies that offer hope by feeding the hungry, prolonging life, and eliminating drudgery,” he said: “Tonight, I want to speak to the people of the Soviet Union, to tell them it’s true that our governments have had serious differences, but our sons and daughters have never fought each other in war. And if we Americans have our way, they never will.”

Though, even if Reagan’s tone against the Soviets from this point onwards became softer, it remained principled and based on the values of American Exceptionalism. Before traveling to his first meeting with Gorbachev in 1985, he made it clear that people should not expect trust and cooperation between West and East to come through American appeasement. On the contrary, progress demanded fundamental change in the communist bloc. Reagan also reminded his countrymen that it was the U.S.’ historic mission to lead the West’s struggle against communism and act as a counterweight to the Soviet Union:

In advancing freedom, we Americans carry a special burden – a belief in the dignity of man in the sight of the God who gave birth to this country. This is central to our being. A century and a half ago, Thomas Jefferson told the world, “The mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs...” Freedom is America’s core. We must never deny it nor forsake it. Should the day come when we Americans remain silent in the face of armed aggression, then the cause of America, the cause of freedom, will have been lost and the great heart of this country will have been broken.

In the following years, Reagan continued using plenty of exceptionalist rhetoric to keep the public pressure on for reforms in the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites. However, the twists and turns that followed and eventually led to the fall of communism in 1989-91 will not concern us in this thesis. Instead, it is now time to look at how Reagan chose to use American Exceptionalism to secure his reelection.

In 1984, Reagan’s main domestic achievement was the economy. For as partly flawed as his sale of *laissez-faire* and free trade being parts of original American economic philosophy was, in the end, it paid off. In short, as the recession ended in 1983, people started to credit Reagan’s “liberating of the American spirit” for saving the economy.$^{113}$ And as markets went into overdrive during 1984, one historian writes that “a patriotic hurricane” formed that made landfall just in time for that year’s election.$^{114}$ Reagan could therefore hit the campaign trail boasting: “We came together in a national crusade to make America great again, and to make a new beginning. Well, now it’s all coming together. With our beloved nation at peace, we’re in the midst of a springtime of hope for America. Greatness lies ahead of us.”$^{115}$

An examination of Reagan’s 1984 stump speeches further shows how he employed the economy in conjunction with exceptionalist rhetoric to secure his reelection. Appearing in front of cheering crowds, he largely ignored Democrats’ attacks upon him and instead delivered comforting talks focused on the recovery, sprinkled with exceptionalist phrases and local references. As when visiting Abraham Lincoln’s hometown of Springfield, Illinois:

In 1861, just before beginning the long train journey east to become President, Abraham Lincoln stood near this spot and spoke to the people of this good town. He said, “A duty devolves upon me which is perhaps greater than that which is devolved upon any other man since the days of Washington.” It was the duty of making certain, as Mr. Lincoln would later say at Gettysburg, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and a government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish

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from the Earth. Well, ever since taking office, we’ve worked hard to restore government of the people, to give this blessed land a new birth of freedom and opportunity.\textsuperscript{116}

In this speech, Reagan also reflected over the progress that had taken place during his own lifetime:

[I]n a single lifetime – my own – we went from the horse and buggy to sending astronauts to the Moon. We Americans have fought harder, paid a higher price, done more to advance the freedom and dignity of man than any other people who ever lived on this Earth. Ours is the land of the free because it is the home of the brave. America’s future will be great because our nation will be strong. And our nation will be strong because our people will be free. And we’re free because we’re united. We’re united – one people, under God, with liberty and justice for all. I’m deeply honored that you have allowed me to serve you for these past 4 years. But much remains to be done. We must continue to build upon that new beginning we started 4 years ago. So, I ask for your vote.\textsuperscript{117}

Another example of Reagan’s use of exceptionalist sentiments is a particular TV ad. It was part of a series of ads titled “Prouder, Stronger, Better” describing how the U.S. had improved under his leadership but is best known as “It’s Morning Again in America!” To maudlin music, it shows images of Americans going to work, a farmer on a tractor, a newspaper boy on his bike, people moving into a new house, a couple getting married, and a man raising the Stars and Stripes at the same time as a narrator softly explains how America was roaring back:

\textit{It’s morning again in America. Today more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country’s history. With interest rates at about half the record highs of 1980, nearly 2,000 families today will buy new homes, more than at any time in the past four years. This afternoon 6,500 young men and women will be married, and with inflation at less than half of what it was just four years ago, they can look forward with confidence to the future. It’s morning again in America, and under the leadership of President Reagan,}

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
our country is prouder and stronger and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?\textsuperscript{118}

This particular ad became a hit, not so much because of its pictures and words but for its subtext. Scholars have long noted that it inferred that America prospered again because Reagan – after what most voters saw as two decades of war, turmoil, and scandal – had returned the country to the serenity of the 1950s: a time when in popular memory the country had been at peace with itself, wealthy, well-functioning, and Baby Boomers (by 1984 one of the country’s most important voter blocks) been young and happy. Alternatively, to put it in Reagan’s vocabulary, America had become great again because he had restored its proper order, as it once upon a time had been instituted by the Founding Fathers.

Exactly how big of an impact the “Morning in America” ad had on the final election result is impossible to say. However, scholars apparently agree that the booming economy and renewed national pride it both reflected and boosted, plus Reagan’s rhetoric and personality, was vital.\textsuperscript{119} Americans’ growing appreciation of him and the “patriotic hurricane” can be traced in polls and various occurrences. For example, his approval ratings jumped to nearly 60 percent,\textsuperscript{120} and the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles turned into a national spectacular as “the colors of this Olympics became red, white, and blue [and] the American flag often upstaged the legendary five overlapping rings.”\textsuperscript{121}

\textsuperscript{118} Transcription from Jessie Swigger, “New Right, New History, Common Ground: Populism and the Past,” in Moffitt & Campbell (ed.), 1980s, 164. The ad is accessible online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fa8Qupc4PnQ.
\textsuperscript{119} Abramson, Aldrich & Rohde, Change and Continuity, 55-64.
\textsuperscript{120} Newport, Jones, & Saad, “Ronald Reagan From the People’s...,” (June 7, 2004).
\textsuperscript{121} Troy, Morning in America, 152.
Likewise, the power of Reagan’s exceptionalist rhetoric showed in that Democrats tried to steal his thunder. However, they mostly used exceptionalism negatively, as when New York Governor Mario Cuomo (1932-2015) delivered a keynote address at their National Convention. It was filled with patriotic clichés and countered Reagan’s “city on a hill” by describing America as a “Tale of Two Cities” wherein “some people can’t pay their mortgages, and most young people can’t afford one.” Cuomo also cast-off JFK’s theme about frontier life as a communal endeavor by stating that “[t]he Republicans believe that the wagon train will not make it to the frontier unless some of the old, some of the young, some of the weak are left behind by the side of the trail.” Nevertheless, even if these words would cement his personal popularity amongst Democrats for years to come, they were scattered in the “patriotic hurricane.”

Consequently, on Election Night, Reagan won reelection with nearly 59 percent of the vote and a 525 to 13 electoral vote, the biggest landslide in U.S. history. In his victory speech, he said that it was a grand victory for exceptionalist ideas:

> Well, we began to carry a message to every corner of the Nation, a simple message. The message is: Here in America, the people are in charge. And that’s really why we’re here tonight. This electoral victory belongs to you and the principles that you cling to – *principles struck by the brilliance and bravery of patriots more than 200 years ago*. They set forth the course of liberty and hope that makes our country special in the world. To the extent that what has happened today reaffirms those principles, we are part of that prairie fire that we still think defines America – a fire of hope that will keep alive the promise of opportunity as we head into the next century.  

Moreover, when Reagan a few months later delivered his second Inaugural Address, he filled it with exceptionalist verse:

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We see and hear again the echoes of our past: a general falls to his knees in the hard snow of Valley Forge; a lonely President paces the darkened halls and ponders his struggle to preserve the Union; the men of the Alamo call out encouragement to each other; a settler pushes west and sings a song, and the song echoes out forever and fills the unknowing air. It is the American sound. It is hopeful, big-hearted, idealistic, daring, decent, and fair. That’s our heritage, that’s our song. We sing it still. For all our problems, our differences, we are together as of old. We raise our voices to the God who is the Author of this most tender music. And may He continue to hold us close as we fill the world with our sound – in unity, affection, and love – one people under God, dedicated to the dream of freedom that He has placed in the human heart, called upon now to pass that dream on to a waiting and hopeful world. God bless you, and God bless America.Indubitably, this was only a politician’s swaggering words after a great victory. Still, they reflect a widely held sentiment amongst friends and foes alike that Reagan’s presidency was a turning point that influenced everything from politics to popular culture. The year after the election, for example, movies like Back to the Future and Rocky IV expressed exceptionalist themes and became “an integral feature of the wider political and cultural effort to rebuild American self-confidence and self-concept.”

Furthermore, the magnitude of Reagan’s victory rewrote campaign books and was so overwhelming that the Democratic Party seemed to all but abandon liberalism. For years, many of its figureheads would try to pursue “liberal goals through conservative means” and sounding like “me too” conservatives, even if they continued to be “not so much interested in individual empowerment as in group empowerment.” Therefore, Reagan could continue to sell his “second American Revolution” with exceptionalist rhetoric and populist, humorist punchlines.

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125 McVeigh, “‘Do We Get to Win This Time?’” in Moffitt & Campbell (ed.), 1980s, 472. For a deeper analysis of Reagan’s effect on American culture, see White, New Politics, 103-121.
126 White, New Politics, 132-141, quote from 65.
For instance, he promoted a 1986 tax bill by calling the tax system “un-American” and quipped that “even Albert Einstein reportedly needed help on his 1040 form” before declaring:

The tax system is crucial, not just to our personal, material well-being and our nation’s economic well-being; it must also reflect and support our deeper values and highest aspirations. It must promote opportunity, lift up the weak, strengthen the family, and perhaps most importantly it must be rooted in that unique American quality, our special commitment to fairness. It must be an expression of both America’s eternal frontier spirit and all the virtues from the heart and soul of a good and decent people – those virtues held high by the Statue of Liberty standing proudly in New York Harbor.  

Another example of Reagan’s second term rhetoric is his reaction to the Challenger disaster mentioned earlier. A national catastrophe with existential dimensions, his consoling speech touched people both because of its form and exceptionalist eloquence:

We’ve grown used to the idea of space, and perhaps we forget that we’ve only just begun. We’re still pioneers. They, the members of the Challenger crew, were pioneers. I’ve always had great faith in and respect for our space program, and what happened today does nothing to diminish it. We don’t hide our space program. We don’t keep secrets and cover things up. We do it all up front and in public. That’s the way freedom is, and we wouldn’t change it for a minute. We’ll continue our quest in space. There will be more shuttle flights and more shuttle crews and, yes, more volunteers, more civilians, more teachers in space. Nothing ends here; our hopes and our journeys continue.

Similarly, Reagan expressed his mix of futuristic optimism and Americanism in 1988 when speaking at Moscow State University:

We’re breaking through the material conditions of existence to a world where man creates his own destiny. Even as we explore the most advanced reaches of science, we’re returning to the age-old wisdom of our culture, a wisdom contained in the book of Genesis in the Bible: In the beginning was the spirit, and it was from this spirit that the

material abundance of creation issued forth. But progress is not foreordained. The key is freedom – freedom of thought, freedom of information, freedom of communication.  

However, the eloquence of Reagan’s exceptionalism was never expressed as clearly as in his Farewell Address. Based on a memo from his pollster that emphasized the president’s nurturing of a “strong public confidence and pride in America,” this speech stated:

[A]s long as we remember our first principles and believe in ourselves, the future will always be ours. And something else we learned: Once you begin a great movement, there’s no telling where it will end. We meant to change a nation, and instead, we changed a world. Countries across the globe are turning to free markets and free speech and turning away from the ideologies of the past. For them, the great rediscovery of the 1980’s has been that, lo and behold, the moral way of government is the practical way of government: Democracy, the profoundly good, is also the profoundly productive. [...] And how stands the city on this winter night? More prosperous, more secure, and happier than it was 8 years ago. But more than that: After 200 years, two centuries, she still stands strong and true on the granite ridge, and her glow has held steady no matter what storm. And she’s still a beacon, still a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home.

Nevertheless, Reagan’s biggest botch would be his failure, despite two overwhelming victories and his powerful rhetoric, to turn around “liberal” trends regarding issues like abortions and divorces. Instead, ironically, on his watch, the country passed a historic tipping point between communitarian and republican values and atomistic individualism, which over time would not only feed the Cultural Wars but effectively make “traditional American values” a source of partisan bickering and stretch the ongoing ideological polarization well-beyond traditional policy boundaries. And since Reagan’s successor would turn out to be equally unable to do something about this development, it would lead to immense changes in the

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131 Reprint in White, New Politics, 185-189.
132 Reagan, “Farewell Address to the Nation” (January 11, 1989).
133 For example, see D’Antonio, Tuch & Baker, Religion, Politics, and Polarization, 43-62.
1990s. Actually, from a contemporary perspective, one could say that decade marks both the end of the post-World War II era and a decrease of the domestic worth of American Exceptionalism.

BUSH 41

Signifying the transition to a new historical epoch, George Bush (1924-2018) became the last World War II veteran to be elected president. Spare JFK’s interlude, he was also the first Northeastern patrician to win the White House since FDR. This background made him ambitious, honest, and ideologically pragmatic. As noted, he first ran for office as a Goldwater man in 1964 before he, like Reagan, qualified his beliefs. After a stint in Congress, Bush later became chairman of the RNC, Ambassador to the U.N., and Director of the CIA. Hence, he seemed destined for a relatively anonymous career. However, in 1980, he ran for the presidency, this time as a moderate. In this campaign, he made a name for himself by labeling theory-based supply-side plans “voodoo economics” and, after losing to Reagan, was forced to turn right again when offered the Vice Presidency.

The vice presidency put Bush in a good position to seek the Republican presidential nomination in 1988, but it was both a blessing and a curse. The upside was that Reagan’s allure and the economic boom rubbed off, while the downside was that made the position hard for him.

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134 A decade later, in 1998, a bi-partisan report reflected on the effects of this historic cultural change: “We fret about the weakness of our families, but will not make the personal commitments needed to preserve them. We worry about the consequences of out-of-wedlock births, but refuse to condemn them. We deplore the performance of our public schools, but somehow we can’t find time to join parents associations, attend school board meetings, or even help our children with their homework. We complain about the influence of popular culture on our young people, but as parents we do not try very hard to monitor the programs our children watch and the music they hear. We desert neighborhood associations, and then lament the fraying of community. We elect, and then reelect, leaders for whom we profess mistrust. We say we do not have time for civic life. But, in fact, we enjoy more leisure than ever before. And too many of us spend it watching television.” Quote from White, Values Divide, 11.

to step forward as his own man. As well, memories about his run as a Reaganomics-skeptic eight years earlier lingered amongst hardcore conservatives, who never fully trusted him. Case in point, being a lackluster speaker, his announcement speech offered only a faint echo of Reagan’s poetic-visionary style: “We have righted ourselves – the platform is firm again, the base is stable – and from this strong platform we can now launch the great endeavors of the future. We don’t need radical new directions – we need strong and steady leadership. We don’t need to remake society – we just need to remember who we are.” Also, since Bush’s exceptionalist rhetoric was aristocratically discreet, he crammed most of it into a single paragraph:

We must recommit ourselves to a doctrine that expresses the best in our history and our heritage. We must be true to the knowledge that the interests of the world are best served – and the cause of peace best served – by not merely containing communism, but by spreading freedom. Let me be very specific: I intend to help the freedom fighters of the world fight for freedom. In the hills of Afghanistan – we will help them. In the plains of Africa – we are on their side. And in a place called Nicaragua, we will help the Contras win democracy. This doctrine – this doctrine of democracy – must thunder on.136

Thus, both personally and ideologically, Bush can be seen more like a glimmer of the old, pre-Reagan GOP than a fighting spirit of the Conservative Movement, and he has fittingly been called “an American Tory.”137 Since this movement by now held complete sway over the Republican Party, he therefore needed to prove his fidelity even after securing the nomination. Accordingly, he opened his RNC Acceptance Speech by presenting himself as Reaganesque:

[W]hat it all comes down to is this: My opponent’s view of the world sees a long slow decline for our country, an inevitable fall mandated by impersonal historical forces. But America is not in decline. America is a rising nation. He sees America as another

137 Stuckey, Defining Americans, 290-317, quote from 295.
pleasant country on the U.N. roll call, somewhere between Albania and Zimbabwe. And I see America as the leader, a unique nation with a special role in the world.\textsuperscript{138}

Throughout this speech, Bush also did his best to sound like Reagan by hitting hard upon politically contentious themes like the death penalty, school prayer, the right to bear arms, and abortion. And of course, he now paid full homage to Reagan’s economic policy:

And I’m the one who will not raise taxes. My opponent now says he’ll raise them as a last resort or a third resort. When a politician talks like that, you know that’s one resort he’ll be checking into. My opponent won’t rule out raising taxes, but I will, and the Congress will push me to raise taxes, and I’ll say no, and they’ll push, and I’ll say no, and they’ll push again, and I’ll say to them, “Read my lips: no new taxes.” \textsuperscript{139}

However, Bush’s exceptionalism differed from Reagan’s, and a close reading of speeches makes their difference in political accent clear, especially on communitarianism. In short, while Reagan had focused on the individual, Bush was more about community:

From the individual to the family to the community, and then on out to the town, to the church and the school and, still echoing out, to the county, the state and the nation – each doing only what it does well and no more. And I believe that power must always be kept close to the individual, close to the hands that raise the family and run the home. \textsuperscript{140}

In fact, Bush’s emphasis on families, neighborhoods, churches, towns, and other collective bodies was so strong that he felt obliged to draw these demarcation lines not only to the left,...

[...] the idea of community – a beautiful word with a big meaning, though liberal Democrats have an odd view of it. They see community as a limited cluster of interest groups, locked in odd conformity. And, in this view, the country waits passive while Washington sets the rules. But that’s not what community means, not to me. For we’re a nation of community, of thousands and tens of thousands of ethnic, religious, social,
business, labor union, neighborhood, regional and other organizations, all of them varied, voluntary and unique.

...but also to the right:

Does government have a place? Yes. Government is part of the nation of communities, not the whole, just a part. And I don’t hate government. A government that remembers that the people are its master is a good and needed thing.141

The reason for this last comment, which could so easily have been omitted, is that Bush seemingly felt that under the glamorous crust of the 1980s there were perversions running counter to traditional American ways and virtues. Most of these stemmed from historically deep wells, like the sexual promiscuity of the 1960s, the unhinged individuality of the 1970s, and the amoral outlook of “modernity” at large. However, because some vices – primarily greed and self-indulgence142 – also drew verve from Reagan’s economic policies’ criticism of them was politically risky. Even so, Bush said:

I wonder sometimes if we’ve forgotten who we are. We’re the people who sundered a nation rather than allow a sin called slavery. And we’re the people who rose from the ghettos and the deserts. And we weren’t saints, but we lived by standards. We celebrated the individual, but we weren’t self-centered. We were practical, but we didn’t live only for material things. We believed in getting ahead, but blind ambition wasn’t our way. The fact is: Prosperity has a purpose. It’s to allow us to pursue “the better angels,” [sic!] to give us time to think and grow. Prosperity with a purpose means taking your idealism and making it concrete by certain acts of goodness. [...] I want a kinder and gentler nation.143

Thus, Bush did represent a more traditional GOP message, emphasizing the country’s republican heritage, than Reagan. For that reason, he should be seen as a more traditional Conservative and an advocate of a more traditional, community-oriented form of American

141 Ibid.
142 For a critical evaluation of the materialistic side of Reagan’s legacy, see Wills, Reagan’s America, 440-447.
Exceptionalism. Moreover, since Americans in 1988, after eight years of obviously effective but one-dimensional materialistic policies, were on the market for a more nuanced message, this worked to his advantage by making it hard for his opponent to call him a heartless Reagan clone.

A CLASH OF EXCEPTIONALISTS

As a successful second-generation immigrant, the 1988 Democratic candidate Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis (b. 1933), was in an excellent position to talk about American virtues. He often called himself a product of the American Dream, called the Democrats “America’s Party,” used less liberal/more pro-business language, and, like Bush, stressed the need for more compassion and inclusion. By doing so, Dukakis’ campaign turned into a new Democratic attempt to reclaim the exceptionalist mantle from the GOP. In his DNC Acceptance Speech, he said:

It’s time to meet the challenge of the next American frontier – the challenge of building an economic future for our country that will create good jobs at good wages for every citizen in this land, no matter who they are or where they come from or what the color of their skin. [...] It’s not about insider trading on Wall Street; It’s about creating opportunity on Main Street. And it’s not about meaningless labels. It’s about American values. Old-fashioned values like accountability and responsibility and respect for the truth. And just as we Democrats believe that there are no limits to what each citizen can do, so we believe that there are no limits to what America can do.

Initially, this worked, and directly after the convention, Dukakis opened up a substantial lead over Bush. However, because the Democratic Party’s shift rightward since 1984 was linguistic and not conceptual, Dukakis could only offer a “modern” variant of American

144 White, New Politics, 148-164.
Exceptionalism. Thus, the abundance of exceptionalist language in his DNC Acceptance Speech drowns in references similar to JFK’s depiction of the U.S. as an example more of communal than individualistic enterprises, plus standard Democratic sound bites like “Opportunity for some isn’t good enough for America;” “college education is a right;” “invest in our urban neighborhoods;” and “wage war on hunger and pollution and infant mortality.”\textsuperscript{146} And when Dukakis ripped a page from Reagan’s playbook by invoking John Winthrop, he did so by stating that the Puritans had not been “talking about material success [but] about a country where each of us asks not only what’s in it for some of us, but what’s good and what’s right for all of us.”\textsuperscript{147}

Nevertheless, given Bush’s and Dukakis’ rhetoric, the overlap between the campaigns was considerable, especially regarding the economy, community, and public service. Thus, the main task for the former became to depict the latter as a hard-core liberal whose ideas stood way out from the American mainstream.\textsuperscript{148} And thanks to decades of conservative branding of most things left-of-center as potentially un-American, this was not difficult. One right-wing commentator noted that “[t]he premise of the Bush campaign is that many people [...] think that only two things come from Massachusetts, liberals and lobsters, and pretty soon they’re going to wake up and say, ‘That’s not a lobster.’”\textsuperscript{149}

Bush started this process by ending his RNC Acceptance Speech with a recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, which Dukakis opposed being mandated in schools, and then throughout the campaign stuck the “L-word” on his opponent’s forehead at every given turn. Instrumental, in this case, was a TV ad. Formally produced by an independent PAC, it depicted Dukakis as soft

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid; \textsuperscript{146} Gamble, \textit{City on a Hill}, 153f.
\textsuperscript{147} Dukakis, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination…,” (July 21, 1988).
\textsuperscript{149} Quote from Hershey, “The Campaign and the Media,” 78.
on crime by describing how a convicted African American murderer, Willie Horton, had committed assault, robbery, and rape while partaking in a Massachusetts weekend furlough program. Dukakis also made Bush’s job easy by being a forlorn candidate. For example, he refused to throw “red meat to the Yahoos” by supporting the death penalty even when asked what he would think if someone raped and killed his wife. Not surprisingly, therefore, most scholars agree that Bush connected better with Americans and won a landslide victory.

A CAUTIOUS PRESIDENT

With Bush, the GOP scored its third consecutive presidential term for the first time since 1928. However, even if the ideological rift between right and left was more profound than ever and Bush defeated Dukakis “on the value turf that Reagan had fenced in,” his win was as broad but thin as Reagan’s socio-cultural impact had been limited and shallow. For four years, Bush was also continuously forced to reaffirm his ideological bona fides. However, neither his language nor actions matched that task. For instance, in his Inaugural Address, he said: “We know what works: Freedom works. We know what’s right: Freedom is right. We know how to secure a more just and prosperous life for man on Earth: through free markets, free speech, free

150 The ad can be found on-line at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Io9KMSSEZ0Y. It shows black and white pictures of Horton, an African American man, while a narrator says: “Bush and Dukakis on crime. Bush supports the death penalty for first degree murderers. Dukakis not only opposed the death penalty, he allowed first degree murderers to have weekend passes from prison. One was Willie Horton who murdered a boy in a robbery, stabbing him 19 times. Despite a life sentence, Horton received 10 weekend passes from prison. Horton fled, kidnapped a young couple, stabbing the man, and repeatedly raping his girlfriend. Weekend prison passes. Dukakis on crime.”


154 White, New Politics, 171.
elections, and the exercise of free will unhampered by the state.”

And in 1990, he scorched his internal party credibility by breaking his “read my lips” promise on taxes in a statesmanlike move to reduce the deficit, imperiling party unity going into the 1992 election.

Furthermore, Bush used exceptionalist expressions mostly in speeches like State of the Union Addresses; i.e., speeches that were planned out, well thought-through, and to a considerable degree written by others. Of course, all modern presidents have used speechwriters, but good ones develop a feeling for their client’s style and wishes. That Bush’s speechwriters did not fill his every day speeches with exceptionalist phrases indicates that such language did not come naturally to him. A particular study of hastily composed and unscripted comments of Bush’s indicate the same thing. For example, in September 1990, he did not use exceptionalist phrases in a speech to Congress about the Persian Gulf crisis except to say, “Recent events have surely proven that there is no substitute for American leadership. In the face of tyranny, let no one doubt American credibility and reliability.”

On the first day of that war, he also used exceptionalist wording only in the form of quotes from U.S. soldiers:

The troops know why they’re there. And listen to what they say, for they’ve said it better than any President or Prime Minister ever could. Listen to Hollywood Huddleston, Marine lance corporal. He says, “Let’s free these people, so we can go home and be free again.” And he’s right. The terrible crimes and tortures committed by Saddam’s henchmen against the innocent people of Kuwait are an affront to mankind and a challenge to the freedom of all. Listen to one of our great officers out there, Marine Lieutenant General Walter Boomer. He said: “There are things worth fighting for. A world in which brutality and lawlessness are allowed to go unchecked isn’t the kind of world we’re going to want to live in.”

Similarly, in Bush’s first war-time press conference, he did not offer any exceptionalist phrases or arguments for the war, or the U.S.’ leading role in it. In fact, it was not until his 1991 State of the Union two weeks later that he explained it in ideological language:

Halfway around the world, we are engaged in a great struggle in the skies and on the seas and sands. We know why we’re there: We are Americans, part of something larger than ourselves. For two centuries, we’ve done the hard work of freedom. And tonight, we lead the world in facing down a threat to decency and humanity [...] For two centuries, America has served the world as an inspiring example of freedom and democracy. For generations, America has led the struggle to preserve and extend the blessings of liberty. And today, in a rapidly changing world, American leadership is indispensable. Americans know that leadership brings burdens and sacrifices. But we also know why the hopes of humanity turn to us. We are Americans; we have a unique responsibility to do the hard work of freedom. And when we do, freedom works.

Still, when Bush addressed the nation at war’s end, he again avoided exceptionalist rhetoric.

Referring to the international nature of the war coalition, he only described it as “a victory for the United Nations, for all mankind, for the rule of law, and for what is right.”

That exceptionalist oratory did not come naturally to Bush became further obvious when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, and the Soviet Union collapsed two years later. Even in his stoutest statement before the first event, given to the German people in Mainz, he sounded moderate:

And for 40 years, the world has waited for the Cold War to end. And decade after decade, time after time, the flowering human spirit withered from the chill of conflict and oppression; and again, the world waited. But the passion for freedom cannot be denied forever. The world has waited long enough. The time is right. Let Europe be whole and free. [...] The forces of freedom are putting the Soviet status quo on the defensive. And in

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the West, we have succeeded because we’ve been faithful to our values and our vision. And on the other side of the rusting Iron Curtain, their vision failed.\footnote{George Bush, “Remarks to the Citizens in Mainz, Federal Republic of Germany,” (May 31, 1989) \textit{APP}, accessed July 1, 2019, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/262786.}

And Bush’s prudence became even clearer two years later, in August 1991. Throughout the Soviet Union, the situation was tense because nearly all Soviet republics, including Ukraine – “little Russia” – had joined a chorus line demanding independence. So when Bush was invited to give remarks to the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet, he was extra cautious:

I don’t want to sound like I’m lecturing, but let’s begin with the broad term “freedom.” When Americans talk of freedom, we refer to people’s abilities to live without fear of government intrusion, without fear of harassment by their fellow citizens, without restricting others’ freedoms. We do not consider freedom a privilege, to be doled out only to those who hold proper political views or belong to certain groups. We consider it an inalienable individual right, bestowed upon all men and women.

Since Bush was tiptoeing around a political powder keg, this would probably not have been so bad if he had just not added: “[F]reedom is not the same as independence. Americans will not support those who seek independence in order to replace a far-off tyranny with a local despotism.”\footnote{George Bush, “Remarks to the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of the Ukraine in Kiev, Soviet Union,” (August 01, 1991), \textit{APP}, accessed July 1, 2019, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/265653.}


“the Chicken Kiev speech.” Bush later explained his tameness as a deliberate strategy not to provoke hardline backlashes in Eastern Europe. However, even on Christmas Day 1991, the day the Soviet Union ceased to exist, he only expressed relief: “This is a victory for democracy and freedom. It’s a victory for the moral force of our values. Every American can take pride in this victory...” Again, it took him a State of the Union to sound truly jubilant:

[I]n the past 12 months, the world has known changes of almost Biblical proportions. And even now, months after the failed coup that doomed a failed system, I’m not sure we’ve absorbed the full impact, the full import of what happened. But communism died this year. Even as President, with the most fascinating possible vantage point, there were times when I was so busy managing progress and helping to lead change that I didn’t always show the joy that was in my heart. But the biggest thing that has happened in the world in my life, in our lives, is this: By the grace of God, America won the cold war.

In this, as it turned out, his last his State of the Union, Bush also said:

There are those who say that now we can turn away from the world, that we have no special role, no special place. But we are the United States of America, the leader of the West that has become the leader of the world. And as long as I am President, I will continue to lead in support of freedom everywhere, not out of arrogance, not out of altruism, but for the safety and security of our children. This is a fact: Strength in the pursuit of peace is no vice; isolationism in the pursuit of security is no virtue.

Two things should be noted about this paragraph. First, by honoring Barry Goldwater in paraphrasing his famous quote from 1964, Bush closed a big loop in modern U.S. politics. It not only acknowledged Goldwater’s stamina and far-sightedness but highlighted the Republican Party’s role in opposing Communism during a period when Democrats were accused of wanting

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166 Naftali, George H. W. Bush, 84ff; Meacham, Destiny and Power, 379-389, 400f, 482-496.
to appease the Soviets. It was also, of course, a proverbial bone to his party’s right-wing and a way to apologize for his moderation. Second, by promising to keep America involved as a promoter of democracy, Bush laid down a path resting squarely upon an active-inclusive form of American Exceptionalism that his successors would follow for almost three decades.

**NEW WORLD ORDER REDUX**

Many Americans saw the end of the Cold War in the same way as their grandparents had viewed World War I: as a historic opportunity to reform the world according to their own standards. Bush was one of them. As a well-bred Northeasterner, like FDR and JFK, he formed a worldview firmly rooted in American Exceptionalism early in life. Bush accordingly declared the fall of communism to be the onset of a New World Order, a term he would use nearly one hundred times as president.\(^{170}\) He also showcased the U.S. as the world’s dominant force and a nation that collaborated both with other, preferably democratic nations, and international organizations such as the U.N. Hence, in many ways, his statement resembled the world order Woodrow Wilson had envisioned after World War I.

Furthermore, in the spring of 1989, Bush expressed his belief in a coming victory for American ideals over fascist, communist, and other totalitarian systems in a series of foreign policy addresses. In the first, focused on Poland, where the communist regime was just about to give up its monopoly of power, Bush set forth his goal for Eastern Europe as “greater recognition of human rights, market incentives, and free elections.”\(^{171}\) In the second, he focused on the

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\(^{170}\) A search on APP for “new world order” generates 93 hits (July 22, 2020).

Soviet Union. However, this was before a total collapse of “the evil empire” appeared to be more an remote possibility, so his ambition was only to support “the integration of the Soviet Union into the community of nations.” In the final speech, though, he allowed himself to be bolder:

[T]he eclipse of communism is only one half of the story of our time. The other is the ascendancy of the democratic idea. Never before has the idea of freedom so captured the imaginations of men and women the world over, and never before has the hope of freedom beckoned so many [...] And we hear them, and the world hears them. And America will do all it can to encourage them.

In this last speech, it too became clear that Bush’s world vision was as grand as Wilson’s, FDR’s, and Reagan’s, even if his language lacked their grandiose ring:

What is it that we want to see? It is a growing community of democracies anchoring international peace and stability, and a dynamic free-market system generating prosperity and progress on a global scale. The economic foundation of this new era is the proven success of the free market, and nurturing that foundation are the values rooted in freedom and democracy.

Hence, Bush at this point shifted the role of the U.S. from its previous limited role as a shield against communism to underscore America’s exceptionalist role as a source of democracy everywhere. He also portrayed contemporary developments as directly shaped by deliberate U.S. policies over many decades: “The economic rise of Europe and the nations of the Pacific Rim is the growing success of our postwar policy. This time is a time of tremendous opportunity, and destiny is in our own hands.” However, it was not until the following year that Bush’s view of

174 Ibid.
175 Ibid.
a New World Order and America’s specific role in it as a “redeemer nation” became genuinely distinct. And it took a war to make it happen.

“The Mother of All Wars”

After invading Kuwait in August 1990, the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein promised that the ensuing showdown with the world would become “the mother of all wars.” However, what the conflict gave birth to was not regional supremacy for Iraq, but a New World Order defined by American supremacy. Bush began using this term after Iraq’s invasion in a talk with a journalist.176 Two weeks later, he also called Hussein’s behavior “a rare opportunity to move toward an historic period of cooperation [where] the nations of the world, East and West, North and South, can prosper and live in harmony” and made it clear that his reaction should be seen as “a signal to actual and potential despots around the world” that the U.S. could not be intimidated.

Furthermore, the Gulf War made it clear that Bush’s view was widely shared. Politicians, pundits, and experts expressed only minor differences “about how America’s constrained power could best serve the cause of strategic globalism,” and most “in no way questioned the legitimacy of America’s geopolitical goals.”177 This paradigm was also underlying Francis Fukuyama’s The End of History? which made de Tocqueville’s vision of a democratic future “appear like an exercise in intellectual timidity.”178 The article was filled with exceptionalist-laden views that the fall of communism meant “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution

177 Walker, National Security, 206.
178 Williamson, After Tocqueville, 5.
and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human
government.”¹⁷⁹ And even if Fukuyama did not openly presage a prime role for the U.S., he did
declare “the egalitarianism of modern America [...] the essential achievement of the classless
society envisioned by Marx.”¹⁸⁰

Thus, what Fukuyama offered in the seductive form of an apparently objective academic
theory was the argument that the fall of communism proved central tenets of American
Exceptionalism – and in the bigger scheme of things Whig history writing and Kantian
philosophy – to be true. And even though a few protested against this view, he was not alone.
The response to his article became overwhelmingly positive. For example, the same year,
neoconservative commentator Charles Krauthammer penned a blunter piece, demanding the U.S.
to become a “super-sovereign” and shoulder the role as a New Rome by declaring a worldwide
Pax Americana.¹⁸¹ However, nowadays, Fukuyama’s thesis is considered one of modern history’s
most contested concepts, and at the time, not even Bush was so sure about what the New World
Order would convey. He therefore prudently distanced himself from Fukuyama’s thesis.

Nevertheless, in his 1993 Farewell Address, with the Soviet Union gone, Bush thinking
crystallized. He opened by saying that he wished the end of the Cold War could have made
American interventionism “a thing of the past,” but professed that this would be a mistake since
the unfolding of world events, instead of serenity, showed “disturbing signs of what [the world
will] become if we [Americans] are passive and aloof.” It risked being “a world characterized by
violence, characterized by chaos, one in which dictators and tyrants threaten their neighbors.

¹⁷⁹ Francis Fukuyama, “The end of history?” in The National Interest, No. 16 (Summer 1989), 1, accessed July 1,
¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 8.
build arsenals brimming with weapons of mass destruction, and ignore the welfare of their own men, women, and children [and] a horrible increase in international terrorism, with American citizens more at risk than ever before.”

Hence, Bush left office with the message that America, the only superpower, could not afford to hesitate. And he made clear that this was because a world, “one more attuned to the enduring principles that have made this country a beacon of hope for so many for so long, will not just emerge on its own. It’s got to be built.” Logically, in this speech, Bush also formally filed away George Washington’s “great rule” of foreign policy as obsolete:

Two hundred years ago, another departing President warned of the dangers of what he described as “entangling alliances.” His was the right course for a new nation at that point in history. But what was “entangling” in Washington’s day is now essential. [...] We must engage ourselves if a new world order, one more compatible with our values and congenial to our interest, is to emerge. But even more, we must lead.

Moreover, even though Bush, as he had done many times before, swore allegiance to a multilateral world order and warned that a role as “the world’s policeman [...] would exhaust ourselves,” he inferred that “in a world where we are the only remaining superpower, it is the role of the United States to marshal its moral and material resources to promote a democratic peace. It is our responsibility, it is our opportunity to lead. There is no one else.” Bush’s successors would also hold on to this view and expand it because, according to one scholar, “the rhetorical waging of the Gulf War did legitimize a posture of international engagement [and] set the tone of future discourse about the United States’ international role.”

183 Ibid.
184 Ibid.
185 McEvoy-Levy, American Exceptionalism, 94.
Our hopes, our hearts, our hands are with those on every continent who are building democracy and freedom. Their cause is America’s cause.

BILL CLINTON (1993)

CHAPTER 8 |

The Era of Hubris

Some might say the 1990s was a bewildering decade. At first, the fall of Communism persuaded many that democracy and capitalism had finally triumphed over Socialism. However, democracy would never truly take hold in Russia, and because of an economic recession, the pendulum in the West shortly swung back towards a “new left” that promised more respect for private enterprises, less ridged welfare states, etc. What is more, the end of the Cold War meant the return of old conflict patterns of irredentism, separatism, and ethnic-religious tensions. In 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait, and Yugoslavia was drawn into a civil war between Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats, and Muslim Bosnians. Nevertheless, the number of democracies did increase, the U.S. started to act as a “world police,” and politicians talked about a New World Order, so, for a moment, it looked like America’s destiny to remake the world had finally arrived.¹

Still, even if Americans generally felt right about all of this, many thought the world could now take care of itself. Consequently, a new president promising to focus on domestic

¹ Herring, Colony to Superpower, 917-922; Kinzer, Overthrow, 219-259.
issues was elected, and since the 1990s was to experience the computer-driven “third industrial revolution,” the economy soon boomed again. However, this time, things were different. First and foremost, for the first time “high-quality European and Japanese goods flooded U.S. markets to satisfy the tastes of well-heeled and sophisticated consumers.”² The good times thus did not primarily benefit American producers. Instead, deindustrialization, computerization, and trade deals spread the spoils of growth unevenly. Overall, the “dot.com economy” would benefit people working in high-skill sectors who could keep up with educational demands and technological developments while low- and middle-class people seemed doomed to idleness or low paying “McJobs.”³ Still, as many times before, people began to think that the good times would last forever.⁴

Furthermore, America began to change rapidly, both socially and culturally. As Baby Boomers stepped forward as discourse makers, the U.S. became less hierarchical and traditional, and a “Hakuna Matata” attitude became one of the decade’s markers.⁵ At the same time, the effects of the secularization, narcissism, and loosening of social controls ongoing since the 1960s began to show.⁶ Notably, while traditional crime shrunk, mass violence in the form of workplace and school shootings, like the Columbine massacre, and incidents of domestic terrorism, similar to the Oklahoma City bombing, began to occur. Less dramatic manifestations were preppers, folks preparing for the end of days by stockpiling necessities, and militias, private groups of people organizing for a fight against “the Feds.” These groups were not new but now became a news staple. Also, Americans’ age-old proclivity for conspiracy thinking bloomed and made hits

² Herring, Colony to Superpower, 918.
³ Troy, Age of Clinton, 279ff.
⁴ Ibid. 256ff.
⁵ Stuckey, Defining Americans, 288ff.
⁶ Troy, Age of Clinton, 189, 276f.
of movies like Oliver Stone’s *JFK* and the TV-series *X-files*. However, when they went to the polls in 1992, most of this was still in the future.

**The Next Generation Election**

When George Bush declared that he would run for reelection, pundits predicted that, because of the Gulf War and the fall of Communism, he would win in a landslide. However, before long, he began to lag in the polls. The main reason for this was the bad economy, but the premises for U.S. politics had also changed dramatically in only a few years. Four years earlier, a foreign policy proficient Bush was seen as well-suited to handle the international drama caused by the collapse of communism, but, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, he could no longer offer the guidance towards the future, or “the vision thing” as he called it, that people wanted. Instead, in light of escalating sociocultural changes and comparison to his opponents, Arkansas Democratic Governor Bill Clinton (b. 1946) and Independent Texas billionaire Ross Perot (1930-2019), he seemed old, tired, and his ideas outdated.

Moreover, the end of the Cold War spurred a broad debate about the economy and other “normal” issues like crime and education. In reality, it was a new apex in the hundred-year-old argument about how to best preserve America’s exceptionalist nature: stick to the country’s heritage, or change? On one side were people who viewed the outcome of the Cold War as proof of the enduring strength of the U.S. system and the recession as only a regular economic slump. On the other side were voices, inspired by ideological whims but also scholars such as British

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historian Paul M. Kennedy, who argued that the Cold War had exhausted the U.S. economy, and that radical change was therefore needed. And for the first time since the 1960s, it was the disciples of change that found the most compelling advocate.

After a modest upbringing in Arkansas, Bill Clinton decided early to enter politics. A highly intelligent, rhetorically brilliant, opportunistic, and (when needed) unscrupulous policy wonk, he had become a star in 1978 when, at age 32, became the nation’s youngest Governor. In the 1980s, he had also become a notable member of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC); a group of centrists opposing their party’s Social Democracy by highlighting issues like the need for “expanding opportunity, not the government,” and saying that the U.S. was about “equal opportunity, not equal outcomes.” In addition, Clinton, like Carter, described himself as beyond left and right and hailed traditional American values. Thus, his liberalism was moderate and so often offset by opportunism that if his stances were liberal, conservative, or something in-between is still hard to judge today. For example, while running for the presidency, he proposed a new form of student loans based on semi-compulsory communitarianism:

Everybody can borrow money to go to college. But you must do your part. You must pay it back, from your paychecks or, better yet, by going back home and serving your communities. Just think of it. Think of it. Millions of energetic young men and women serving their country by policing the streets or teaching the children or caring for the sick. Or working with the elderly and people with disabilities. Or helping young people to stay off drugs and out of gangs, giving us all a sense of new hope and limitless possibilities.

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Similarly, the level of Clinton’s American Exceptionalism is challenging to assess. Even though he believed in a particular role for the U.S. and often talked like an exceptionalist, he was above all “an unabashed enthusiast for globalization, like the eighteenth-century philosopheviewing commerce as the essential instrument to promote free markets, democracy, and eventually peace and prosperity.”13 Also, since both concepts are “imperial liberalism” and as such are not inherently contradictory in all respects, some crucial differences between them need to be clarified. Most imperative, while American exceptionalists want to make other countries more like the U.S. and see a unique role for the country in world affairs, globalists want a world where all countries’ cultures converge, and state governments subject themselves to supranational bodies like the U.N., the World Trade Organization, and the International Court of Justice.14 Hence, economic globalization is only one part of a full-sized ideology complete with “images, sound, bites, metaphors, myths, symbols, and spatial arrangements of globality,”15 whose goal is a borderless world and for many also, ultimately, some form of world government.

In Europe, where after 40 years of political division, many saw all forms of unity as a blessed want – and a desirable counterweight to what a French philosopher derided as American “hyper power”16 – globalization became popular after the Cold War (at least amongst it elites). Hence, Europeans, in line with Catholic and Kantian traditions, began to see the world as destined for “super states” that one day may merge into a planetary community.17 In fact, it activated the age-old meme of a universal empire entrenched in German and French philosophy. This turned the E.U., established in 1993, into a politically highly centralized union that has

13 Herring, Colony to Superpower, 926.
14 Huntington, Who Are We, 257-291.
16 Herring, Colony to Superpower, 916.
17 For example, see Hazony, Virtue of Nationalism, 16-55.
since been enlarged to include nearly all of Protestant and Catholic Europe. It has also inspired similar projects such as the African Union (2002) and the Union of South American Nations (2008).\textsuperscript{18} Contrariwise, since national independence is the core of Americanism, broad opposition to globalism formed swiftly in the U.S. after the Cold War on both the left and the right.\textsuperscript{19}

Thus, despite numerous similarities, it takes creative imagination to reconcile globalism and Americanism, and beyond the hybrid rhetoric produced by Bill Clinton (see below), globalists and exceptionalists’ policies and goals would soon clash. Still, globalization was seen by many Baby Boomers growing up in the “Make Peace – Not War” era as a pacifying and equalizing force of nature. Thus, the term became a catchphrase in big cities, academia, business, and other well-connected areas in the world and prospering from the dot.com economy also in the U.S.\textsuperscript{20} Accordingly, many Americans in the 1990s joined the new worldwide cast of politicians, businessmen, and others – “the Davos people” – that strived for a borderless world and felt little bond to their countries of birth, their culture, and insular masses.\textsuperscript{21}

Moreover, since most experts, media, and politicians described economic and other forms of globalization as if not destined by God or History, at least given by economic forces, opposition to it soon became heretical in line with U.S. foreign policy tradition. Few, therefore, talked about its ostensibly most palpable result – the erosion and possible end of national

\textsuperscript{18} Symptomatically, the 1992 Maastricht Treaty creating the EU was in some countries rammed through by politicians against popular will: in France after an exceptionally narrow margin in a referendum; in Denmark by holding a second referendum when the first produced the “wrong” result; and in the U.K. by not holding a referendum despite strong arguments that one was technically needed. See Desmond Dinan, \textit{Europe Recast: A History of European Union} (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), 231-250.

\textsuperscript{19} For example, on the left, unions concreted the Democrats’ profile as the country’s protectionist party, and anti-globalization activists engaged zealously in both consumer boycotts and street riots. On the right, people like Nixon’s former speechwriter Patrick Buchanan, while running against Bush in the 1992 GOP primaries, tried to redefine the party along pre-World War II lines of “trade protectionism, heavy restrictions on immigration, and foreign policy isolationism.” Kazin, \textit{Populist Persuasion}, 272-286.

\textsuperscript{20} Bacevich, \textit{American Empire}, 32-54.

\textsuperscript{21} Huntington, \textit{Who Are We}, 264-271.
sovereignty – except for a handful of paleoconservatives, libertarians, left-wing radicals, and conspiracy theorists, of which the latter shamed opposition further by filling in the blanks with caprices such as secret plans to hand over the policing of America to the U.N.

Nevertheless, knowing that support for globalization would alienate millions of voters, not least Reagan Democrats in the Rustbelt, before the 1992 election, Clinton subdued his globalism, just as FDR in 1932 had muted his internationalism. This tactic was easy because Clinton, running as an outsider, seldom needed to dwell upon foreign policy. He could instead deliver media-savvy one-liners like wanting “[a]n America that champions the cause of freedom and democracy from Eastern Europe to Southern Africa – and in our own hemispheres, in Haiti and Cuba.”22 In fact, on the occasions Clinton did expound on his foreign policy, time and again he sounded more exceptionalistic than Bush. Like when he criticized the president for taking

[...] a lot of credit for Communism’s downfall, but fail[ing] to recognize that the global democratic revolution actually gave freedom its birth. He simply does not seem at home in the mainstream pro-democracy tradition of American foreign policy. He shows little regard for the idea that we must have a principled and coherent American purpose in international affairs, something he calls “the vision thing.”23

On at least one occasion, though, Clinton did reveal his globalist attitude. It was in late 1991 when he gave a speech at Georgetown University:

Make no mistake: foreign and domestic policy are inseparable in today’s world. If we are not strong at home, we cannot lead the world we have done so much to make. If we withdraw from the world, it will hurt us economically at home. We cannot allow this false choice between domestic policy and foreign policy to hurt our country and our economy.24

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Since this speech was given during the primaries long-before Clinton seemed to be the obvious candidate, it did not generate much attention. However, in hindsight, it stands out as a clear indication of what was in the cards.

CLINTON’S FOREIGN POLICY

In his Inaugural Address, Clinton sounded a tone on foreign affairs that would become a rhetorical hallmark of his presidency. It contained a fair share of exceptionalist semantics but also reflected his globalist instincts. Its basic theme was the century-old Progressive/Liberal mantra that the world had entered a new era where old truths, habits, and rules no longer applied, and the U.S. had to change accordingly. In addition, Clinton argued that since the pressure for change after the Cold War no longer came mainly from the inside, it could therefore no longer be politically controlled or bureaucratically directed from Washington, D.C.

When George Washington first took the oath I have just sworn to uphold, news traveled slowly across the land by horseback and across the ocean by boat. Now, the sights and sounds of this ceremony are broadcast instantaneously to billions around the world. Communications and commerce are global. Investment is mobile. Technology is almost magical. And ambition for a better life is now universal. We earn our livelihood in America today in peaceful competition with people all across the Earth.25

Clinton then summarized the core of globalist thinking by saying that, “There is no longer a clear division between what is foreign and what is domestic. The world economy, the world environment, the world AIDS crisis, the world arms race: they affect us all.” Still,

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cognizant about Americans’ animosity vis-à-vis globalist developments, he imbedded this message in more familiar exceptionalist language:

When our vital interests are challenged or the will and conscience of the international community is defied, we will act, with peaceful diplomacy whenever possible, with force when necessary. [...] But our greatest strength is the power of our ideas, which are still new in many lands. Across the world we see them embraced, and we rejoice. Our hopes, our hearts, our hands are with those on every continent who are building democracy and freedom. Their cause is America’s cause.26

As president, Clinton would stick to this hybrid exceptionalist-globalist rhetoric. For instance, he seldomly seems to have used exceptionalist arguments to describe or defend international actions, even when America was the driving force. Instead, he presented them as U.S. led international efforts. As in 1994, when he described military action to achieve regime change in Haiti as an “international effort to restore [that country’s] democratic government.”27

This dual rhetoric would serve Clinton well overall, but it was not always practical. In 1993, for example, when he argued for NAFTA against large parts of his own party, he could not, just like Reagan a decade earlier, square free trade with the views of the Founding Fathers.28 One of the few truly exceptionalist arguments he used at the signing ceremony was, therefore, that NAFTA offered an “opportunity to remake the world.”29 Instead, he based his support upon more recent U.S. history:

After World War I we turned inward, building walls of protectionism around our Nation. The result was a Great Depression and ultimately another horrible World War. After the

26 Ibid.
28 Clinton’s position was weakened further by the circumstance that he the year before had expressed doubts about the deal and as a candidate often delivered protectionist gushes about it, like “American companies must act like American companies again, exporting products, not jobs.” Quote from Clinton, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination,” (July 16, 1992).
Second World War, we took a different course: We reached outward. Gifted leaders of both political parties built a new order based on collective security and expanded trade. They created a foundation of stability and created in the process the conditions which led to the explosion of the great American middle class, one of the true economic miracles in the whole history of civilization. Their statecraft stands to this day: the IMF and the World Bank, GATT, and NATO.

In this speech, Clinton also argued that America did not have a choice:

We cannot stop global change. We cannot repeal the international economic competition that is everywhere. We can only harness the energy to our benefit. Now we must recognize that the only way for a wealthy nation to grow richer is to export, to simply find new customers for the products and services it makes. [...] There is no other way, not for the United States or for Europe or for Japan or for any other wealthy nation in the world.\(^30\)

Now, for a president to concede in this way that not even the U.S., as the only remaining superpower, could resist globalism is quintessentially un-American. And it seems like Clinton recognized this. At least he closed his speech by harking back on the familiar theme of American’s bent for the unknown, experiments, competition, and winning: “We must face the challenges, embrace them with confidence, deal with the problems honestly and openly, and make this world work for all of us. America is where it should be, in the lead, setting the pace, showing the confidence that all of us need to face tomorrow. We are ready to compete, and we can win.”\(^31\) Still, Clinton and others’ emotionally weak arguments for NAFTA made the deal so disputed that it would continue to stir debate until it was replaced in 2020.

Another predicament with Clinton’s foreign policy was its human rights focus. In a few words, he shared Jimmy Carter’s desire to spread human rights as a goal for U.S. foreign policy, and it ended in the same way. Specifically, while for Carter it had been tension between human

\(^{30}\) Ibid.
\(^{31}\) Ibid.
rights and the need for a realist policy towards the Soviet Union that led to trouble, for Clinton, it was his belief in the civilizing force of trade. In conjunction with pressure to open U.S. markets to imports of cheap clothing, electronics, and other consumer goods, this assurance led him to meet human rights violations in China and other countries with lower tariffs instead of forfeits.32 After only six months in the White House, by mid-1993, Clinton’s foreign policy thus collapsed, and he was forced to replace it with what one of his assistants called “a strategy of enlargement” based on four themes:

First, we should strengthen the community of major market democracies – including our own – which constitutes the core from which enlargement is proceeding. Second, we should help foster and consolidate new democracies and market economies, where possible, especially in states of special significance and opportunity. Third, we must counter the aggression – and support the liberalization – of states hostile to democracy and markets. Fourth, we need to pursue our humanitarian agenda not only by providing aid, but also by working to help democracy and market economics take root in regions of greatest humanitarian concern.33

Hence, Clinton’s foreign policy’s new goal became to secure high economic growth at home through continuous globalization, strategic democratization, and U.S. military hegemony – or what the New York Times called a “peace through trade” policy – abroad.34 And to make this quite cynical purpose a bit more appetizing, the silver lining was said to be that America would no longer be forced to deal with thugs to secure its place in the world. Instead, she was now free “to enlarge the circle of nations that live under [...] free institutions” even if

32 Bacevich, American Empire, 93ff.
soon fade away. But I agree with President Roosevelt, who once said, “The democratic aspiration is no mere recent phase of human history. It is human history.”

Still, Clinton seemed to have never expressed a sincere belief that the U.S. by God or History had been ordained to give direction to world affairs. Instead, as stated by his second Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright (b. 1937), his administration's policies were steered by the belief that the future was up to Americans because “we have our own duty to be the authors of history.”

Consistent with this view, Clinton reserved the right for America “to act unilaterally when there is a threat to our core interests” and in the same speech, he told the U.N. to scale back on its overseas interventions also, because “[i]f the American people are to say yes to U.N. peacekeeping, the United Nations must know when to say no.” Or as one scholar has rephrased it: “America was no longer asking; it was telling.” Clinton’s revamped foreign policy thus marks a turning point where the “liberal faith in international institutions [...] collided with post-cold war liberal faith in human rights” and where even many Democrats – like numerous Republicans had done for decades – gave up on the U.N. During the 1990s, the latter institution consequently waned as a tool for U.S. foreign policy and, in the process, its importance shrunk in relation to other international bodies like the WTO, that was guided by truly globalist goals.

Furthermore, Clinton’s more realist foreign policy in 1994 first led to fatal American and international inaction in Rwanda when Hutus killed some 800,000 Tutsis. However, he managed

36 Quote from Bacevich, American Empire, 33.
37 Clinton, “Remarks to the 48th Session of the United Nations” (September 27, 1993).
38 Ibid, 282.
39 Herring, Colony to Superpower, 927; Walker, National Security, 232f; quote from Beinart, Icarus Syndrome, 279.
to end another genocide in Bosnia the following year, and the talk he gave about the ensuing Dayton Accord between Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians became his most exceptionalist ever:

From our birth, America has always been more than just a place. America has embodied an idea that has become the ideal for billions of people throughout the world. Our Founders said it best: America is about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In this century especially, America has done more than simply stand for these ideals. We have acted on them and sacrificed for them. Our people fought two World Wars so that freedom could triumph over tyranny. After World War I, we pulled back from the world, leaving a vacuum that was filled by the forces of hatred. After World War II, we continued to lead the world. We made the commitments that kept the peace, that helped to spread democracy, that created unparalleled prosperity, and that brought victory in the cold war. Today, because of our dedication, America’s ideals – liberty, democracy, and peace – are more and more the aspirations of people everywhere in the world. It is the power of our ideas, even more than our size, our wealth, and our military might, that makes America a uniquely trusted nation.

This quote is a prime example of a president acting/speaking in his role as pontifex maximus for American civil religion, elevating the nation above other countries as having a special role in human history and having unique qualities. However, Clinton’s globalism shone through when he discussed Bosnia’s multicultural nature and its future nation-building process:

[W]ith our leadership and the commitment of our allies, the people of Bosnia can have the chance to decide their future in peace. They have a chance to remind the world that just a few short years ago the mosques and churches of Sarajevo were a shining symbol of multiethnic tolerance, that Bosnia once found unity in its diversity. Indeed, the cemetery in the center of the city was just a few short years ago a magnificent stadium which hosted the Olympics, our universal symbol of peace and harmony. Bosnia can be that kind of place again. We must not turn our backs on Bosnia now.

This speech had historic effects because, even if public opinion for overseas actions would warm only slightly in the 1990s, the self-esteem created by Bosnia opened a period of

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40 Ibid, 273f; Herring, Colony to Superpower, 928f.
42 Ibid.
hubris amongst politicians, media, and other elites concerning America’s role and power in the world. For example, while Secretary of State Albright said that “if we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation,” neoconservative Charles Krauthammer crowed that “[t]he alternative to unipolarity is chaos,” and Clinton declared that people agreeing with him were on the “right side of history,” of which the last of course was a way of saying that History was moving towards an end defined by him (or at least America).

Given this brazenness, it is symptomatic that Clinton, in his Farewell Address, chose to second Bush’s shelving of George Washington’s “great rule” from eight years earlier. Recalling that Thomas Jefferson, “In his first Inaugural Address [like his predecessor] warned of entangling alliances” Clinton said that “in our times, America cannot and must not disentangle itself from the world.” He also once more put his globalist spin on the theme that the U.S. has to work well at home to function as a model abroad. However, what he now described as most important was not a strong economy, or the fixing of social ills, but America as an ideal for multiracial and multicultural societies:

[W]e must remember that America cannot lead in the world unless here at home we weave the threads of our coat of many colors into the fabric of one America. As we become ever more diverse, we must work harder to unite around our common values and our common humanity. We must work harder to overcome our differences, in our hearts and in our laws. We must treat all our people with fairness and dignity, regardless of their race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation, and regardless of when they arrived in our country – always moving toward the more perfect Union of our Founders’ dreams.

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44 Quote from Beinart, Icarus Syndrome, 300.
45 Of 38 recorded uses of this word combination listed on APP, Clinton and his associates answer for 34, plus 10 uses of the contrasting axiom “wrong side of history.”
47 Ibid.
To summarize, Clinton never dared to abandon exceptionalist rhetoric, and he often successfully wrapped his globalism in such semantics. Still, many of his essential speeches lack explicit nods towards American and Western qualities and are filled instead with forebodes about peace, prosperity, and progress in a new world where ethnic heritage and national boundaries play lesser and lesser roles. Now, that such talk came to mark the first Boomer president is not more surprising than that he, as a “bridge president” between two eras, applied memes and sentiments from different paradigms. Nevertheless, since Americans were not ready to give up their heritage, he had to continue making use of exceptionalist talk in the domestic arena.

“A BRIDGE TO THE 21ST CENTURY”

As an ideologically placid yet excellent orator, Clinton could make great use not only of American Exceptionalism, but traditionalism, populism, and religion to sell his vision of the future. And when he did, his ability to what one of his speechwriters called “speak American” could at times compare even to Reagan’s, as it did in his first Inaugural Address:

When our Founders boldly declared America’s independence to the world and our purposes to the Almighty, they knew that America, to endure, would have to change; not change for change’s sake but change to preserve America’s ideals: life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness. Though we marched to the music of our time, our mission is timeless. Each generation of Americans must define what it means to be an American.

48 White, Values Divide, 117-127.
Also, Clinton from time to time sounded like JFK, as when he described the global economy as “the new frontier,” spoke about pushing back “the frontiers of knowledge,” and offered Americans “the right and the power to explore the frontiers of science and technology and space.”

Still, Clinton used exceptionalist rhetoric sparingly, and when he did, it often appears more calculated than spontaneous. For example, when addressing Congress about his 1993 Health Care Reform, he began grandly...

My fellow Americans, tonight we come together to write a new chapter in the American story. [...] From the settling of the frontier to the landing on the Moon, ours has been a continuous story of challenges defined, obstacles overcome, new horizons secured. That is what makes America what it is and Americans what we are. Now we are in a time of profound change and opportunity.

... to two paragraphs later eking out only a thin association: “This health care system of ours is badly broken, and it is time to fix it.” Hence, exceptionalism did not seem to flow extemporaneously in Clinton’s mind. Moreover, since he tended to use it mostly for effect and rhetorical patchwork, it was typically standard and often ill-integrated into his narratives. His exceptionalism also seems stilted because he apparently often found it hard to connect his ideas and policies to traditional Americanism. Like FDR, JFK, and LBJ, Clinton therefore many times had to stretch his rhetoric; as in 1997, when he challenged

[...] Americans in the arts and humanities to join with our fellow citizens to make the year 2000 a national celebration of the American spirit in every community, a celebration of our common culture in the century that has passed and in the new one to come in the new millennium, so that we can remain the world’s beacon not only of liberty but of creativity long after the fireworks have faded.

52 Ibid.
Nevertheless, to underline his centrism, Clinton frequently talked about traditional values and especially the primacy of family and community. He also used religion and U.S. history, as in his 1992 DNC Acceptance Speech when he alluded to both the Bible and John Winthrop by branding his policy program a “New Covenant.”

In the end, my fellow Americans, this New Covenant simply asks us all to be Americans again - old-fashioned Americans for a new time. Opportunity, responsibility, community. When we pull together, America will pull ahead. Throughout the whole history of this country, we have seen, time and time and time again, that when we are united we are unstoppable.54

Anyhow, Clinton’s use of globalist over exceptionalist and traditionalist parables seem to have increased over time. For instance, his second DNC Acceptance Speech is nearly devoid of exceptionalist views and even flat-out discounts the need for anchorage: “I love and revere the rich and proud history of America, and I am determined to take our best traditions into the future. But with all respect, we do not need to build a bridge to the past; we need to build a bridge to the future.”55 Next to a proper amount of exceptionalist clichés, this speech instead has a globalist ring to it: “Our rich texture of racial, religious, and political diversity will be a godsend in the 21st century. Great rewards will come to those who can live together, learn together, work together, forge new ties that bind together.”56 However, the 1990s would instead be divisive.

CULTURE WARS: PHASE II

One of the 1990s’ many paradoxes is that while U.S. culture consumed the world to such an extent that a French cultural minister said that a Disney World outside Paris would be a “cultural Chernobyl,” cultural fragmentation at home intensified. Next to long-term social and cultural trends discussed earlier, like people diverging into subcultures based on race, gender, age, and education, several specific circumstances caused this development. One was that the demise of Communism made it possible for Americans, for the first time since the 1920s, to focus more on what divided than unified them. Other causes were the advent of the Internet, a glut of new TV channels, and cheaper airfare, which led to an information and travel explosion that challenged traditional worldviews through a massive inflow of foreign ideas, tastes, and other impressions. Simultaneously, the number of Evangelical and Progressive Christians continued to grow, parallel with record numbers of Catholic, Muslim, and Hindu immigrants to the U.S.\(^58\)

However, by far, most important was that Baby Boomers “by conquering the academy, the media, the courts, and the Democratic Party [...] transformed America.”\(^59\) The maturing of this “sex, drugs, and rock ‘n roll” generation affected U.S. society more than any previous generation in at least two ways. First, the “postmodernist” views held by a sizeable minority of Boomers encouraged “deconstruction” of traditional institutions like the family, religion, and patriotism.\(^60\) Second, the cultural diversification they valued often ran contrary to the nationalization of issues like “abortion, affirmative action, art, censorship, evolution, family

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\(^{57}\) Quote from Herring, *Colony to Superpower*, 918.

\(^{58}\) Troy, *Age of Clinton*, 21.

\(^{59}\) Ibid, 53.

values, feminism, homosexuality, intelligence testing, media, multiculturalism, national history standards, pornography, school prayer, [and] sex education”\textsuperscript{61} that they demanded.

Subsequently, the Baby Boomers’ rise escalated the Culture Wars to new levels. Specifically, the effects of their pushing for reform of nearly everything convinced conservatives that the U.S. was turning into what one author calls a “Vulgaria, a land with no limits where nothing was sacred.”\textsuperscript{62} And given Americans’ proclivity for perfectionist thinking, both sides locked themselves into two camps whose leaders clung to a Reaganesque dream world on one side and questioned everything “typically American” to such an extent that some appeared anti-American on the other. For instance, for advocates of multiculturalism – for which “race is the source of culture, and since a person’s race is fixed and unchangeable, so also is a person’s culture” – it became dogma to oppose English as the official language, immigration control, and assimilation.\textsuperscript{63} Hence, this development bolstered the split between uncritical and critical patriotism mentioned earlier.

This development led to the formation of two discourses that had been in the making for half a century but now finally took firmer forms. On the left, as radical’s belief in positivism (and modernism generally) collapsed, “political correctness” became the norm. Initially, as a speech code from the 1970s intended only to evade language that could insult people because of sex, race, etc., it now turned into a tool for censoring rivals.\textsuperscript{64} In 1976, former Vice President Humphrey had already called attacks on welfare “a disguised new form of racism, a disguised new form of conservatism,”\textsuperscript{65} and by 1992, such comments had become so common that

\textsuperscript{61} Hartman, \textit{War for the Soul}, 1.
\textsuperscript{62} Troy, \textit{Age of Clinton}, 17, 69, 306ff.
\textsuperscript{63} Huntington, \textit{Who Are We}, 178-219; quote from 312.
\textsuperscript{64} For example, see Hicks, \textit{Explaining Postmodernism}, 84-134.
\textsuperscript{65} Quote from Frum, \textit{How We Got Here}, 346.
President Bush protested saying: “What began as a crusade for civility has soured into a cause of conflict and even censorship.” In the same way, when Clinton tried to find a working formulary for abortions by saying that he wanted abortions to be “safe, legal, and rare,” he was cursed by pro-choice people for giving in to the pro-life movement.

Congruently, as Conservatives felt that “PC” was used by teachers, journalists, and others to “shove liberalism down people’s throats,” Republicans chose a tough strategy to fight back against what they saw as assaults on all things American. For example, a handful of members regularly began to filibuster bills in the Senate, others questioned Democrats’ patriotism, and some, like Bush’s primary challenger Patrick Buchanan (b. 1938) in a thundering rank-closing speech at that year’s GOP convention, declared full-scale political war:

My friends, this election is about more than who gets what. It is about who we are. It is about what we believe, and what we stand for as Americans. There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as was the Cold War itself, for this war is for the soul of America. And in that struggle for the soul of America, Clinton & Clinton are on the other side, and George Bush is on our side.

Indeed, language like Buchanan’s was still rare, but it was spreading during the 1990s, not least through talk radio. The political language also hardened as Democrats began answering Republican charges about them betraying American values with labeling their opponents, e.g., “right-wing zealots,” “extremists,” and “homophobes.” Adding to this development on the

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67 Tomasky, Bill Clinton, 71. By that time extreme theories, like Leonard Jeffries Jr.’s notion that white “Ice Peoples” are inherently evil because they lack coloreds’ “Sun Peoples” melatonin levels, also gained support amongst academics. See Hartman, War for the Soul, 127ff.
68 For example, see Lynne V. Cheney, Telling the Truth: Why Our Culture and Our Country Have Stopped Making Sense – and What We Can Do About It (New York: Touchstone, 1995).
70 Kornacki, Red and the Blue, 37ff, 237-247; White, Values Divide, 65.
Republican side was a tendency to substitute – in the same way as they had abandoned ideological moderation for neoconservative theoretical purity – their traditional republican and individualistic heritage for a theocratic readiness to use the U.S. government “to impose their religious and moral viewpoints”\(^{71}\) on people. And indeed, Democrats now wanted to use the government to impose more federal legislation regarding various welfare issues, abortions, etc. Hence, in the 1990s, a never-before-seen nationalization of politics and political rhetoric took place that made U.S. political discourse much more European-like.

To summarize, while many Democrats gradually more avoided patriotic and exceptionalist semantics for ideological reasons, Republicans, by sticking to more traditional rhetoric, turned the latter into a counter form of “patriotic correctness” that similarly was used to shame opponents.\(^{72}\) In other words, the left and the right were no longer separated only by policy and ideals but by (lack of) exceptionalist language, making it hard for opponents sometimes even to understand each other. As a result, U.S. politics reached a flashpoint where it would not only sound like but become more polarized than Europe’s. Even if this would not be obvious until after the Iraq War in 2003, the importance of this is shown by the Republicans’ nationalizing of the 1994 midterms and their failure to win the 1996 Presidential Election.

**A TALE OF TWO ELECTIONS**

The story behind the GOP’s historic recapture of Congress in 1994 is complex, and Republicans’ language is only one piece of the puzzle. To argue that language decided the 1994 midterm

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\(^{71}\) Quote from Ibid, 99.

would therefore undoubtedly be to stretch it too far. Nevertheless, it did play a role. Basically, GOP candidates gained a prompt advantage by nationalizing the election because issues like taxes and crime and the language used to discuss them for voters are more exalting than “pork talk” concerning single districts and states. Speaker-to-be Newt Gingrich’s (b. 1943) *Contract with America* also hit a nerve:

This year’s election offers the chance, after four decades of one-party control, to bring to the House a new majority that will transform the way Congress works. That historic change would be the end of government that is too big, too intrusive, and too easy with the public’s money. It can be the beginning of a Congress that respects the values and shares the faith of the American family. Like Lincoln, our first Republican president, we intend to act “with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right.” To restore accountability to Congress. To end its cycle of scandal and disgrace. To make us all proud again of the way free people govern themselves.

Due to this language, the *Contract* was dismissed by Democrats as archaic and too radical, and Clinton happily attacked it as a “contract on America.” Nonetheless, partly because of the *Contract*, voters gave the GOP its most significant win in a midterm since 1946 by gaining 54 new seats in the House, eight new seats in the Senate, and flipping both chambers for the first time since 1954. Also, by winning local and state races, particularly in the South, the GOP sealed their takeover of this region.

Yet, given the shrinking impact of exceptionalism in the domestic sphere, this rhetoric strategy was problematic. Most noticeable is that because the *Contract* was written to appeal to midterm voters, which tend to be older, whiter, and more Conservative, it was ill-fit for presidential politics, where candidates normally “move to the center” to attract moderates. This

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came into play two years later when Clinton, after “reinventing” himself as a moderate, took on Republican contender for the presidency Bob Dole (b. 1923), who as Senate leader had also sort of reinvented himself by adapting to Gingrich’s combative style. However, since Dole was a moderate and a bland speaker, this latter move did not work well. As Clinton geared up towards victory, Dole came forward as a bitter voice of Reaganites, traditionalists, and others seeing “their country” dissolving in the decade’s maelstrom of social and cultural changes.

Emblematically, while Clinton talked about the Internet and making a second term “a bridge to the 21st century,” Dole looked backward:

Age has its advantages. Let me be the bridge to an America than only the unknowing call myth. Let me be the bridge to a time of tranquility, faith and confidence in action. And to those who say it was never so, that America’s not been better, I say you’re wrong. And I know because I was there. And I have seen it. And I remember. [...] I am here to say to America, do not abandon the great traditions that stretch to the dawn of our history. Do not topple the pillars of those beliefs – God, family, honor, duty, country – that have brought us through time, and time, and time, and time again.

Expectedly, in the materialistic and morally relativistic environment of the 1990s, Dole’s message did not strike a chord, and he lost decisively by 40.7 percent against Clinton’s 49.2 percent (with Ross Perot this time scoring 8.4 percent). Thus, the 1996 election – besides showing the significance of the economy and the power of incumbency in presidential elections – can be perceived as an indication of the growing weakness of exceptionalist-laden messages in a modern individualistic-hedonistic-cynical environment. Be that as it may, the growing rift

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between left and right showed itself in the GOP holding on to their majorities in the House and the Senate and Clinton not winning an absolute majority of the vote this time either.  

Finally, while the dot.com economy gave Clinton his 1996 victory, the result may also have been affected by the continuous politicization of media. As Boomers took over as editors, reporters, and news anchors, traditional journalism, which had slanted left since at least the 1960s, continued its drift and effectively offered support for Democrats like Clinton, e.g., by focusing on “soft” issues like health care. However, an alternative was taking form. Since the 1980s, Republicans had been able to count on support from a pool of think tanks, magazines, and talk radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh. Adding to this were now online sources like Drudge Report and Townhall on the Internet and – definitively most significant – the Fox News Channel. The latter’s launch in October 1996 did not affect the outcome of that year’s election, but it finally broke the age-old TV-news oligopoly of ABC, CBS, and NBC (plus CNN). Many of the channels’ hosts, like Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity, would from now argue for conservative (and libertarian) viewpoints by using exceptionalist slogans and language in studios draped in American imagery. Hence, the liberal media circle was partly squared.

Bush 43

Despite being a fellow Boomer, Clinton’s successor was very different. Born into a stable home in Midland, Texas, to patrician Northeastern parents, George W. Bush’s (b. 1946) youth was marked by access to money, power, and influence. He could, therefore, allow himself to take

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81 Ibid, 118ff, 152.
school and early adulthood less seriously than Clinton. However, like him, Bush developed a taste for politics early on, and after a period of drinking and drift, he became a born-again Christian. At that time, he also began to plot a political career for himself by running for Governor of Texas in 1994. However, many already suspected that his ultimate goal was to rectify his father’s 1992 loss by succeeding Clinton in the White House.\(^3\)

Despite being verbally challenged, Bush was an effective speaker with a more “blunt, unfussy, a little salty – Trumanesque”\(^4\) speaking style than his father’s. Likewise, as a born-again Christian, his ideological profile was sharper. Still, because Bush’s worldview “was shaped both by his father’s experiences and by his own religious faith,”\(^5\) his “Compassionate Conservatism” was in many ways practically identical to his father’s traditional republicanism. Announcing his candidacy, he said:

> [P]rosperity alone is simple materialism. Prosperity must have a greater purpose. The success of America has never been proven by cities of gold, but by citizens of character. Men and women who work hard, dream big, love their family, serve their neighbor.

Values that turn a piece of earth into a neighborhood, a community, a chosen nation.\(^6\)

Furthermore, by combining this “soft edge” with demands for deep tax cuts, Bush succeeded in partly reviving the Reagan Coalition. Moreover, even if he offered only a far cry of the Great Communicator’s exceptionalistic style, his unapologetic patriotism, and deep religiosity offered a brisk contrast to Clinton’s seeming histrionic style and globalism. Still, Bush was also an internationalist-minded free-trader who saw America as the world’s foremost

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defender of democracy and capitalism and only detested Clinton’s foreign policy for being trifling: “We must be selective in the use of our military precisely because America has greater responsibilities that cannot be slighted or compromised.”\textsuperscript{87} To set himself apart from his opponent, Vice President Al Gore (b. 1948), Bush, therefore, had to sound more anti-globalist than he was, which worked. In the end, by winning Florida with some mere 500+ votes, Bush eked out a super-slim 271 majority in the Electoral College.

However, the month-long recount in Florida following the election became a flashpoint for both Democrats, who came to see Bush as an illegitimate president, and Republicans, who thought that Gore was trying to steal the election. Thus, the partisan vitriol of the Clinton era – that in 1998 had gone from bad to worse through the Lewinsky-affair and the resulting impeachment process – carried over. And it was now deepened by cultural differences.\textsuperscript{88} After Clinton’s worldly manners, fluent rhetoric, and moderate policies, many could not stomach Bush’s cavalier style, Texas twang, and “reactionary and destructive”\textsuperscript{89} views. Others could not stand his foreign policy, because while Clinton had talked about the world in materialistic, agnostic, and multilateral terms, Bush talked about it in idealistic/exceptionalist, resilient, and unilateral ways.\textsuperscript{90} Moreover, Bush’s think-big attitude led him to allow hardliners to define his foreign policy, including representatives for a new, more ideologically rigid generation of neoconservatives that – despite a traditional liberal internationalist-activist ethos – appalled many as neo-isolationist.\textsuperscript{91} However, it would turn out to be precisely the opposite.

\textsuperscript{87} Quote from Beinart, \textit{Icarus Syndrome}, 317.
\textsuperscript{88} White, \textit{Values Divide}, 163-170.
\textsuperscript{90} Beinart, \textit{Icarus Syndrome}, 342f.
\textsuperscript{91} Daalder & Lindsay, \textit{America Unbound}, 49-60.
On September 11, 2001, when the New York World Trade Center vanished in a dust cloud so big that it could be spotted from the International Space Station, so did what was left of America’s “splendid isolation” from the world. As suicidal fanatics all of a sudden seemed to lurk everywhere, shock and panic set in, and millions of Americans’ worldview changed, at least temporarily. Most strikingly, nearly all social, cultural, and political divisions seemed to disappear as people united in ways far exceeding the usual “rally around the flag” reaction after more “natural” wars and catastrophes. Overnight the land was draped in Stars and Stripes, and a full year later, one poll showed that over 90 percent still felt proud of being Americans.

Naturally, in this environment, a renewed emphasis on American Exceptionalism swept the land, and Bush immediately found his voice. In one of his first comments, he said, “Freedom, itself, was attacked this morning by a faceless coward, and freedom will be defended.” And when he addressed the nation that evening from the Oval Office, he expounded upon this theme:

A great people has been moved to defend a great nation. Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve. America was targeted for attack because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining.

Thus, Bush chose to frame 9/11 not as an assault on symbols of the country’s military and economic might, but as an attack on American ideals and freedom in particular. This was also a message that he would stick with for seven years. For instance, that fall when he started a

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92 Herring, Colony to Superpower, 941f; Brooks, American Exceptionalism, 65ff.
93 Huntington, Who Are We, 273; White Values Divide, 197-202.
“Lessons of Liberty Initiative” to have veterans give patriotic speeches in schools, he praised the
“renewed spirit of patriotism,” and said that it was vital to realize why the attacks happened:

Our commitment to freedom has always made us a target of tyranny and intolerance. Anyone who sets out to destroy freedom must eventually attack America, because we’re freedom’s home. And we must always be freedom’s home and freedom’s defender. We must never flinch in the face of adversity, and we won’t.96

Still, Bush used such highbrow language frugally. Instead, he often seemed to have followed his folksy instincts and shifted to more common but still exceptionalistic language. For example, when touring the Pentagon the day after the attacks, he said: “Coming here makes me sad, on the one hand; it also makes me angry. Our country will, however, not be cowed by terrorists, by people who don’t share the same values we share, by people who are willing to destroy people’s lives because we embrace freedom.”97 A few days later, Bush also truly touched the soul of the nation when asked if he wanted to see Osama bin Laden dead: “I want him held – I want justice. There’s an old poster out West, as I recall, that said, ‘Wanted: Dead or Alive.'”98

Nevertheless, Bush’s real masterstroke was to claim that the U.S. would prevail because “Americans are generous and kind, resourceful and brave.”99 He would use this argument almost daily and, like Nixon, give speeches using the theme that the country’s greatness was a fixed but at times slumbering verity and that 9/11 stirred it anew: “We’re living through a unique moment in American history. This is a time of rediscovery, of heroism and sacrifice and duty and patriotism. These are core values of our country, and they’re being renewed. We found them

waiting for us just when we needed them.” Bush also made 9/11 intelligible by describing the War on Terrorism as a struggle between Good and Evil. In remarks at the National Cathedral three days after the attack, he said, “Our responsibility to history is already clear: To answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.” And in his 2002 State of the Union, he called Iraq, Iran, and North Korea “an axis of evil.”

Thus, Bush used the same language as FDR and Reagan in their battles with Fascism and Communism. A week after the attacks, he told Congress that Islamic terrorists were “the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century,” adding, “[E]very nation, in every region, now has a decision to make: Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” He also maintained that America had the right to demand such stances because of her unique role:

> Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom, the great achievement of our time and the great hope of every time, now depends on us. Our Nation – this generation – will lift a dark threat of violence from our people and our future. We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. We will not tire; we will not falter; and we will not fail.

Near the end of this speech, Bush even hinted that America was doing God’s work because even if “[t]he course of this conflict is not known [...] its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them.”

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104 Ibid.
TALK & EFFECTS

The policy Bush and his administration hammered out after 9/11 was to make such future catastrophes impossible by cementing America’s role as the world’s hegemon. To what extent neoconservatives formulated it is debated, but their influence on it is evident. When Bush presented his policy in June 2002, he first echoed President McKinley’s pledge from 1898 that the U.S. could not be imperialistic because “the American flag will stand not only for our power but for freedom.” He then summed up his views in three points. First, the U.S. has a right to take “the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans and confront the worst threats before they emerge” (i.e., to launch preemptive wars). Second, the U.S. military should be so strong that it makes the “destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limit rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace.”105 And third, America should spread democracy and capitalism to other countries.106 Bush also argued that U.S. world hegemony was morally right because it made the country safer and described the rationale for it in words that could almost have been lifted verbatim from a Woodrow Wilson speech:

The 20th century ended with a single surviving model of human progress, based on nonnegotiable demands of human dignity, the rule of law, limits on the power of the state, respect for women, and private property and free speech and equal justice and religious tolerance. America cannot impose this vision, yet we can support and reward governments that make the right choices for their own people.107

Based upon the liberal-neoconservative view of humans as naturally inclined towards freedom, this “Bush Doctrine” has appropriately been called “Wilsonianism in boots.”108 So, if

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106 Daalder & Lindsay, America Unbound, 12ff, 115-126; Walker, National Security, 267-277.
107 Ibid. Emphasis added.
108 Herring, Colony to Superpower, 944.
an active-inclusive form of American Exceptionalism can ever be said to define a moment in U.S. history, this is it; especially since, in the early 2000s, the parable about democracy being the way of the future was still alive and well. In his doctrine speech, for example, Bush chose to point out that he had just returned “from a new Russia, now a country reaching toward democracy and our partner in the war against terror.” He also stated because Chinese “leaders are discovering that economic freedom is the only lasting source of national wealth,” they too would soon accept that “social and political freedom is the only true source of national greatness.” 109

Above all, Bush’s confidence that “the human desire for freedom is universal” 110 steered his decisions to deploy U.S. forces long-term in Afghanistan and invade Iraq. As well, while his decision to organize a democracy in the first country was partly forced by circumstance, the decision to invade the second was a deliberate choice. 111 Because, even if Bush’s main argument for the Iraq War was Saddam Hussein’s alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMD), since the Gulf War in 1991, neoconservatives had convinced themselves that leaving the dictator in power had been a mistake. They now also believed that turning Iraq into a democracy would trigger a cascading revolt throughout the Middle East akin to Eastern Europe in 1989. 112 A few days before the war started, Bush revealed this was on his mind, too:

As we enforce the just demands of the world, we will also honor the deepest commitments of our country. Unlike Saddam Hussein, we believe the Iraqi people are

109 Bush, “Commencement Address,” (June 1, 2002).
111 Daalder & Lindsay, America Unbound, 12ff, 97-113, 127-142.
112 For example, a group of neoconservatives had in 1998 swayed Congress to approve and Bill Clinton to sign the Iraq Liberation Act that declared “that it should be the policy of the United States to seek to remove the Saddam Hussein regime from power in Iraq and to replace it with a democratic government.” H.R.4655 - Iraq Liberation Act of 1998105th Congress (1997-1998), accessed October 7, 2019, https://www.congress.gov/bill/105th-congress/house-bill/4655. See also Preble, Peace, War, and Liberty, 101f; and Kinzer, Overthrow, 280-299.
deserving and capable of human liberty. And when the dictator has departed, they can set an example to all the Middle East of a vital and peaceful and self-governing nation.\footnote{George W. Bush, “Address to the Nation on Iraq,” (March 17, 2003) \textit{APP}, accessed October 7, 2019, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/212791.}

The utopian reasoning behind this vision can be studied in neoconservative pundit Richard Pearl and Bush’s speechwriter David Frum’s \textit{An End to Evil} (2004). In this setting, it is sufficient to remember that Bush was a believer in the primacy of freedom before he made Iraq a fulcrum for a democratization of the Middle East and note that this led forward to a flawed nation-building process; arguably to some degree because he assumed that Iraqis’ desire for freedom would make it go smoothly.\footnote{Daalder & Lindsay, \textit{America Unbound}, 161-183.} In his 2004 State of the Union, he typically resounded the culturally blind assertion from Reagan’s speech to the British Parliament in 1982:

> We also hear doubts that democracy is a realistic goal for the greater Middle East, where freedom is rare. Yet it is mistaken and condescending to assume that whole cultures and great religions are incompatible with liberty and self-government. I believe that God has planted in every human heart the desire to live in freedom, and even when that desire is crushed by tyranny for decades, it will rise again.\footnote{George W. Bush, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” (January 20, 2004) \textit{APP}, accessed October 14, 2019, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/211969.}

A year later, in his second Inaugural Address, Bush went further by making worldwide democratization the lodestar for his second term: “The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world. America’s vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one.”\footnote{George W. Bush, “Inaugural Address,” (January 20, 2005) \textit{APP}, accessed October 6, 2019, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/214048.} And despite the fact no Founding Father had ever expressed belief in a policy for the active spread of the U.S. societal model, he said:
From the day of our founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this Earth has rights and dignity and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of heaven and Earth. Across the generations, we have proclaimed the imperative of self-government, because no one is fit to be a master and no one deserves to be a slave. Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation. It is the honorable achievement of our fathers. Now, it is the urgent requirement of our Nation’s security and the calling of our time.117

Moreover, to prove that this was no mere semantic shift, six months later Bush dispatched his new Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to Cairo to affirm that:

We should all look to a future when every government respects the will of its citizens – because the ideal of democracy is universal. For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East – and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people.118

However, just as when the military body count crept up during the Vietnam War, exceptionalist arguments for spending more “blood and treasure to bring democracy to Iraq”119 lost their sway. And this was far from the only sign that things started to shift. Two years later, neoconservative icon Jeane Kirkpatrick, in what turned out to be a posthumous book, not only broke definitively with the second generation of that movement by warning about an unelected “deep state” of foreign policy hawks and declared the hope for global democracy to be bunk. In addition, she ignited a blame-game about responsibility for the Iraq debacle.120 Thus, overall, Bush 43 and his administration’s overreach truncated the hubris amongst D.C. elites about America’s role in the world and portended a broader reaction against the post-World War II

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117 Ibid.
119 Herring, *Colony to Superpower*, 956.
paradigm down the road. However, first, we should study how Bush managed to use exceptionalism to win reelection.

DOMESTIC EFFECTS

As 9/11 brought domestic politics to a near halt, Bush, in contrast to his father after the Gulf War, succeeded more long-term in employing the patriotic energy created by the event for political gains. For example, he used the dread it created to push through the Patriot Act. Like the Alien and Sedition Act of 1798 and the Espionage Act of 1917, it contained perilous edicts for civil liberties that under normal conditions would never have been accepted. All Bush needed to do was to say things such as that it was as a crucial upgrade of laws “written in the era of rotary telephones” representing “a firm resolve to uphold and respect the civil liberties guaranteed by the Constitution while dealing swiftly and severely with terrorists.” Still, some people opposing the Patriot Act used exceptionalist language too. For example, Democratic Wisconsin Senator Russ Feingold, the lone member in that house to vote against it, said:

The Founders who wrote our Constitution and Bill of Rights exercised that vigilance even though they had recently fought and won the Revolutionary War. They did not live in comfortable and easy times of hypothetical enemies. They wrote a Constitution of limited powers and an explicit Bill of Rights to protect liberty in times of war, as well as in times of peace.

He also delivered a warning about where the Act risked taking the country:

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121 Ball, *USA Patriot Act*, 4-8.
Of course, there is no doubt that if we lived in a police state, it would be easier to catch terrorists. [...] But that probably would not be a country in which we would want to live. And that would not be a country for which we could, in good conscience, ask our young people to fight and die. In short, that would not be America. Preserving our freedom is one of the main reasons that we are now engaged in this new war on terrorism. We will lose that war without firing a shot if we sacrifice the liberties of the American people.  

And Feingold was not alone. Former Vice President Al Gore accused Bush of saying that “we have to sacrifice traditional freedoms in order to be safe from terrorists,” and some GOP members of Congress who first supported the Act soon changed their minds. Captivatingly, exceptionalist arguments were also often used in local statements regarding the Patriot Act. Like Idaho County, Idaho, which passed a declaration stating: “The Bill of Rights and the Constitution for these United States of America, which is the Supreme Law of the Land, shall be upheld and enforced within the boundaries of Idaho County; repugnant acts, ordinances, or regulations of government in clear contravention notwithstanding.”

Still, patriotic sentiments were naturally most successfully used by Bush, who as the pontifex maximus of American Exceptionalism could use and tweak them at will. Besides the Patriot Act, one example of this is how he used such language to mobilize Republicans before the 2002 midterms. He began this work in January, in his State of the Union:

America has need of idealism and courage because we have essential work at home, the unfinished work of American freedom. In a world moving toward liberty, we are determined to show the meaning and promise of liberty. In America’s ideal of freedom, citizens find the dignity and security of economic independence instead of laboring on the edge of subsistence. This is the broader definition of liberty that motivated the Homestead Act, the Social Security Act, and the GI bill of rights. And now we will extend this vision by reforming great institutions to serve the needs of our time.
Hence, what Bush did was to seek “public support at home by making the war against terrorism a campaign about defending traditional [American] values.” And by doing so, he continued to blur the line between exceptionalist and Republican talk by giving speeches that contained exceptionalist-sounding arguments for voting for his Compassionate Conservatism policies:

I’m traveling this country, and I can tell you, the American spirit is alive and well, the spirit of people understanding that to be an American means you’ve got to serve something greater than yourself. The spirit of America says that we’re willing to sacrifice for our freedoms. And the spirit of America says that you take nothing in democracy for granted. You see, if you’re eligible to vote, you have an obligation to vote. That’s what the spirit of America calls for.

Given the circumstances, this worked well. For the first time since 1934, the White House party picked up seats in both the House and the Senate. To what degree precisely this result can be ascribed to Bush’s exceptionalist language, in relation to terrorism and/or other issues, is as always impossible to judge precisely, but, given the data available – plus the extreme rarity of such results – one could say it played a role. Contemporaries also noted Bush’s use of patriotic-exceptionalist language to score political gains in 2002, and the campaign today stands as a portal leading forward to the politically roughest period in U.S. history since the Civil War. The following is, therefore, crucial to understand what would happen next.

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128 White, Values Divide, 204f.
The 2004 presidential campaign became one of the fiercest in the modern era. The reason for this was that the fervor over the victory in Iraq in March 2003 first gave way to confusion over not finding WMDs, then angst over growing U.S. casualties, and finally anger. Specifically, for many on the left, the Iraq War aroused memories of the Vietnam War, the specter of big business (particularly the oil industry and the military-industrial complex), and Watergate. At the same time, people on the right viewed criticism of the war as betraying the nation, not supporting the troops, and being weak on terrorism. That such discord erupted less than two years after 9/11 indicates that the ultimate question was not the war itself but ideological grievances. In short, liberals viewed Republicans as supporters of the “old” nationalistic, imperialistic, bigoted, racist, backward U.S. that many believed had ended with Clinton while at the same time as more and more conservatives saw Democrats as weak, indecisive, and un-American.131

However, it is crucial to notice that many Democrats were now almost as “neocon” on foreign policy as Bush and his administration. In the 1990s, Bill and Hillary Clinton, cabinet members like Secretary of State Albright, and large parts of the party’s Congressional delegation had accepted the U.S.’s role as the only superpower and did not shun using its military might to affect world events. Thus, what differed now was mostly only rhetoric. For example, in 2005,

when Iraq had spiraled almost out of control, former Vice President and Reagan’s 1984 contender Walter Mondale opened a speech by criticizing Bush for “hubristic ideas of American exceptionalism” just to finish with calling for some moderations:

I’m not a pacifist. I think there are times when we need military forces. I think America is truly exceptional and I think our ideals are what make us exceptional. But we still have to be reasonable and sensible, and we have to know about other nations and we have to understand the history of empire. If we do those things, we can really make a difference in the world, and I think that’s what the world needs now. The world wants us, they starve for our leadership, but they want it to be responsible leadership. So I hope when many of you students graduate, you can go out and help build and strengthen that indispensable, exceptional America—that city upon a hill—that the world needs so desperately.¹³²

Nevertheless, since campaigns enhance differences, however small, the 2004 election became a referendum about American Exceptionalism. In this battle, Bush represented a traditional but activist form of the concept and Massachusetts Senator John Kerry (b. 1943) a variant induced by globalism and a European-like (i.e., modest) patriotism. Bush and Kerry also contrasted personally as much as Reagan and Mondale had in 1984, and fundamental differences between them were evident on nearly every issue. Front and center, though, was the Iraq War, for which Bush refused to express regrets. He maintained that the invasion had been necessary to make sure that Saddam Hussein had had no WMDs and that the war had been in line with American values. In the first presidential debate, he said:

The way to make sure that we succeed is to send consistent, sound messages to the Iraqi people that when we give our word, we will keep our word; that we stand with you; that we believe you want to be free. And I do. I believe that the 25 million people, the vast majority, long to have elections. I reject this notion – and I’m not suggesting that my

opponent says it, but I reject the notion that some say that if you’re Muslim you can’t be free; you don’t desire freedom. I disagree, strongly disagree with that.133

By contrast, Kerry, who, like most leading Democrats, had initially supported the war but turned against it when it became politically taxing, struggled to explain himself.134 His chief defense was that Bush had violated the mandate given by Congress to use force against Iraq, but he also criticized the president’s unilateral foreign policy in general. And when compelled by the debate moderator to explain his view on preemptive wars, he got into trouble:

No President, through all of American history, has ever ceded, and nor would I, the right to preempt in any way necessary to protect the United States of America. But if and when you do it […] you’ve got to do in a way that passes the test, that passes the global test, where your countrymen, your people, understand fully why you’re doing what you’re doing and you can prove to the world that you did it for legitimate reasons.135

Sensing that this demand for a “global test” equated to a gaff, Bush responded: “You take preemptive action if you pass a global test? My attitude is you take preemptive action in order to protect the American people, that you act in order to make this country secure.”136

Thus, by depicting Kerry as prepared to limit national sovereignty, Bush arguably struck what most Americans, after centuries of exceptionalist/exemptionalist rhetoric, perceived as solid leadership and American prerogatives. For the duration of the campaign, therefore, he could depict himself as a strongman deeply dedicated to the country’s mission, saying things like:

Freedom is on the march, and America and the world are more secure because of it. I believe in my heart of hearts that every person in the world desires to live in a free

134 Beinart, Icarus Syndrome, 347f.
135 Ibid.
136 Ibid.
society. I believe this because I understand that freedom is not America’s gift to the world; freedom is the Almighty God’s gift to each man and woman of this world.\(^\text{137}\)

Whatever degree Kerry’s answers on this and other issues\(^\text{138}\) contributed to Bush’s reelection can be debated, but they added to his margin enough to make him the first president since 1988 to win a majority of the popular vote.\(^\text{139}\) They probably also aided in expanding the GOP’s majorities in Congress, giving the party its strongest hold over the federal government since 1928. Directly after the election, a common picture was therefore that Bush had turned the Democrats into “the party of minorities and metropolitan areas.”\(^\text{140}\) However, his and the GOP’s victory in 2004 rested upon a few million swing-voters whose ideological beliefs and faithfulness at the polls were flimsy.\(^\text{141}\) Indeed, already in 2006, they handed Congress over to the Democrats and, two years later, vote heavily for Barack Obama.

In hindsight, the mixture of losses and victories between 2000 and 2006 brought long-term consequences for both parties and the country. On the left, first Gore’s and then Kerry’s

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\(^{138}\) Kerry would assist in cementing Bush’s image as a strong leader also by delivering confusing answers on other questions like abortions, stem-cell research, and same-sex marriages. And since such issues were parts of the Culture Wars, they came to play a big role since Bush could mobilize millions of traditionalist voters simply by offering clear-cut stances. For instance, while he simply said *No* to same-sex marriages on religious grounds, Kerry, to explicate his more liberal view with exceptionalist-sounding arguments, offered a blurry, meandering answer: “The President and I share the belief that marriage is between a man and a woman. I believe that. I believe marriage is between a man and a woman. But I also believe that because we are the United States of America, we’re a country with a great, unbelievable Constitution, with rights that we afford people, that you can’t discriminate in the workplace. You can’t discriminate in the rights that you afford people. You can disallow someone the right to visit their partner in a hospital. You have to allow people to transfer property, which is why I’m for partnership rights and so forth.” Quote from George W. Bush, “Presidential Debate in Tempe, Arizona,” (October 13, 2004) APP, accessed December 3, 2019, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/212983. See also Mark J. Rozell & Debasree Das Gupta, “The Values Vote? Moral Issues and the 2004 Elections,” in John C. Green, Mark J. Rozell & Clyde Wilcox (ed.), *The Values Campaign: The Christian Right and the 2004 Elections* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006), 11-21.

\(^{139}\) Regarding the size of the “value vote” see Green, Rozell & Wilcox (ed.), *Values Campaign*, passim, and Russell Muirhead et al, “Religion in the 2004 Presidential Election” in Sabato (ed.), *Divided States of America*; 221-242.

\(^{140}\) Charles E. Cook, “Conclusion” in Ibid, 296.

defeat triggered some to pass on their distaste for Bush to the country, or at least its “red” parts. One indicator of this is that the number of Democratic voters declaring themselves to be “extremely proud” of being American began to drop from over 50 percent towards 22 percent in 2019.142 What is more, an economic crisis would soon convince liberals that the time for radical change had finally arrived. On their side, millions of Republicans became convinced that the Democratic Party had turned so far left that they – as Reagan had joked – had left the U.S. The GOP was also so ossified by ideological (and religious) rigorousness and a “rule or ruin”143 mentality that not even the 2006 and 2008 losses made rethinking possible, disregarding growing grassroots opposition on issues like trade and wars. Superficially, on these issues while the base started to look towards their party’s protectionist, isolationist past and an inactive form of American Exceptionalism, its leadership remained internationalist free traders.

To finish this section, as Bush’s tenure drew to close and 9/11 began to fade into history, the focus shifted towards the Great Recession; the burst of an over thirty-year-old housing bubble that quickly turned into a political crisis as well.144 As what for most Americans was the very core of their American Dream – a good-paying job and a big house – suddenly became threatened, the specter from the 1970s about the U.S. being in irreversible decline returned. And since this in turn put acute attention on the eternal question of whether the country needed to return to its roots or change to recover – and polarization had made bipartisan cooperation almost impossible – the parties continued to move further towards their ideological extremes.

143 See White, Values Divide, 97.
144 Johan Norberg, Financial Fiasco: How America’s Infatuation With Homeownership and Easy Money Created the Financial Crisis (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 2012); Brooks, American Exceptionalism, 1ff; White, Barack Obama’s America, 1-12.
Barack Obama (b. 1961) owns one of the most unforeseen backgrounds of all U.S. Presidents. He was the son of a white, atheistic, liberal mother from Kansas and a left-wing Muslim father from Kenya that grew up in Hawaii, spent part of his youth in Indonesia, and worked as a community organizer in Chicago. Moreover, he became the first president to have grown up in the 1960s and 1970s, when U.S. society was marked not only by the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and Watergate but economic stagflation, political malaise, and cultural upheaval. However, instead of becoming a regular activist, Obama developed an academic mindset that made him more of an observer of than participant in society, which would serve him well as a student of law and history (but sometimes create problems for him as a politician).

One could say Obama has an elitist streak that convinced him “if you could just get enough smart people in a room, they could figure out a solution to whatever the problem [is] and the public would accept it.” However, at the same time, it seems his mindset is a byzantine mix of James Madison’s republicanism, John Dewey’s pragmatism, Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian realism, and Saul Alinsky’s bent for social action. Among other things, this makes Obama dismissive of the notion of “Archimedean vantage points” from where scientists, ideologues, or others can reach absolute truths, which in turn makes his worldview relativistic and oxymoronic (according to ideological standards).

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148 For a more elaborate analysis of Obama’s worldview, see Kloppenberg, Reading Obama, passim.
nature but being optimistic about reaching social improvements through governmental programs prunes his views on both the primacy of politics and civic society. This mix also makes him a political moderate, even if sometimes as a candidate gave voice to truly radical ideals and as president was prone to habitual liberal actions like economic stimulus packages.  

Similarly, Obama’s religious views are complicated. As an adult, he became a member of the Trinity United Church of Christ on Chicago’s South Side and often expressed a positive view of religion’s role in society. However, his father’s heritage and Indonesian experience, plus an apparent interest in *philosophia perennis*, also make him attentive to Islam; a fact that has nurtured conspiracy theories about him, e.g., being a closet Muslim or a Manchurian candidate. Concerns about his “true Americanness” on the right also made him as hard to swallow as Bush had been on the left. Nevertheless, in 2008 Obama enthused millions in ways the country had not seen since JFK, creating a form of “Obamamania” that borderlined rock star status. However, he appeared just as distressing for nearly, which indicates that his persona and/or message deeply affected people’s imaginations.

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149 Obama once noticed that the “law of love” is hard to follow because “we are fallible; we make mistakes and fall victim to the temptations of pride and power and, sometimes, evil. Even those of us with the best of intentions will at times fail to right the wrongs before us.” Barack Obama, “Remarks on Accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo,” December 10, 2009) APP, accessed January 8, 2020, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/287562.

150 Obama once summarized his view on politics as follows: “[F]ulfilling America’s promise will require more than just money. It will require a renewed sense of responsibility from each of us to recover what John F. Kennedy called our “intellectual and moral strength.” Yes, government must lead on energy independence, but each of us must do our part to make our homes and businesses more efficient. Yes, we must provide more ladders to success for young men who fall into lives of crime and despair. But we must also admit that programs alone can’t replace parents; that government can’t turn off the television and make a child do her homework; that fathers must take more responsibility for providing the love and guidance their children need.” Barack Obama, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in Denver: ‘The American Promise,’” (August 28, 2008) APP, accessed December 15, 2019, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/278860.

151 For example, in 2006, Obama said “secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square.” Quote from E.J. Dionne Jr., & Joy-Ann Reid (ed.), *We Are the Change We Seek: The Speeches of Barack Obama* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 30.

To cut to the heart of the matter, Obama’s background and philosophical and political views permit him to be more precise and candid about his belief in American Exceptionalism than most modern Democrats. Actually, he may have used exceptionalist words and themes more than all other Democratic presidents since JFK combined. Nonetheless, his exceptionalism seems best classified as broad but thin. Specifically, Obama’s life story persuades him to define America as a unique place with unrivaled advantages, as in his keynote address for John Kerry in 2004:

I stand here today, grateful for the diversity of my heritage, aware that my parents’ dreams live on in my precious daughters. I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that, in no other country on earth, is my story even possible. Tonight, we gather to affirm the greatness of our nation, not because of the height of our skyscrapers, or the power of our military, or the size of our economy. Our pride is based on a very simple premise, summed up in a declaration made over two hundred years ago, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

As president, he would also continue to express this view, stating things like, “America remains the one indispensable nation in world affairs, and as long as I’m President, I intend to keep it that way.” However, it is essential to note that Obama mostly speaks in the exceptionalist tradition of JFK, usually stressing the collective story of American history:

Each time I look at [the American] flag, I’m reminded that our destiny is stitched together like those 50 stars and those 13 stripes. No one built this country on their own. This Nation is great because we built it together. This Nation is great because we worked as a team. This Nation is great because we get each other’s backs. And if we hold fast to that truth, in this moment of trial, there is no challenge too great, no mission too hard. As long as

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153 For a historical analysis of Obama’s use of the American Dream, see John Kenneth White, “The Presidency and the Making of the American Dream” in White & Hanson, American Dream, 27ff.
we are joined in common purpose, as long as we maintain our common resolve, our journey moves forward, and our future is hopeful, and the state of our Union will always be strong.\footnote{Barack Obama, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” (January 24, 2012) \textit{APP}, accessed January 11, 2020, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/299426.}

Thus, Obama, at the same time as he regularly uses exceptionalist themes and arguments, does typify the modern, liberal reading of American Exceptionalism that considers the U.S.’s founding documents and institutions to be “stained and imperfect” (e.g., because they accept slavery) and that it is a political task is “to purify and perfect their core ideas and purposes.”\footnote{Philip S. Gorski & William McMillian, “Barack Obama and American Exceptionalism,” in Hoover (ed,), \textit{Religion and American Exceptionalism}, 44.}

Because of this, Obama often discusses the negative sides of America. Predictably, his major grievance is racism, but he also points out prejudices against women, gays, and immigrants, as well as numerous social, economic, and other concerns. In other words, he partly reflected the ever-harsher view of the U.S. amongst some since the 1970s that has turned into the WOKE-movement, which focuses on what sets people apart and ideas that in many ways makes it the very opposite of American Exceptionalism. As a candidate, Obama also promised to transform the nation by, e.g., reforming the economy and education, investing in research, protecting workers’ rights, ending poverty, etc. And he resounded FDR’s view of why the government can be used for such endeavors:

The genius of our founders is that they designed a system of government that can be changed. And we should take heart, because we’ve changed this country before. In the face of tyranny, a band of patriots brought an Empire to its knees. In the face of secession, we unified a nation and set the captives free. In the face of Depression, we put people back to work and lifted millions out of poverty. We welcomed immigrants to our shores, we opened railroads to the west, we landed a man on the moon, and we heard a King’s call to let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream. Each and every time, a new generation has risen up and done what’s needed to be done. Today we are called once more – and it is time for our generation to answer that call. For
that is our unyielding faith – that in the face of impossible odds, people who love their country can change it.\textsuperscript{158}

This is the left-wing form of Lockeanism discussed earlier, and as Obama’s victory in 2008 shows, it can be highly electorally useful in the American context in times of economic distress.

Still, Obama’s view of human nature sets him apart from modern liberals by conceding that societal improvements cannot be reached primarily through government actions but by changes in culture and discourse. One of his main strategies to do this is to inspire people by embracing exceptionalist optimism. For instance, in 2007, Obama declared he was running for the presidency “to keep the American Dream alive for those who still hunger for opportunity, who still thirst for equality.”\textsuperscript{159} Likewise, the following year, after losing the New Hampshire primary to Hillary Clinton (b. 1947), he appealed to disappointed supporters by stroking Americans’ optimism in what became his iconic “Yes, we can!” speech.\textsuperscript{160}

Language like this is key to understanding Obama’s qualities and successes as a public speaker and politician. In a few words, for people on the left, that for ideological and other reasons had earlier been unable or unwilling to relish exceptionalist talk, he sounded like a redeemer, while for people on the right, who demand a sizable amount of patriotism in their presidents, he at least sounded acceptable. Still, for some, this was not enough, and one reason for this is arguably Obama’s tendency to deliver lectures that, for many, sounded more like


academic jargon than love of country. For example, in 2008, when his candidacy was threatened by videotapes of his Chicago pastor Jeremiah Wright voicing anti-American ideas, he said:

“We the people, in order to form a more perfect union.” Two hundred and twenty-one years ago, in a hall that still stands [in Philadelphia], a group of men gathered and, with these simple words, launched America’s improbable experiment in democracy. Farmers and scholars; statesmen and patriots who had traveled across an ocean to escape tyranny and persecution finally made real their declaration of independence at a Philadelphia convention that lasted through the spring of 1787. The document they produced was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation’s original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least twenty more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations. Of course, the answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution – a Constitution that had at is very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty, and justice, and a union that could be and should be perfected over time. And yet words on a parchment would not be enough to deliver slaves from bondage, or provide men and women of every color and creed their full rights and obligations as citizens of the United States.¹⁶¹

And indeed, this passage scores 36.2 on Flesh Reading Ease Test, meaning “Difficult to read” and 16.2 on Flesch-Kincade Grade Level Test, meaning “College Graduate and above.”¹⁶²

In the same way, Obama’s view of the Constitution as an unfinished “long-running conversation,” his readiness to let “our values [...] be tested against fact and experience,” and his view of the U.S. as an ethnic patchwork rather than one distinct culture do not sound acceptable for conservatives who generally tend to have an “originalist” view on the Constitution and relish social and cultural harmony.¹⁶³ Moreover, some of Obama’s political ideas foster suspicion, like in his 2008 DNC Acceptance Speech when he delivered what can be interpreted as the most sweeping critique of the country’s economic regime made by a major presidential candidate

¹⁶² Test at: https://readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-formula-tests.php.
¹⁶³ Quotes from Kloppenberg, Reading Obama, 153, 163. For an intellectual anatomy of American conservative thinking, see Russell Kirk’s Conservative Mind.
since George McGovern. Such comments also offered easy openings for his opponent John McCain (1936-2018), who in his RNC Acceptance Speech could hit many exceptionalist chords by contrasting his policies with Obama’s:

We’re going to recover the people’s trust by standing up again to the values Americans admire. [...] In this country, we believe everyone has something to contribute and deserves the opportunity to reach their God-given potential, from the boy whose descendants arrived on the Mayflower to the Latina daughter of migrant workers. We’re all God’s children, and we’re all Americans. We believe – we believe in low taxes, spending discipline, and open markets. We believe in rewarding hard work and risk-takers and letting people keep the fruits of their labor. We believe [...] in a strong defense, work, faith, service, a culture of life [...] personal responsibility, the rule of law, and judges who dispense justice impartially and don’t legislate from the bench. We believe in the values of families, neighborhoods, and communities. We believe in a government that unleashes the creativity and initiative of Americans, government that doesn’t make your choices for you, but works to make sure you have more choices to make for yourself.

Also, during the 2008 campaign, a comment made by Obama positing “I think when you spread the wealth around, it’s good for everybody,”165 made it easy for conservative pundits to attack him for being a socialist.

However, Obama typically sounded moderate, and his slogans Hope! and Change! that were chosen to sound optimistic were also vague enough to enthuse and reassure. Moreover, he managed to “fashion himself as conciliator, a post-partisan, sensible centrist whose appealing manner, lack of ideological passion, and absence from the red-hot political fights of the last two decades would allow him to bridge the political divide in Washington.”166 Therefore, on

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164 Obama stated that John McCain for decades had “subscribed to that old, discredited Republican philosophy – give more and more to those with the most and hope that prosperity trickles down to everyone else. In Washington, they call this the Ownership Society, but what it really means is – you’re on your own. Out of work? Tough luck. No health care? The market will fix it. Born into poverty? Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps – even if you don’t have boots. You’re on your own.” Obama, “Address at the National Constitution Center,”(March 18, 2008).
Election Night, he won a significant – but given the economic crisis not historically overwhelming – victory. Even so, with 53 percent of the popular vote, 365 electoral votes, and the Democrats adding to their already large majorities in Congress, it was the closest to a landslide the country had come since 1988.\textsuperscript{167} Nevertheless, Obama would quickly run into a string of exceptionalist-fueled firestorms.\textsuperscript{168}

**DOMESTIC POLITICS: PUSHING FORWARD**

Given the political resentment, economic bedlam, and military setbacks since 2005, the first days of Obama’s presidency seemed to confirm forecasts that his reign would usher in a new era. For a moment, the nation came together, the new president’s ratings went sky high, and enthusiasm about what he could accomplish was nearly boundless. For example, some pundits forecasted that he would bring an end to neoliberalism and neoconservatism, and both at home and abroad, hopes were expressed that he – by expanding the welfare state and bringing an end to the country’s “imperialistic” behavior and American Exceptionalism – would turn the U.S. into a more regular Western country.\textsuperscript{169}

However, as revealed by their ideological nature, such predictions were political, not comprehensive. It also quickly became apparent that, in truth, Obama had nothing to offer but classic Keynesian policies, meaning stimulus packages with more political interference, more spending, higher taxes, and deeper debt. In his first State of the Union, he even admitted as much by saying that he had signed his American Recovery and Reinvestment Act “not because I...


\textsuperscript{168} Rasmussen & Schoen, *Mad as Hell*, 218-223.

believe in bigger Government – I don’t – not because I’m not mindful of the massive debt we’ve inherited – I am.” In addition, Obama backpedaled from protectionist nods he had made during the campaign by promising to stick with free trade:

[T]o respond to an economic crisis that is global in scope, we are working with the nations of the G-20 to restore confidence in our financial system, avoid the possibility of escalating protectionism, and spur demand for American goods in markets across the globe. For the world depends on us having a strong economy, just as our economy depends on the strength of the world’s.\(^{170}\)

Instead, he promised to use U.S. power, wealth, and influence to continue the globalization process: “For in our hands lies the ability to shape our world for good or for ill.”

Now, this was hardly the fundamental change many had expected, and Obama’s honeymoon effectively ended only a few days later, when CNBC business commentator Rick Santelli accused one of his plans (to prop up the housing market with federal subsidies) of being un-American. Speaking from the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, he fumed: “This is America! How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor’s mortgage that has an extra bathroom and can’t pay their bills?” He also said: “We’re thinking of having a Chicago Tea Party in July,” and “I’ll tell you what, if you read our founding fathers, people like Benjamin Franklin and Jefferson... What we’re doing in this country now is making them roll over in their graves.”\(^{171}\)

As this spark went viral via media such as Drudge Report, and thanks to a public rebuke from the White House Press Secretary, what can be described as a political wildfire spread across the nation.\(^{172}\) Only a week later, Tea Party rallies took place in some 40 cities where people

protested against government spending, stimulus bills, and bank bailouts and demanded a return to free-market policies, budget discipline, and other principles they understood had once made America great. These protests were also followed by manifestations, e.g., on Tax Day April 15th and a “9/12” event led by Fox News firebrand Glenn Beck in Washington, D.C. In addition, everything from the movement’s name, via participants’ penchant to dress up in Colonial uniforms, to their waving of “Don’t Tread on Me” flags indicated strict confidence in American Exceptionalism.173 Other evidence for this is that “Constitution talk” flooded Tea Party gatherings, and scholars have concluded that “Tea Partiers are ‘historical fundamentalists’ who project directly accessible and unchangeable meanings onto past events and documents.”174

Now, had the Tea Party’s demands been limited to more laissez-faire, lower taxes, and curbed government spending, it could – as was widely done by Democrats and various media – have been written off as an astroturfing event staged by traditional right-wing forces. However, even if such groups soon overtook the movement, it was indeed born as a spontaneous movement attracting broad support from Independents and even some Democrats and driven by what can be called exceptionalist angst. This is mirrored in the typical call “I want my country back!” 175 and in that the movement reflected widely held sentiments. For example, in March 2009, one poll showed that 55 percent of Americans saw “big government” as the main threat to their country, while only 32 percent pointed to “big business.”176

Furthermore, many Tea Party activists supported protectionist and isolationist thinking that had had a decent foothold within the Democratic Party for more than half a century but

175 For details about the Tea Party’s development, see Ibid and Rasmussen & Schoen, Mad as Hell, both passim.
176 Rasmussen & Schoen, Mad as Hell, 72.
existed only as grapevine chatter within the GOP. More precisely, one 2010 poll found that 61 percent of Tea Party supporters believed that trade deals hurt the U.S. (compared to 53 percent of all respondents) and that this trend was extra strong among Republicans, who generally had been free traders since at least the 1960s. Another sign that an atmospheric change was taking place is that talking heads like TV-anchor Lou Dobbs and New York billionaire Donald Trump spoke – more vehemently than ever – not only about governmental waste, fraud, and abuse but the need for “fair” rather than free trade. Still, the Democrats, now controlling all three government branches, dismissed such signs and moved on with fixing what they saw as the last “unfinished business from the New Deal era.”

THE “OBAMACARE” DEBATE

As a bill centered on achieving universal health care by compelling all Americans to buy health insurance, the Affordable Care Act (ACA) became extremely popular on the left. However, most Americans instead came to view it as a threat to their own health care plans, a breach of privacy, and a historic break with the U.S. political tradition. Thus, the ACA added fuel to the exceptionalist fire. For example, some 80 notable conservatives protested the bill by signing the Mount Vernon Statement, which became an exercise in exceptionalistic poetry in which they recommitted themselves “to the ideas of the American Founding.” Moreover, in Florida, a

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178 Tomasky, *Bill Clinton*, 47.
180 The full text of the statement reads: “We recommit ourselves to the ideas of the American Founding. Through the Constitution, the Founders created an enduring framework of limited government based on the rule of law. They sought to secure national independence, provide for economic opportunity, establish true religious liberty and
U.S. District Court justice dismissed the centerpiece of the bill as unconstitutional: “If Congress penalizes a passive individual for failing to [buy health insurance] the enumerations of powers on the Constitution would have been in vain” and the country “would have a Constitution in name only. Surely this is not what the Founding Fathers could have intended.” Technically, this last comment can be classified as legal originalism only, but one could also easily see it as an expression of the judge’s will to stay with the country’s exceptionalist qualities.

The ACA is also an example of the exceptionalist habit amongst U.S. politicians, journalists, and others not to use foreign examples as positive arguments. While opponents flooded the country with warnings that the bill would turn America into a new Sweden, France, or Canada, in his crucial speech to Congress on the subject, Obama only referenced one foreign country’s healthcare system and did so negatively, by promising that the bill would not create Canadian-like health care. Furthermore, as the debate commenced, angry people began to swarm lawmakers’ regular August town hall meetings, and by now, it is clear that the GOP and the Tea Party had managed, in less than two years, to change political discourse. A sign that Democrats had gone too far is also that, in January 2010, in a special election in deep-blue

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181 Quotes from Brooks, American Exceptionalism, 28f.
Massachusetts, Republican Scott Brown was elected to the U.S. Senate, depriving the Democrats of their filibuster-safe super-majority in that chamber. The following November, the GOP also won the House by winning 63 seats, plus six new Senators and around 700 state legislators.\(^{183}\)

Furthermore, during the fall of 2011, the exceptionalist uproar on the right got a mirror image in Occupy Wall Street on the left. It was a similarly spontaneous movement whose mostly young members protested that Obama did not change the country fast enough and demanded, e.g., higher taxes, more regulations, and higher minimum wages. The faction was numerically small compared to the Tea Party. However, it did reflect the left-wing form of American populism that sought to improve society through “more government intervention, regulation, ownership, and control.”\(^{184}\) It had been around since the late 1800s but by and large had been successfully contained by the Democratic Party, and now many on the left – and especially Baby Boomers with memories of “the good old days” – saw the OWS’ as a “new 1968” and hailed its activists talk about standing up for the “99 percent” against crony capitalists and others that they believed damaged America.\(^{185}\)

In December that year, Obama added to this fever when, like Theodore Roosevelt, he went to Osawatomie, Kansas, and criticized the present U.S. economic system by describing “trickle-down theory” as a system that “fits well on a bumper sticker [but] doesn’t work.” Instead, he posed a vision based on the communitarian interpretation of Locke described earlier, “where everyone in America gets a fair shot at success.”\(^{186}\) However, few noticed that OWS

\(^{183}\) Balz, *Collision 2012*, 35.
\(^{184}\) Rasmussen & Schoen, *Mad as Hell*, 22.
often talked about the same problems and shared problem descriptions with the Tea Party. For example, both groups blamed de-industrialization, falling wages, and unemployment on free trade and globalization and criticized cronyism on Wall Street and in Washington, D.C., alike. Hence, similar worldviews were suddenly, at a critical point in time, bull-horned from both sides, setting the stage for future uproars. First, though, we must take a look at Obama’s foreign policy.

FOREIGN POLICY: LEADING FROM BEHIND

Given the Great Recession, foreign policy should have played a minimal role during the 2008 campaign, but terrorism and the Iraq War made it a weighty issue. Also, GOP-candidate John McCain, who in the 1990s had turned into a neoconservative hawk, contrasted sharply with Obama, who based his foreign policy upon the same “soft” worldview and form of American Exceptionalism underpinning his domestic views. Accordingly, the contrast was stark, and while McCain promised perpetually aggressive moves to fight terrorism, Obama pledged to scrap Bush’s foreign policy, leave Iraq, and close Guantanamo Bay. He also argued that with him as president, America’s lost power, prestige, and standing in the world would return:

[W]e need a president that can bring a new face to American diplomacy. Who’s willing to talk not just to our friends but our enemies, who’s willing to engage the world and say, “America’s back.” We are ready to lead. Not just militarily but with our example and with our deeds. I want to go before the world and say, “We are going to be the America that has made us that bright and shining light all around the world.”

However, Obama’s foreign policy was not customarily liberal. Because even if he envisioned a world marked by human rights, democracy, and some form of restrained capitalism,

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his view on the supremacy and often illogical nature of human action made him a half-baked realist. As president, he would, therefore, at times, act remarkably stoic. For example, after committing 30,000 more U.S. troops to “fix” Afghanistan, he went to Oslo in Norway to accept the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize and said:

War, in one form or another, appeared with the first man. At the dawn of history, its morality was not questioned; it was simply a fact, like drought or disease, the manner in which tribes and then civilizations sought power and settled their differences. [...] A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler’s armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda’s leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force is sometimes necessary is not a call to cynicism – it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.188

Since Obama here overall defended the U.S.’ international role and actions during the 20th century and committed himself to the just war principle, established trade policies, and other international concerns, this Oslo lecture stands as one of his typical academic bromides – this time a recommitment to an inclusive form of American Exceptionalism – as well as a foreign policy manifesto for his presidency. In truth, the only unusual matters he pushed in his Oslo address (compared to his predecessor) was his reliance on sanctions and preparedness to talk with hostile regimes, like Iran and North Korea. Though at the moment, these were only minor topics, and his speech atypically received more praise from Republicans than Democrats.189

However, by then, Obama had already squandered his chance for bipartisan support for his foreign policy by going on an “Apology Tour” giving speeches reflecting what conservatives saw as “the concept that the U.S. is a flawed nation that must seek redemption by apologizing for

188 Obama, “Remarks on Accepting...” (December 10, 2009).
And judging from the number of harsh reactions it created, his biggest mistake had been to answer a journalist’s question if he subscribed “to the school of American exceptionalism” with:

I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism. I am enormously proud of my country and its role and history in the world. If you think about the site of this summit and what it means, I don’t think America should be embarrassed to see evidence of the sacrifices of our troops, the enormous amount of resources that were put into Europe postwar, and our leadership in crafting an alliance that ultimately led to the unification of Europe. We should take great pride in that.

For people used to presidents boasting about American greatness and exclusiveness for over two centuries, it is understandable that this relativizing of American Exceptionalism created an uproar. For example, one pundit used the remark to jeer at him in the Washington Times:

President Obama’s reference to British or Greek exceptionalism suggests a belief that the United States doesn’t stand alone with a particular greatness but that every nation is great in its own way and America is simply one of many nations with something cool to offer. This kind of multicultural, politically correct, “we’re all unique in unique ways, every kid must win at dodgeball” thinking is the basis for his economic and foreign policies, from his schemes to nationalize the auto, banking, and health care industries to his lollygagging on behalf of those fighting for greater freedom in Iran. It is the rationale for his Vesuvian explosion of big government and the much higher taxes required to finance it. It also explains Mr. Obama’s irrepressible urge to apologize for past perceived American injustices and ill-conceived foreign “meddling.” In Mr. Obama’s kaleidoscopic left-wing view, no nation is better than any other, no country can tell another country not to have nuclear weapons, and we’re all socialists now. In other words, American exceptionalism was so last century.

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On this issue, Obama was also indeed swimming upstream not only against pundits but public opinion. The following year, 80 percent said they believed that “the U.S. has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world,” and 37 percent thought that Obama did not think so.\textsuperscript{193} However, under this still generic “surface opinion,” Americans had begun to shift their stance on several related issues. For instance, the proportion considering military cuts necessary to fix the economy had risen, opposition to new overseas involvement now stood at 46 percent, and over half saw foreign trade more as a threat than as an opportunity.

Consequently, when Obama took a step back towards Bush 43’s aggressive foreign policy, things got complicated. In January 2011, after a Tunisian fruit vendor committed suicide to protest his country’s autocratic regime, popular revolts spread across the Middle East and North Africa. Caught by this rapid turn of events, Obama was torn between idealist and realist views, and while he at first leaned towards a realist stance to support the status quo, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (who as First Lady had sided with the “humanitarian interventionists” in the 1990s) saw the event as “a new 1989” that must be supported. Therefore, Obama turned from backing Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak in January to “leading from behind” a coalition conducting air attacks to unseat Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi in March.\textsuperscript{194} Nevertheless, despite his declaration that the goal for this war was only to protect “[t]he democratic values that we stand for,” public support for it became weak.

This new attitude also showed itself in Washington, D.C., when the GOP-controlled House criticized Obama for failing “to provide Congress with a compelling rationale based upon


United States national security interests for current activities regarding Libya.” And this timid language stemmed from a resolution taken in place of a more radical one, demanding an end to all military actions within 15 days. In addition, the latter motion had been supported by 61 Democrats and 87 Republicans, including a soon-to-be presidential candidate, Tea Party favorite, and Minnesotan House Republican Michele Bachmann (b. 1956), who later justified her votes for both resolutions by saying that, “we [...] have not identified an American vital national interest. That must be done before the United States can intervene in another nation’s affairs.”\textsuperscript{195} This stance would turn out to be smart as Libya descended into a civil war. Also, the next year Libya came back and haunted Obama during his reelection campaign when four Americans, including an ambassador, were killed by terrorists in Benghazi, and his opponent called the occurrence a result of Obama’s “apologizing for America’s values.”\textsuperscript{196}

The 2012 Election

As Republican candidates lined up to take on Obama in 2012, they were optimistic because of what they saw as the President’s mediocre first term. It also seemed like the GOP had managed to absorb the Tea Party simply by incorporating “American exceptionalism into an article of Republican political religion”\textsuperscript{197} without compromising its core policies.\textsuperscript{198} Therefore, all


presidential candidates except libertarian Ron Paul (who only had a small chance of winning the nomination) still supported an active foreign policy based on an active-inclusive form of American Exceptionalism. However, for Americans in general and Republican voters specifically, changing views on foreign policy and economic issues loomed. While traveling to Iowa, New Hampshire, and other primary states talking to voters, the candidates must therefore probably have wondered if the situation could explode, maybe even before the election.

But it did not. The GOP’s ideological structures held, and the nomination went to Mitt Romney (b. 1947). He was a traditional Country Club Republican, successful businessman, and internationalist-minded neoconservative, whose most noticeable feature – besides being a Mormon – was the difficulty he had, despite generally being respected, enthusing the party’s base.\(^{199}\) Thus, he often tried to enliven his rhetoric with plenty of exceptionalist truisms and reached out to Teapartiers by attacking Obama for lack of patriotism. In a book published before he entered the race but clearly written to foster his run, he declared his support for the U.S.’ active role in the world after World War II as the ultimate warden of freedom: “The United States is unique. American strength does not threaten world peace. American strength helps preserve world peace.”\(^{200}\) In one primary debate, he also said:

[T]his election is about the soul of America. The question is, what is America going to be? And we have in Washington today a president who has put America on a road to decline, militarily, internationally and, domestically, he’s making us into something we wouldn’t recognize. We’re increasingly becoming like Europe. Europe isn’t working in Europe. It will never work here. The right course for America is to return to the principles that were written down in first words in the Declaration of Independence, we were endowed by our creator with certain unalienable rights, among them, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.\(^{201}\)


Furthermore, Romney linked himself entirely with the party’s establishment wing by picking Wisconsin House Representative Paul Ryan as his running mate. A policy wonk best known for his preparedness to “attack” Social Security and Medicare/Medicaid, he was a hard-core Classic Liberal ideologue and an ardent believer in the neoconservative view of American Exceptionalism. In a speech given the day of his nomination, he said, “But America is more than just a place... it’s an idea. It’s the only country founded on an idea. Our rights come from nature and God, not government. We promise equal opportunity, not equal outcomes. This idea is founded on the principles of liberty, freedom, free enterprise, self-determination and government by consent of the governed.”

On his side, in 2012, Obama struggled with recreating the fervor for his Hope! and Change! message from four years earlier, e.g., in his second DNC Acceptance Speech. However, besides such gestures to his base, he mostly used his signature “thin” exceptionalism during the campaign. For example, when asked about the role of government, he said:

The first role of the Federal Government is to keep the American people safe. That’s its most basic function. [...] But I also believe that Government has the capacity – the Federal Government – has the capacity to help open up opportunity and create ladders of opportunity and to create frameworks where the American people can succeed. Look, the genius of America is the free enterprise system and freedom and the fact that people can go out there and start a business, work on an idea, make their own decisions. But as Abraham Lincoln understood, there are also some things we do better together.
Still, despite both Obama and Romney’s rich use of exceptionalist language, such sentiments played a lesser role in 2012 than they had in 2008. Instead, traditional ideological polarization was back and totally dominant. One poll showed that “the values gap between Republicans and Democrats is now greater than gender, age, race or class divides,” and over 60 percent of voters self-identified as “strong partisans.”\(^{205}\) Thus, partisanship was more than ever a decisive factor and not only for politicians, media, and pundits but voters at large, and, as a result, the campaign, quickly turned nasty. For instance, one TV-ad depicted Romney as personally liable for a woman’s death from cancer.\(^{206}\) There were also a couple of ideological moments during the campaign, of which the most memorable had a deep exceptionalist connection. It occurred on July 13, when Obama, as he often did, stressed the collective side of U.S. history by saying “you didn’t build that” referring to successful entrepreneurs, and Romney described the comment as “slap in the face to the American Dream.”\(^{207}\)

At the end of the day, Romney lost despite the slow economic recovery, and the main reason for this is that most voters continued to blame Bush for the bad economy, not Obama.\(^{208}\) Still, there is also the possibility that Romney’s praise of free trade and an active foreign policy swayed some Republicans to stay home. Because even if there is no “hard” proof validating this assumption, there is much circumstantial evidence that an ideological shift on these issues was on its way. For example, during the primaries, Romney had been attacked by fellow Republicans for representing a “vulture” form of capitalism and four years later “perhaps half of Republican


\(^{207}\) Quotes from Sides & Vavreck, The Gamble, 116.

voters [...] had turned sour on the benefits of globalization,” and their “support for focusing greater attention on problems at home ha[d] risen sharply since George W. Bush left office.” Consequently, they then also turned out in droves to vote for a candidate with trade and foreign policies that were nearly total opposites of Romney’s. We will return to this in a moment.

SECOND TERM BLUES

The morning after the 2012 election, Americans woke up more divided than ever. The night before, only seven percent of Republicans and seventeen GOP House districts had voted for Obama and only eight percent of Democrats and nine Democratic districts for Romney; an ideological line almost as concrete as the wall between East and West Berlin during the Cold War. Obama, therefore, tried to unite the nation by making his second Inaugural Address an exercise in exceptionalist lyrics about domestic affairs...

...as well as international matters:

We will support democracy from Asia to Africa, from the Americas to the Middle East, because our interests and our conscience compel us to act on behalf of those who long for

freedom. And we must be a source of hope to the poor, the sick, the marginalized, the victims of prejudice – not out of mere charity, but because peace in our time requires the constant advance of those principles that our common creed describes: tolerance and opportunity, human dignity and justice.²¹²

However, after this pause, Obama’s second term offered new problems. As Syria was gripped by civil war, Obama tried to balance demands from liberal interventionists and neoconservatives to stop the Assad regime’s violations of human rights with public opposition against dragging the country into another “endless war” in the Middle East. He therefore first chose to do nothing except declaring that the use of chemical weapons was a “red line” that would not go unpunished. And when poison gas was used anyway, instead of attacking, he settled for a deal with Russia to destroy the regimes’ stockpiles. Obama explained this with that even he wanted to aid Syrian opponents who “just want to live in peace, with dignity and freedom,” he was still not prepared to commit U.S. forces. He did add, though, that as the only superpower, the U.S. could still be forced to act as an enforcer of international agreements:

Our ideals and principles, as well as our national security, are at stake in Syria, along with our leadership of a world where we seek to ensure that the worst weapons will never be used. America is not the world’s policeman. Terrible things happen across the globe, and it is beyond our means to right every wrong. But when, with modest effort and risk, we can stop children from being gassed to death – and thereby make our own children safer over the long run – I believe we should act. That’s what makes America different. That’s what makes us exceptional.²¹³

This statement had several effects. The most serious one was that, after the Syrian regime used gas anew the following year and Obama could not afford not to live up to his word again, the U.S. was pulled into the military campaign in Syria that continues to this day. In a statement

to the nation about the war, he said that “This is American leadership at its best: We stand with people who fight for their own freedom, and we rally other nations on behalf of our common security and common humanity.” And he finished: “That is the difference we make in the world. And our own safety, our own security, depends upon our willingness to do what it takes to defend this Nation and uphold the values that we stand for, timeless ideals that will endure long after those who offer only hate and destruction have been vanquished from the Earth.”

Another effect was that the day after Obama’s speech, which incidentally happened to be September 11, Russian leader Vladimir Putin wrote in the *New York Times* that, “Millions around the world increasingly see America not as a model of democracy but as relying solely on brute force” and that it was “extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptionalist, whatever the motivation.” Hence, Obama was lectured publicly by a foreign colleague that American Exceptionalism was a menace. And to make things even eerier, when he did not answer Putin directly, his 2008 opponent did. In a piece in a Russian online newspaper, McCain accused Putin and his men for not respecting the dignity of the Russian people:

They punish dissent and imprison opponents. They rig your elections. They control your media. They harass, threaten, and banish organizations that defend your right to self-governance. To perpetuate their power they foster rampant corruption in your courts and your economy and terrorize and even assassinate journalists who try to expose their corruption.

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The awkwardness of having a former opponent answering the Russian leader’s critique of American Exceptionalism hardly needs to be pointed out, and it arguably reflects what can be seen as a growing fatalism regarding America and her virtues that had crept up on the nation after the Iraq War and with the Great Recession. More precisely, over 80 percent of Americans now agreed with the statement that “the last several years had seen the United States take a step back;” only half said they were “extremely proud to be Americans;” and merely 35 percent believed that the U.S. should be active globally. Indeed, this development started under Bush, and to what extent Obama is personally to blame for its continuation can never be quantified. We can only conclude that he did not manage to stem or reverse the change. Hypothetically, though, his rhetoric had contributed to the development. Towards the end of his presidency, he even began to air doubts about some core exceptionalist notions, like the probability of ever achieving worldwide democratization. In his last speech to the U.N., he said:

I know that some countries, which now recognize the power of free markets, still reject the model of free societies. And perhaps those of us who have been promoting democracy feel somewhat discouraged since the end of the cold war, because we’ve learned that liberal democracy will not just wash across the globe in a single wave. It turns out, building accountable institutions is hard work, the work of generations. The gains are often fragile. Sometimes, we take one step forward and then two steps back.

However, like other modern presidents, Obama still believed in some form of historical force or logic pushing human societies towards democracy and capitalism:

I believe the road of true democracy remains the better path. I believe that in the 21st century, economies can only grow to a certain point until they need to open up, because

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entrepreneurs need to access information in order to invent; young people need a global education in order to thrive; independent media needs to check the abuses of power. Without this evolution, ultimately, expectations of people will not be met; suppression and stagnation will set in.\textsuperscript{220}

In 2016, though, such optimism had become rare. The reason for this varied. Eight years of slow recovery, high unemployment, and over 40 million Americans on food stamps had taken a toll on some. An uptick in violent crime, illegal immigrants bringing drugs and raising welfare costs, and unrest created by movements such as ANTIFA and Black Lives Matters troubled the minds of others. Testing people’s patience was also the fact that members of the New Class openly used their positions in the government, media, and academia to argue about things like male chauvinism, “structural discrimination,” and open borders\textsuperscript{221} while many “normal people” (as around 1970) felt that their opinions no longer counted and that the world no longer made sense. That the present was presented as a “new normal” created by globalization, demographic trends, and cultural changes beyond anyone’s control did not help either. Too, even if most understood that this discourse did not fit Americans’ psyche any better than Carter’s \textit{malaise} had done 40 years prior, only one person seemed able to deal with it politically.


\textsuperscript{221} Open borders is a dogma born at the juncture of left-wing humanitarianism and right-wing free trade theory that is seen as a cure for the lot from Third World poverty to low Western economic growth. See Kimberly Clausing, \textit{Open: The Progressive Case for Free Trade, Immigration, and Global Capital} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019) & Jason L. Riley, \textit{Let Them In: The Case for Open Borders} (New York: Gotham Books, 2008).
As the son of a real-estate developer who had “found opportunity in gloom” by developing the outskirts of New York City during the Great Depression, Donald Trump (b. 1946) was taught to work hard, think big, be daringly optimistic, and win by always being on the offensive. After attending the New York Military Academy, he therefore set out to defy the gloom of the 1970s by building his own real-estate empire in Manhattan, where a mixture of political corruption, Mafia-ridden construction businesses, and celebrity milieus made him a tough negotiator, a straight talker, and a public relations aficionado. In the 1980s, Trump expanded his enterprise to casinos, golf courses, airlines, and multitudes of other ventures, and even if many of these endeavors failed, he managed to rebound and turn TRUMP into a world brand before also landing his own TV-show *The Apprentice* in 2004. This last gig sealed his reputation and made him even more of a household name. Thus, when the Great Recession hit, Trump had appeared for decades in public as the epitome of the American Dream.

Furthermore, Trump’s meandering, off-the-cuff rhetorical style makes it difficult to find well-structured lines revealing his philosophical stance. Still, his views on human nature and the world can be inferred from speeches, writings, and other comments. Overall, Trump holds a classic view of humans as mixed beings with good and bad urges, and as a Christian, he believes in the reality of good and evil. His view of history, though, is materialistic and non-deterministic, and he shares LBJ’s belief that strongmen (like himself) can make great things
happen. Indeed, he once quoted a writer stating that “successful alpha personalities display a single-minded determination to impose their vision on the world.”226

Not so surprisingly, Trump’s persona and outlook make his view of American Exceptionalism complex. On the one hand, being an archetypical American impulsive optimist and “think big” individual, he personifies the concept and sees the U.S. as a unique place. While temporarily pondering a run for the presidency in 2012, he wrote:

[My biggest beef with Obama is his view that there’s nothing special or exceptional about America – that we are no different than any other country. If a guy is that clueless about the character of America he has no business being the leader of America. Our country is the greatest force for freedom the world has ever known. We have big hearts, big brains, and big guts – and we use all three.]227

Four years later, after entering the GOP primary, he also stated: “America is the leader of the free world – we’ve earned the right to boast and make it clear that we are ready and willing to do whatever is necessary to defend this country as well as liberty anywhere in the world.”228

On the other hand, Trump believes that a country can be great only if diligent people are in charge and that success should be measured in finite entities like money, victories, and accomplishments.229 Correspondingly, his view of world affairs is Hobbesian in that he sees all nations as having a right and an obligation (to its inhabitants) to put their own interests first. At the same time, Trump is not privately or politically a pure materialist. Before entering the 2016 primary process, he wrote that he had “learned that wealth and happiness are two completely different things,”230 and he equated love for country with love of neighbor. He once also quoted

230 Ibid, 127.
Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*: “The man who barely abstains from violating either the person, or the estate, or the reputation of his neighbors, has surely very little merit.”

However, since Trump’s worldview leaves little-to-no room for mystic destinies or missions stretching over generations, and he has, quite astonishingly, declared that he downright dislikes American Exceptionalism – or at least what the term lately has come to denote. A month before declaring his candidacy, he said: “I don’t think it’s a very nice term” because a country like “Germany is eating our lunch.” Given the trouble that Obama and others have gotten into for expressing less serious doubt about American Exceptionalism, it may seem puzzling that this remark did not hurt Trump in the primaries or during the presidential campaign. However, if we posit that voters in 2015-2016 equated patriotism with an active-inclusive form of exceptionalism and that they connected the term with the Iraq War, Benghazi, and other failures, and/or had begun to realize that the concept has been historically abused, it does make sense. Regrettably, there seem to be no polls or other research that can cast light on this subject, but such an assumption fits well with both the long-term weakening of the concept’s clout and how Trump, a connoisseur in public moods, addressed the issue.

For example, in April 2016, when Trump specifically spoke about his foreign policy, he criticized previous administrations for making bad decisions and neglecting U.S. interests. He stated that he wanted to replace their “randomness with purpose, ideology with strategy, and chaos with peace.” He also argued that it had been “America First” policies that saved the world in the 20th century and that leaders must “develop a new vision for a new time” and outlined his approach:

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231 Trump, *Time To Get Tough*, 40.
Instead of trying to spread universal values that not everybody shares or wants, we should understand that strengthening and promoting Western civilization and its accomplishments will do more to inspire positive reforms around the world than military interventions. These are my goals as president. I will seek a foreign policy that all Americans, whatever their party, can support [...] and which our friends and allies will respect and totally welcome.233

After echoing John Quincy Adams that “The world must know that we do not go abroad in search of enemies,” he too took a strong stand against globalism:

We will no longer surrender this country or its people to the false song of globalism. The nation-state remains the true foundation for happiness and harmony. I am skeptical of international unions that tie us up and bring America down [...] And under my administration, we will never enter America into any agreement that reduces our ability to control our own affairs.234

We will return to the implication of these views. At this point, it is sufficient to note that while they are closer to the Founding Fathers’ focus on national independence and international non-engagement than post-World War II U.S. foreign policy, they still deviate from both. Precisely, even though Trump made a point of getting the U.S. “out of the nation-building business and instead focusing on creating stability in the world,” by promising to defeat ISIS and stopping Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, he bound himself to keep America involved internationally. Actually, by foreshadowing that he would act non-ideologically to improve America’s position abroad and deal seriously with problems like North Korea, he committed himself to be, if necessary, more aggressive than earlier presidents.

Trump applied his America First principle to trade as well. When announcing his run, he declared: “I’m a free trader. But the problem with free trade is you need really talented people to

234 Ibid.
negotiate for you. If you don’t have talented people, if you don’t have great leadership, if you don’t have people that know business [...] free trade [is] terrible.”

Hence, as with foreign policy, Trump alleged U.S. politicians failed to protect national interests, this time by signing bad trade deals. And even if his alternative is far from full-scale protectionism, his readiness to start trade wars and put penalty taxes on outsourcing U.S. companies is equally remote from the unreserved praise of free trade the GOP stood for after World War II. Thus, “Trump built a coalition that transcended some of the [Republican] party’s traditional divides [...] He capitalized on an existing reservoir of discontent about a changing America and culture.”

**CANDIDATE TRUMP: MAGA**

At first, because Trump had flirted with but never entered politics since the 1980s, had lived a life unfit for an office-seeker, and had a long history of advanced publicity stunts, most did not take his bid for the 2016 nomination seriously. According to modern political standards, he also made himself intolerable on day one by talking tough on immigration: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. [...] They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us [sic!]. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”

That Trump opened his campaign in this way was to break through the media chatter, set his candidacy apart, and tap

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into the grassroots currents of isolationism and protectionism mentioned earlier. And it worked. Within two months, he took the lead in the strongest field of GOP candidates in a generation.

However, Trump’s campaign-style and rhetoric are more notable here than his immigration policy. To start, the choice of *Make America Great Again* as his campaign theme made it possible for him to circumvent the depressed “new normal” discourse and project “a return to better times – economically and culturally – in America’s past.”239 It also connected him with the slogan’s first user, Ronald Reagan, even if some of his ideas did not pair with his. Moreover, on the stump, Trump turned out to be a juggernaut worthy of comparison to William Jennings Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt, and Harry Truman. During the fall of 2015, his public appearances exploded into “MAGA rallies,” where his high-energy persona, uncooked populism, and media dexterity could play out in front of audiences in the tens of thousands, far exceeding even most of Obama’s mass meetings.240

Furthermore, Trump’s pre-presidential use of exceptionalist language was typically limited to bits like, “I am a Second Amendment professional. I love the Second Amendment. We have to protect our rights.”241 In its place, he relied on his outsider status and chose to “ignore the rules of modern politics and [speak] to Americans in coarse language, without filtering his words through the data-driven machinery of consultants, focus groups, and TV commercials.”242 Instead, when declaring his candidacy, he stepped forward as an Andrew Jackson/Theodore Roosevelt populist running to expose corruption and give the country back to the people:

Big business, elite media and major donors are lining up behind the campaign of my opponent because they know she will keep our rigged system in place. They are throwing

money at her because they have total control over every single thing she does. She is their puppet, and they pull the strings. [...] I have joined the political arena so that the powerful can no longer beat up on people that cannot defend themselves.  

However, already as a candidate, Trump offered glimpses of a more highbrow rhetorical style he would use as president. Tellingly, it appears mainly in prepared statements like this one he gave after having secured the Republican nomination:

Americans are the people that tamed the West, that dug out the Panama Canal, that sent satellites across the solar system that built the great dams, and so much more. Then we started thinking small. We stopped believing in what America could do, and became reliant on other countries, other people, and other institutions. We lost our sense of purpose and daring. But that’s not who we are. Come this November, we can bring America back – bigger and better, and stronger than ever.  

At times, Trump also turned to the Founding Fathers and Lincoln for support for his trade policy:

“One of the first major bills signed by George Washington called for “the encouragement and protection of manufactur[ing]” in America. Our first Republican President, Abraham Lincoln, warned us by saying: ‘The abandonment of the protective policy by the American government will produce want and ruin among our people.’”

Furthermore, even if exceptionalist language did not come naturally to Trump, he automatically became the exceptionalist alternative in the General Election. His program was economically, socially, and culturally conservative, while his opponent Hillary Clinton was a standard liberal statist-internationalist whose only connection with American Exceptionalism was her support for an active foreign policy. (That link was, on the other hand, ardent, as made

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244 Ibid.  
clear when she in 2011 quipped, “We came, we saw, he died!”\textsuperscript{246} about the death of Libya’s dictator Qaddafi.) Likewise, many of Trump’s personal qualities effectively made him the exceptionalist alternative. Because even if his lack of Reaganesque charm made him divisive, his patriotism, optimism, and regular use of words like huge, beautiful, and wonderful, plus his image of a man “always in a hurry, and constantly ready for a fight,”\textsuperscript{247} who promised that America under him would “start winning again,” appealed to people with traditional views. This is especially true for those disgruntled with lost jobs, stalled incomes, rising crime, illegal immigration, political correctness, and “the D.C. mess” in general.

In the end, it was also arguably Trump’s central claim that America had lost its way that appealed to people’s exceptionalist reflexes and tipped the scale in his favor. The composition of Trump’s vote tells this broader story. Of the 62 percent who thought the country was on the wrong track, 68 percent voted for him,\textsuperscript{248} and he not only won traditionally patriotic and exceptionalist-minded groups like conservatives (81 percent), evangelicals (80 percent), people living in rural areas (61 percent), veterans (60 percent), men (52 percent), people over 65 (52 percent), and Catholics (50 percent). He also won whites (57 percent), men (52 percent), and people with little or no college education (51 percent), plus increased Romney’s share of the African American (8 percent), Latino (28 percent), and Asian American (27 percent) vote. And most importantly, besides the South and the Rockies, he swept most of the Midwest and – for the first time for a Republican since 1988 – the Rustbelt.\textsuperscript{249}

\textsuperscript{247} Hart, \textit{Trump and Us}, 11.
\textsuperscript{248} Sabato, Kondik & Skelly (ed.), \textit{Trumped}, 25.
\textsuperscript{249} Larry J. Sabato, “The 2016 Election That Broke All, or At Least Most of the Rules,” in Sabato, Kondik & Skelly (ed.), \textit{Trumped}, 14-27. Hence, while Donald Trump’s victory in the Electoral College proves that Republicans can still win the White House, Hillary Clinton’s popular vote win shows the weakness in having one’s voters centered in
In search of an explanation for Trump’s victory, academics, pundits, and others have put forward numerous explanations, most of which focus on his stance on immigration and – more generally – that his rhetoric attracted poor and undereducated white voters with racist views. However, even if Trump often crossed the line of what is considered politically correct, and without denying the fact that his maverick candidacy pulled a number of “rednecks” to the polls in places like Michigan that would otherwise not have voted, this oversimplifies the analysis and debases the meaning of what happened. In fact, the “levels of anger and anxiety were no greater in 2016 than in recent years,” and white voting patterns were only beginning to catch up with the levels of “racialization” amongst African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans.  

Instead, what happened seems to be similar to 1980, when Reagan rode to victory on a combination of present worries and fears among Americans that the country was straying from its original state. For example, the year before the election, over 50 percent said the “American culture and way of life’ had changed for the worse since the 1950s” and growing economic inequality had “not clearly shifted Americans’ policy preferences in the progressive direction that many observers anticipated.”  

Another sign is the sharp increase in 2016 of the “diploma divide” that largely overlaps with the split between voters with traditional values and those exposed to alternative worldviews, like globalism, in college. Also, white voters’ attributing the inequality of African Americans to lack of effort more than discrimination and believing that immigrants are “stealing their place in line” are today considered by some racist. However, they can as easily be seen as expressions for Americans’ traditional views of equal opportunity

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states with fewer than 270 electors. Thus, Trump’s win casts doubt on the “Emerging Democratic Majority” theory that a rising majority of minorities will shortly render the GOP electorally defunct.

251 Ibid, 12, 16.
and fair play. Also, the Democratic Party’s image as an alliance of racial, sexual, and other minorities holding extreme ideological policies was by many viewed as un-American.

Moreover, that Trump voters generally cannot be defined – and disregarded – as simple racist is showed by the data represented in the following graph. As can be seen, except for the attitude regarding the ability to speak English and be a Christian, the differences in attitudes between Democrat and Republican voters in 2016 were small, including amongst the minor groups of both parties that deemed being of European decent important for being an American (which can be deemed a truly racist opinion). Therefore, arguably, voters generally paid attention to Trump and Clinton’s attitudes toward the American heritage at large, not their potential degrees of racist views or policies.

**PRESIDENT TRUMP: A NEW ERA?**

Those who thought that after being elected, Trump would start to smooth things over were mistaken. Eying his reelection bid four years down the road, he decided to stick with his style,

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and thus he stands out with Reagan as the president who least changed his rhetoric between the campaign trail and the White House. Already his words and the scenery at his Inauguration spoke volumes. With good parts of the U.S. establishment, including several Bushes and Clintons, sitting stone-faced behind him in front of the Capitol Building, he thundered:

Today’s ceremony [...] has very special meaning. Because today we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another or from one party to another, but we are transferring power from Washington, DC, and giving it back to you, the people. For too long, a small group in our Nation’s Capital has reaped the rewards of Government while the people have borne the cost.

And even though he then did use some traditional language...

The time for empty talk is over. Now arrives the hour of action. Do not allow anyone to tell you that it cannot be done. No challenge can match the heart and fight and spirit of America. We will not fail. Our country will thrive and prosper again. We stand at the birth of a new millennium, ready to unlock the mysteries of space, to free the Earth from the miseries of disease, and to harness the energies, industries, and technologies of tomorrow. A new national pride will stir our souls, lift our sights, and heal our divisions.

...he ended with repeating the crescendo from his MAGA rallies:

Together, we will make America strong again. We will make America wealthy again. We will make America proud again. We will make America safe again. And, yes, together, we will make America great again. Thank you. God bless you, and God bless America. Thank you. God bless America.²⁵⁴

Possibly, these are the most daring words spoken by a new president since Andrew Jackson. Nonetheless, as President, Trump swiftly developed (or at least hired speechwriters with) a feeling for the power of exceptionalist rhetoric, and he showed himself able to deliver highbrow speeches in a class with both Reagan and Obama:

Each American generation passes the torch of truth, liberty, and justice in an unbroken chain, all the way down to the present. That torch is now in our hands, and we will use it to light up the world. [...] A new chapter of American greatness is now beginning. A new national pride is sweeping across our Nation. And a new surge of optimism is placing impossible dreams firmly within our grasp. What we are witnessing today is the renewal of the American spirit. [...] Over the last year, the world has seen what we always knew: that no people on Earth are so fearless or daring or determined as Americans. If there is a mountain, we climb it. If there is a frontier, we cross it. If there’s a challenge, we tame it. If there’s an opportunity, we seize it. So let’s begin tonight by recognizing that the state of our Union is strong because our people are strong. And together, we are building a safe, strong, and proud America.  

As President, Trump used exceptionalist talk also when addressing foreign audiences. For example, he once hailed the Constitution in front of the U.N. in a way that, say, both JFK and Reagan could have done. However, Trump’s basic tone was different:

In America, we do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone, but rather to let it shine as an example for everyone to watch. This week gives our country a special reason to take pride in that example. We are celebrating the 230th anniversary of our beloved Constitution, the oldest constitution still in use in the world today. This timeless document has been the foundation of peace, prosperity, and freedom for the Americans and for countless millions around the globe whose own countries have found inspiration in its respect for human nature, human dignity, and the rule of law. The greatest in the United States Constitution is its first three beautiful words. They are: “We the people.”

It should as well be noted that Trump (or, again, at least his speechwriters) frequently engaged in “God-talk” and blended it with exceptionalist notions as freely as some of his predecessors. For instance, when giving a Commencement Address at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, he said:

In your hearts are inscribed the values of service, sacrifice and devotion. Now you must go forth into the world and turn your hopes and dreams into action. America has always been the land of dreams because America is a nation of true believers. When the pilgrims landed at Plymouth they prayed. When the founders wrote the Declaration of Independence, they invoked our creator four times, because in America we don’t worship

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government we worship God. That is why our elected officials put their hands on the Bible and say, ‘So help me God,’ as they take the oath of office. It is why our currency proudly declares, ‘In God we trust,’ and it’s why we proudly proclaim that we are one nation under God every time we say the pledge of allegiance.257

Nevertheless, since Trump did not see American Exceptionalism as a moral concept, or believe in any ordained national mission, his use of such semantics as president was both different and rare. Besides ideological reasons, one cause for this is that his speeches often were more practical than principled and left less room for lavish expressions. One example is his first State of the Union when he chose to explicate his reorientation of U.S. foreign policy from nation-building abroad toward homeland security in terms of stricter immigration protocols and to build a wall along the Mexican border. As a result, during his first year in office, Trump’s exceptionalist language became less than half as frequent as other post-World War II presidents. Still, when speaking on higher levels of abstraction, he did use exceptionalism effectively.258

Furthermore, Trump’s capability to read public moods remained extraordinary. For example, in 2017, when football player Colin Kaepernick and others started to “take a knee” during the national anthem (to protest racism), Trump, arguably sensing that the behavior would upset people, protested. And he was right. A Reuters’ poll showed that 72 percent disagreed with such behavior.259 Similarly, Trump stroke the bond between the space program and the science fiction community. For instance, he nodded to the “final frontier” theme in several speeches...

In reaffirming our heritage as a free nation, we must remember that America has always been a frontier nation. Now we must embrace the next frontier, America’s manifest destiny in the stars. I am asking Congress to fully fund the Artemis program to ensure

258 Restad, “Whither the City Upon a Hill?”
that the next man and the first woman on the Moon will be American astronauts using this as a launching pad to ensure that America is the first nation to plant its flag on Mars.\textsuperscript{260}

...and, most fascinatingly, choose an emblem for the new military branch, the U.S. Space Force, almost identical to \textit{Star Trek}'s Starfleet logo.\textsuperscript{261}

To now return to Trump’s foreign policy, as President, he expounded on more ambitious goals than just disentangling the U.S. from overseas engagements and international deals. Specifically, he used scenes both at home and abroad to promote a “Trump Doctrine” centered on what he called \textit{principled realism} that contains both a general view of world affairs...

We do not expect diverse countries to share the same cultures, traditions, or even systems of government. But we do expect all nations to uphold these two core sovereign duties: to respect the interests of their own people and the rights of every other sovereign nation. [...] Strong, sovereign nations let diverse countries with different values, different cultures, and different dreams not just coexist, but work side by side on the basis of mutual respect.

...and specifies America’s place, role, and actions in the world:

The United States will forever be a great friend to the world and especially to its allies. But we can no longer be taken advantage of or enter into a one-sided deal where the United States gets nothing in return. As long as I hold this office, I will defend America’s interests above all else. We want harmony and friendship, not conflict and strife. We are guided by outcomes, not ideology.\textsuperscript{262}

Hence, Trump aligned himself with state theorists going back to at least John Selden (1584-1654), who perceived the nation-state as the only working alternative to an anarchic world


\textsuperscript{262} Trump, “Remarks to the United Nations...,” (September 19, 2017).
of clans and tribes on one side and despotic empires on the other. He also deemed Western civilization in general and its freedom ethos in particular to be a unique feature in human history, yet one under attack from external and internal enemies. He developed this view in a 2017 speech in Warsaw, Poland, where he compared today’s threat of Islamism with that of Communism and criticized “the steady creep of government bureaucracy that drains the vitality and wealth of the people.” Then, he delivered a political elegy to Western culture:

The world has never known anything like our community of nations. We write symphonies. We pursue innovation. We celebrate our ancient heroes, embrace our timeless traditions and customs, and always seek to explore and discover brand new frontiers. We reward brilliance. We strive for excellence and cherish inspiring works of art that honor God. We treasure the rule of law and protect the right to free speech and free expression. We empower women as pillars of our society and of our success. We put faith and family, not government and bureaucracy, at the center of our lives. And we debate everything. We challenge everything. We seek to know everything so that we can better know ourselves. And above all, we value the dignity of every human life, protect the rights of every person, and share the hope of every soul to live in freedom. That is who we are. Those are the priceless ties that bind us together as nations, as allies, and as a civilization.

Certainly, this is not a traditional form of American Exceptionalism. However, Trump’s focus on national independence and non-chauvinist form of patriotism reflects the tradition of the Founding Fathers and their view of the U.S. as an aloof custodian of freedom. At the same time, Trump didn’t judge other cultures to be inferior, just different. Moreover, after his Warsaw speech, he allied himself with people opposing globalism and multiculturalism everywhere:

As President of the United States, I will always put America first, just like you, as the leaders of your countries, will always, and should always, put your countries first. All responsible leaders have an obligation to serve their own citizens, and the nation-state remains the best vehicle for elevating the human condition. But making a better life for

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263 Hazony, *Virtue of Nationalism*: 109-140.
our people also requires us to work together in close harmony and unity to create a more safe and peaceful future for all people.\textsuperscript{265}

Thus, Trump, like every other post World War II president, used the power of his office to reshape the world order; in his case, according to a “neo-nationalist” scheme that seeks to \textit{roll back} globalism and multiculturalism towards a world system of fully independent but cooperating nation-states. Furthermore, he not only articulated this theoretically in his doctrine but operationalized it in deeds. For instance, Trump retracted the U.S. from the Paris Agreement on climate change and the INF-treaty on nuclear missiles; threatened to leave NATO if its European members do not increase their military spending, and the WTO, if other countries do not start to follow agreements on intellectual property rights; and promised to sign a sweeping trade deal with the U.K. after its exit from the E.U. He also explained with exceptionalist vigor why the U.S. would never join the International Criminal Court:

As far as America is concerned, the ICC has no jurisdiction, no legitimacy, and no authority. The ICC claims near-universal jurisdiction over the citizens of every country, violating all principles of justice, fairness, and due process. We will never surrender America’s sovereignty to an unelected, unaccountable, global bureaucracy. America is governed by Americans.\textsuperscript{266}

Still, the best example of Trump’s foreign policy language is from 2017, when he visited Southeast Asia after abandoning the so-called TPP-agreement. This deal had been worked out by the previous administration as a NAFTA-like deal covering numerous countries in the Pacific region, but now Trump said:

I will [instead] make bilateral trade agreements with any Indo-Pacific nation that wants to be our partner and that will abide by the principles of fair and reciprocal trade. What we will no longer do is enter into large agreements that tie our hands, surrender our

\textsuperscript{265} Trump, “Remarks to the United Nations...,” (September 19, 2017).
sovereignty, and make meaningful enforcement practically impossible. Instead, we will
deal on a basis of mutual respect and mutual benefit. We will respect your independence
and your sovereignty. We want you to be strong, prosperous, and self-reliant, rooted in
your history and branching out toward the future. That is how we will thrive and grow
together, in partnerships of real and lasting value.267

Moreover, he described the rejection of the TPP and similar pacts as a return to a state of
preferred normalcy.268

In America, like every nation that has won and defended its sovereignty, we understand
that we have nothing so precious as our birthright, our treasured independence, and our
freedom. That knowledge has guided us throughout American history. It has inspired us
to sacrifice and innovate. And it is why today, hundreds of years after our victory in the
American Revolution, we still remember the words of an American founder and our
second President of the United States, John Adams. As an old man, just before his death,
this great patriot was asked to offer his thoughts on the 50th anniversary of glorious
American freedom. He replied with the words: independence forever.269

Finally, an early sign of how Trump planned to run for a second term is that he opened
with filling his 2020 State of Union not only with boasting about economic and other successes
but a rhetorical exercise in the passive-exclusive form of American Exceptionalism he stands for.

He did so with words that could well have been spoken by George Washington, Thomas
Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, or Ronald Reagan:

The American nation was carved out of the vast frontier by the toughest, strongest,
fiercest, and most determined men and women ever to walk on the face of the Earth. Our
ancestors braved the unknown; tamed the wilderness; settled the Wild West; lifted
millions from poverty, disease, and hunger; vanquished tyranny and fascism; ushered the
world to new heights of science and medicine; laid down the railroads, dug out the
canals, raised up the skyscrapers. And, ladies and gentlemen, our ancestors built the most
exceptional republic ever to exist in all of human history, and we are making it greater
than ever before. This is our glorious and magnificent inheritance. We are Americans.

267 Donald J. Trump, “Remarks at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation CEO Summit in Danang, Vietnam,”
Foreign Policy, accessed February 22, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/20/the-trump-doctrine-big-think-
america-first-nationalism/.
269 Ibid.
We are pioneers. We are the pathfinders. We settled the New World, we built the modern world, and we changed history forever by embracing the eternal truth that everyone is made equal by the hand of Almighty God. America is the place where anything can happen. America is the place where anyone can rise. And here, on this land, on this soil, on this continent, the most incredible dreams come true.\textsuperscript{270}

\textsuperscript{270} Trump, “Address Before a Joint Session...,” (February 4, 2020).
We [Athenians] alone do good to our neighbors not upon a calculation of interest, but in the confidence of freedom and in a frank and fearless spirit.

THUCYDIDES (c. 431 BC)

Conclusion

Because it was pointed out in the Introduction that exceptionalist rhetoric has been more common than the examples presented in this thesis imply, it is only proper to open this last part by noting that such language may not have been as important for U.S. politics as this analysis probably have indicated. This “thesis effect” is an inevitable result of a focused work, and it should for the record therefore be recalled that other intellectual movements, among them progressivism, positivism, behaviorism, modern liberalism, and (neo)conservatism, plus a number of material and geopolitical developments, often have played more significant roles. Nonetheless, American Exceptionalism has interacted frequently with these other forces, and it has occasionally been decisive for political outcomes. Thus, from the start, the concept has not only been key to the self-image of Americans but an animating force throughout U.S. history.

To begin by summarizing the most general impression emerging from this study, American Exceptionalism seems to have been a largely positive force, offering Americans a collective identity, a civic sense, and a political loadstar. Like the U.S. itself, the concept is a
unique phenomenon semi-purposely created to hold our evermore diverse Union together and to sustain a public beyond-politics “belief in America.” Hence, it has been both an adhesive and an equalizer for Democrats and Republicans, blacks and whites, citizens and immigrants, alike. At the same time, there should be no denying that exceptionalist notions and ideas have every now and then – as in the expulsion of loyalists, the dealings with American Indians, and the concept’s modern aggressive form – also been abused. Yet, here it is no different from many other patriotic or collective ideas, including European nationalism and ideologies.

However, it was not until the Spanish-American War in 1898 that American Exceptionalism truly began to affect day-to-day U.S. politics. This war became a catalyst transforming the concept from a modest civic religion, construed in support of the visions and constitutionalism of the Founding Fathers, into a full-blown nationalist ideology, including ideas about the essence of human nature and the direction of history. Specifically, the war boosted the belief that the U.S. was destined to play a leading role in world affairs. This hubristic form of the concept found its first grand rhetor in Theodore Roosevelt and prime theorist in Woodrow Wilson, who together framed an exceptionalist discourse that still marks U.S. politics. And since they made a strong connection between foreign and domestic affairs, since 1898, hyperbolic thinking has affected domestic politics as well.

As a result, during the 20th century, exceptionalist language turned into a staple of U.S. political rhetoric in general, presidential oratory in particular, and both parties based their programs on exceptionalist visions of America. However, today, their focus differs. In essence, since the 1950s, Republicans have stressed the importance of (negative) freedoms while Democrats have pressed for (more) equality. This division makes sense given the parties’ evolution from two centrist voter coalitions around 1900 to today’s pure left- and right-wing
alternatives. Moreover, this development is often explained by the GOP’s right-turns under Goldwater and Reagan. However, as shown in this thesis, an equally important reason has been the slow but steady radicalization of the Democratic Party. In more detail, since the 1930s, to prop up their ambition to construct a federal welfare state, Democrats have distanced themselves from traditional understandings of American notions like individual freedom, limited government, and states’ rights. Since the 1990s, many in that party have also for this and other ideological reasons discarded exceptionalist rhetoric.

Because of this, American Exceptionalism has become so associated with conservatism that the two today often function as one. This effort began in earnest with the Conservative Movement in which William F. Buckley’s *National Review* played a central role. It prepared the intellectual ground for and helped staff Goldwater’s presidential run in 1964 and was brought to fruition by Reagan and “the Gingrich brigade” in the last quarter of the 20th century. However, since during that same period, America passed a tipping point between communitarian and atomistic-individualist cultures, the value of “playing the exceptionalist card” has dwindled, particularly in the domestic realm. In the 2000s, American Exceptionalism thus became a source of political conflict more than a refrain for national unity.

We will return to this development after making the following, more general observations. When listing exceptionalist views of post-1898 presidents according to the four types defined in the Introduction – active-passive and inclusive-exclusive – plus adding information about their party affiliation, if they had taken the country to war (WP), and aspired

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1 “War President” has here been defined as presidents engaging the U.S. in at least one major conflict, like Wilson did in 1917; escalating low-intensive operations into full-scale war, like LBJ in Vietnam; and engaging the country in large-scale international operations, like Obama in Libya in 2011. Hence, minor incidents, generally resulting in fewer than 100 U.S. military deaths such as the Banana Wars 1898-1934 and Reagan’s 1983 invasion of Grenada, plus inherited operations like Nixon’s in Vietnam and Trump’s in Syria, have been omitted.
to implement major reforms (RP), several interesting patterns occur. To be clear, because presidents’ exceptionalist views sometimes have been vague, inconsistent, or both, this sorting is tentative. Thus, conclusions drawn from it should be treated more as starting points for further discussions than as definitive analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>WP</th>
<th>RP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>William McKinley (1897-1901)</td>
<td>Active-Inclusive</td>
<td>R</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909)</td>
<td>Active-Inclusive</td>
<td>R</td>
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<tr>
<td>William H. Taft (1909-1913)</td>
<td>Active-Inclusive</td>
<td>R</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921)</td>
<td>Active-Inclusive</td>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Warren Harding (1921-1923)</td>
<td>Passive-Exclusive</td>
<td>R</td>
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<tr>
<td>Calvin Coolidge (1923-1929)</td>
<td>Passive-Exclusive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Herbert Hoover (1929-1933)</td>
<td>Passive-Inclusive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1945)</td>
<td>Active-Inclusive</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harry S. Truman (1945-1953)</td>
<td>Active-Inclusive</td>
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<td>Dwight Eisenhower (1953-1961)</td>
<td>Active-Inclusive</td>
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<td>John F. Kennedy (1961-1963)</td>
<td>Active-Inclusive</td>
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<td>Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bill Clinton (1993-2001)</td>
<td>Active-Inclusive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Donald Trump (2017-2020)</td>
<td>Passive-Exclusive</td>
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Thus, of 21 presidents since 1898, more than half (14) have wished to actively spread American values abroad, and of the seven who did not, all but one (Obama) were Republicans.

Three of these later presidents (Harding, Coolidge, Trump) were also exclusive-minded, meaning that they did not believe spreading American values abroad was even feasible. Moreover, of nine war presidents, all but one (Obama) have had an active (and inclusive) view of American
Exceptionalism, while no passive (and exclusive) minded presidents have ever purposely taken the country into war. Also, twice as many war presidents have been Democrats (Wilson, FDR, Truman, LBJ, Clinton, Obama) as Republicans (McKinley, Bush 41, Bush 43). Thus, the only exception to the overall patterns outlined here is the passive-inclusive Obama. His wars in Libya and Syria were reluctant but can be regarded as obligatory by expectations created by his own and earlier presidents’ use of exceptionalist language.

The foremost conclusion that can be drawn from this is that a strong belief in American Exceptionalism is per se not an indicator of presidents’ readiness to go to war, but that holding an active-inclusive variant of the concept is. The most solid proof for this is that all presidents’ decisions to go to war since 1898 except one (FDR) have been active choices based on what good for the world they thought U.S. involvement could bring. (By 1941, FDR had also taken such a strong stand against Fascism that history may have unfolded similarly even without the Japanese attack.) The fact that Democrats have gone to war twice as often as Republicans, despite belonging to the nationalist party, points to the same conclusion. For sure, circumstances have often played big roles. It is, for example, possible that neither Truman and Bush 43 would have gone to war if not for North Korea’s attack and 9/11. But, they could have acted otherwise, so a clear link between presidents’ exceptionalist views and actions has been revealed here.

We find a similar pattern regarding domestic reforms. Five of seven reform presidents (TR, Wilson, FDR, LBJ, Reagan) had an active view of American Exceptionalism, and while four of them (Wilson, FDR, LBJ, Obama) were liberal Democrats, plus Theodore Roosevelt a Progressive, who thought reforms were necessary not only for domestic needs but to keep America an attractive model, Reagan was a conservative wanting to roll back liberal policies for the same reason. Thus, presidents with an active view of American Exceptionalism are
seemingly prone to large-scale reforms. And since three of them were also war presidents (Wilson, FDR, LBJ), we can hypothesize that such persons are prone to take decisive actions to make things happen both at home and abroad; particularly since the two passive-inclusive reform presidents (Nixon, Obama) were also internationally very active.

Because of this, the most important lesson to draw from this investigation is that when trying to identify, describe, and analyze the penchants of presidents and others for warring and reform, we benefit from considering not only what party they belong to and their ideological bents, but also to what form of American Exceptionalism they adhere. Given the central role the concept has for Americans’ self-image and collective sense, this is not a shocking revelation. Nonetheless, because people’s exceptionalist mindset often pair with or even override party affiliation and ideological inclinations, it is important to actually also make use of such information. With this guidance in mind, let us now move on to examine American Exceptionalism’s influence upon U.S. foreign and domestic politics more closely.

FOREIGN POLICY

This thesis has established that more dogmatic forms of American Exceptionalism risk blinding people to the fact that scores of cultural specifics underlie Western democracy and capitalism, causing these systems to work. Explicitly, when strong exceptionalist beliefs combine with a Rousseauian positive or “plastic” view of human nature, inferring that cultures can effortlessly be altered by political and bureaucratic means, they may lower cost assessments for going to war, engaging in nation-building projects, etc. Since early American Exceptionalism was muted by the Founding Fathers’ realist views of human nature and politics, this problem was for long
not a grave issue. But, after 1898, as believers in American Exceptionalism were increasingly affected not only by idealistic sentiments but by positivist and behaviorist views, it became an important incentive to intervention abroad.

This change was reflected in Woodrow Wilson’s belief that in World War I he could broker a “scientific peace” built upon American principles. However, it was not until after World War II, and the elevation of FDR’s democratist-human rights form of American Exceptionalism to international dogma, that ideological belligerence become an issue. From then on, presidents exceptionalist views have offered justifications for going to war where no, few, or only marginal U.S. material and geopolitical interests have been at stake. This first led to the large-scale involvement in Korea and Vietnam and, in the 1990s, as the U.S. entered its most exceptionalist period ever, in countries like Panama, Liberia, Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, Zaire, Sudan, Kosovo, Yemen, and Macedonia. The exceptionalist brashness driving this development then reached a formal peak after 9/11, when George W. Bush staged full-scale invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and made world democratization an explicit goal for his foreign policy.

However, as it became clear that Iraq had had no WMDs, public support for the Iraq War – and beyond that, the War on Terrorism – began to collapse just as it had done for the Vietnam War when its anti-Communist credentials had been exhausted. And while it had taken Americans nearly a decade to turn against Vietnam, they rebuffed Iraq in less than half that time. So, even if the 2004 Presidential Election stands out as a historic contest wherein Bush 43’s aggressive form of American Exceptionalism won over John Kerry’s more modest version of the same, exceptionalist ruses for war over time seem to have less credibility, or at least to have become less durable. Since Americans have never been thrilled to go to war, and after the Cold War were even less eager to act as the world’s police, this is not surprising. On the contrary, this skepticism
is precisely what to expect given the “modernizing” vector marking Western societies in general. Put differently, on this issue, Americans seem to be catching up with European skepticism about war as a political tool, just as they seem to be doing in regard to a federal welfare state.

A similar pattern is noticeable also vis-à-vis other international affairs, like trade. Many Americans viewed the global agendas of Bush 41, Clinton, Bush 43, and Obama with cynicism not only because of the wars they started but because of the trade deals and other agreements they signed. More specifically, the costs for deals like NAFTA in the form of deindustrialization, lost jobs, and salary dumping, and the price tag on arrangements like the Kyoto Protocol was met with strong opposition (at least compared to the negligible disapproval it provoked in other Western countries). Similarly, public misgivings regarding Clinton, Obama, and others signing away U.S. independence to supranational bodies such as the World Trade Organization and the International Criminal Court flourished. In addition, making things even harder for many was that these costs, effects, and worries were belittled or ignored by many in the American elites.

Subsequently, as these developments continued, qualms morphed into anger. And in 2007, when the Great Recession hit in the wake of the Iraq War, a reaction against post-Cold War “globalism” at large was all but destined to happen. The Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street were both signs of this opposition. Moreover, since the uproar became strongest amongst Republican grassroots, the foreign policy map suddenly turned fuzzy with opinions seemingly cutting freely within and across party lines. Still, centrists in both parties to this day tend to defend international engagements and deals of nearly any kind while the far left, the non-neoconservative right (including President Trump), and a hefty part of the electorate want to reassess them. Also, although these groups are politically polar opposites, they tend to use
similar exceptionalist arguments for goals such as more fair trade deals, the need to protect American jobs, and to defend national independence.

Arguably, the main reason for this shattering of the post-World War II consensus on U.S. foreign policy, trade, and “globalism” in general is the Bush-Clinton-Bush-Obama era of uneven economic progress, “endless wars,” and failed nation-building projects. Or, more concretely, as the human and economic costs for the latter endeavors increased, the situation ultimately became intolerable above all for people living in “red” America away from areas that benefit from the dot.com economy. Besides, as the costs for wars, nation-building projects, and lopsided trade deals weakened the idea of democratic capitalism as a universal prescription for peace and prosperity, it undermined the exceptionalist belief of Americans that people everywhere want to live like them. That disillusionment with the U.S.’s international role and obligations should spread to domestic politics was thus only to be expected.

DOMESTIC POLITICS

This thesis has established that American Exceptionalism has always been a domestic political force. Throughout the 19th century, the concept supported the country’s original socioeconomic order at the same time as acceptance of it (together with learning English) made it possible for vast bodies of culturally and ethnically diverse immigrants to assimilate themselves. Also, from around 1900, Progressives arguing that to function as a model, the U.S. had to reform increased the direct link between foreign and domestic politics inherent in Americans’ self-image as a model for others to follow. This relation is somewhat elusive, but it can be described as equivalent to Christians’ trying to live exemplary lives as an inspiration for others. Moreover,
after the U.S. developed a federal welfare state, this argument was reversed by conservatives who stated that to stay wealthy and fulfill its obligations, America had to return to its original socioeconomic order. That is to say, the exceptionalist notions of (negative) freedom and (more) equality were pitted against each other. And while concurrently feeding off and nurturing the Culture Wars, the partisan polarization this has created has sowed discord far and wide in the general population.

Furthermore, adding to this dissent is that both liberals and conservatives are driven by the theologically rooted proclivity of Americans for perfection and going to theoretical extremes. This tendency has at least three interconnected effects. First, it is fostering the idea that Americans can do things that other people cannot. Throughout the 20th century, this arrogance was also bolstered by events like the U.S. becoming the richest and most powerful country in history, going to the Moon, and defeating both fascism and communism. Second, the idea augments Americans’ marked ignorance of foreign experiences. For example, while liberals are ignoring the problems of European countries with regard to, e.g., high taxes, over regulations, rigid labor markets, and bottlenecks in government-run health care systems, conservatives are arguing that economic growth alone can fix the lot, including the deficit. In effect, both sides let the unviable experiment of having the U.S. be a welfare-warfare state and a low-tax society continue.

Nevertheless, the arguably most severe exceptionalist-related problem in the U.S. today is ideological polarization and the distorted sense of national worth that it produces. Precisely, it creates potentially dangerous problems in both the political and public domains. Most basically, amongst people in general, the rift created by the Democrats’ distancing themselves from exceptionalist themes on one side and the Republicans becoming the nationalist-exceptionalist party on the other creates a divide that threatens to tear the nation apart. In short, as the prior set
of values and beliefs constituting American Exceptionalism is losing its bipartisan appeal because of, e.g., the welfare state, secularization, and globalization it is being replaced by an ideological division that alienates people not only politically but socially and culturally from each other. Case in point, we are currently experiencing a near-schizophrenic confusion about what it means to be an American. Because, the difference in values and worldview between a flag-burning ANTIFA activist in Portland, Oregon, and a blue-collar Trump voter in Howell, Michigan, is greater than their being physically thousands of miles apart.

Politically, the effects of this development are even more acute. A modern democracy besides free and fair elections must be guided by a set of commonly held and respected unwritten rules and customs, like politicians showing a basic level of respect for their opponents, keeping a civil tone in debates, and being prepared to admit defeat after elections. And most would say it is not an exaggeration to state that the U.S. has begun to slide on such accounts. Accusations of voter fraud (from the right) and of voter intimidation (from the left) are legion. All post-Cold War presidents have dealt with Congressional and other opponents that openly declare that their main goal is to get rid of them. Presidential candidates in the 2012, 2016, and 2020 elections all publicly showed personal contempt for each other. And after the last two elections, the losing candidates have refused to accept the outcomes; Hillary Clinton by calling Donald Trump an “illegitimate president”\(^2\) and he by disputing results even after the Electoral College assembled. Indeed, even eruptions of political violence are nowadays not completely uncommon events.

Since the 1990s, other actors have exhibited similar bad behavior. This goes not least for the professional army of pundits, experts, journalists, and academics that drive the 24/7 media

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cycle. They have actively helped to create an environment wherein many partisans no longer even reflect over what is said outside their own “bubble” and “U.S. voters now regard each other as a bigger enemy than Russia or North Korea and just as dangerous as China.”

Tellingly, the suspicion is so strong that many partisans don’t even trust mainstream scientific results that do not corroborate partisan views. For example, many Democrats disregard the scientific consensus regarding human nature defining, e.g., gender roles and sexual behaviors, and Republicans doubt the so-called AGW-theory about global warming.

Similarly, next to the media, academia has been responsible for the severing of American national unity through support, tacit and open, for groups and actions like Black Lives Matter, the WOKE-movement, and New York Times revisionist “The 1619 Project.” Even if most activists and writers in groups and initiatives like this certainly are well-meaning, their opposition to basic national mores and sources of unity – such as the teaching of traditional history, English as a common language, standing during the national anthem, and more – can only be deemed as provocative for a majority of Americans and therefore sullying for public discourse.

Furthermore, looking for triggering events and defining moments in this deterioration of political decorum, it is easy to point to the impeachment of Bill Clinton in 1998 and the 2000 Florida recount. However, this thesis tells a very different and more compelling story: that these...

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3 “Voters See Each Other as America’s Enemy,” (December 01, 2020) Rasmussen Reports, accessed December 8, 2020, https://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/general_politics/november_2020/voters_see_each_other_as_america_s_enemy?fbclid=IwAR2Zm8HhsZ3QD_79osdQBgQlkiAr3lsHEakyr5FkoXn4m9e3eiSG8CKmks. “The latest Rasmussen Reports national telephone and online survey finds that 24% of Likely U.S. Voters think Biden voters are America’s biggest enemy as 2020 draws to a close. The same number (24%) see China as enemy number one. Nearly as many (22%) regard Trump voters as the biggest enemy, while 10% view Russia and seven percent (7%) North Korea as the largest threat to the United States. Eleven percent (11%) are more wary of something else.”
events were merely symptoms of a much more long-term and severe loss of shared ideas, values, and traditions. One practical example of this dissolution of old unifying ways and bonds is identity politics. While Republicans continue to appeal to voters as generic Americans and often use exceptionalist language to do so, since the 1990s, Democrats have increasingly tried to appeal to voters as young, old, female, African American, Latino, LBGQT, and other subgroups.

Therefore, the findings of this study beg speculation about the future of American Exceptionalism. As many countries lately have caught up with the U.S. in wealth, making the nation no longer outstanding in material terms, some claim that the country’s glory days are over. Also, since the 1990s, millions of Americans have adopted a “New Class” worldview while traditional values and virtues are being challenged by secularization, individualism, immigration, and globalism. However, as noted, disheartening talk bothers Americans today almost as much as Jimmy Carter’s malaise did in the 1970s. And since the U.S. is still a politically, militarily, diplomatically, economically, and technologically singular power, there is no obvious reason for Americans to reassess their basic self-image or for immigrants (at least in the second and third generations) not to adopt an exceptionalist outlook.

Furthermore, that the at first American/European nature of globalization is fading because of the economic, military, and political rise of culturally alien powers like China, India, and Brazil will arguably also help the U.S. to remain American by making further adaption to it more challenging. Still, there are strong centrifugal forces at work. Of these, mass immigration from Latin America, elite and other group hostility toward traditional American culture, and the growth of Muslim, Hindu, and other religious minority groups are arguably the most perilous from the point of view of national unity. In combination, these trends and views weaken the
U.S.’ relative ethnic, cultural, and linguistic homogeneity and undermine American Exceptionalism as a common denominator

Making today’s fragmentation of society even more serious is the failure of those who oppose traditional patriotic sentiments to offer an alternative to Americans for an identity more concrete than “humankind,” larger than tribe, and different from adherence to a specific religion. Such a collective self is vital to the unity and functioning of modern states. Also, if people and groups lack a certain number of common values, the only potent power center left will be the federal government. For traditionally statist and/or authoritarian countries, like Sweden, France, and Russia, this is a lesser problem, but in the American republican, communal tradition, that the Constitution was written to advance, protect and control, unity today is waning without being replaced by anything but slogans which for many are meaningless (or even provocative).

Furthermore, since the early 20th century, the development of “modernity” has been a crucial underpinning for the extraordinary extension of the scope and power of Executive power. In short, parallel with local and regional identities giving way for a stronger national identity, the powers of the president, as the prime symbol of the nation, were extended to let him deal more vigorously with both foreign and domestic issues. However, from the 1960s onwards, as partisanship and ideological polarization began to undermine national cohesion, the president’s persona became increasingly controversial until around 2000, he began to divide the nation more than uniting it. Furthermore, this could soon lead to national dissolution and/or totalitarian tendencies (as the latter maybe will the only way to avoid the former). In other words, preserving a moderate form of American Exceptionalism as a ballast to an ever more diverse society is arguably a requisite for the continuation of liberal democracy in America.
Finally, it should be noted that since this study covers a very long time span, it offers plenty of opportunities for future study. First of all, since this analysis is based upon qualitative readings of highly selected materials, there is a need for quantitative research that can support or challenge the conclusions drawn here. Moreover, to broaden this thesis’ scope from presidents and a small number of politicians and others to broader groups of actors would greatly enrich our understanding of the role and importance of American Exceptionalism. Extending this treatise’s limited probing’s of exceptionalisms role and use in various moral and spiritual debates, ideological and intellectual movements, and artistic currents would probably also offer valuable insights. Still, one dares hope that already this work, despite its shortcomings, will help spur a more vigorous debate about the forms, impact, and future of American Exceptionalism. Given the discordant tone of public debate in the U.S. today, the country needs more than ever something like it to hold America together. At the same time, it should never be forgotten that the concept is a double-edged sword that can be used as well as abused both at home and abroad.
Keep reading books, but remember that a book is only a book, and you should learn to think for yourself.

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