

Explaining the American Exceptionalism

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ABSTRACT

Exceptionalism seems like a perfectly unexceptional concept until one asks what it means. Those who use the term will then either offer definite, but usually conflicting, definitions or greet the question with a bewildered stare. Exceptionalism is evidently a far less obvious idea than most suppose. This essay has two parts. It begins by looking at the different ways in which Americans

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conceive of exceptionalism, treating perceptions and interpretations but leaving the question of whether America is in fact exceptional to the real social scientists. It will turn next to one of the important meanings of exceptionalism the idea of a mission and subject the dominant understanding of this idea to critical analysis, offering an alternative account.

INTRODUCTION

American exceptionalism is one of three related ideas. The first is that the history of the United States is inherently different from those of other nations. In this view, American exceptionalism stems from its emergence from the American Revolution, thereby becoming what political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset called "the first new nation" and developing a uniquely American ideology, "Americanism", based on liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, republicanism, democracy and laissez-faire economics. This ideology itself is often referred to as "American exceptionalism." Second is the idea that the US has a unique mission to transform the world. As Abraham Lincoln stated in the Gettysburg address (1863), Americans have a duty to ensure, "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Third is the sense that the United States' history and mission give it superiority over other nations [1].

Over the last two centuries, prominent Americans have described the United States as an "empire of liberty," a "shining city on a hill," the "last best hope of Earth," the "leader of the free world," and the "indispensable nation." These enduring tropes explain why all presidential candidates feel compelled to offer ritualistic paeans to America's

greatness and why President Barack Obama landed in hot water most recently, from Mitt Romney for saying that while he believed in "American exceptionalism," it was no different from "British exceptionalism," "Greek exceptionalism," or any other country's brand of patriotic chest-thumping [2].

The theory of the exceptionalism of the U.S. has developed over time and can be traced to many sources. French political scientist and historian Alexis de Tocqueville was the first writer to describe the country as "exceptional" in 1831 and 1840. Most statements of "American exceptionalism" presume that America's values, political system, and history are unique and worthy of universal admiration [3]. They also imply that the United States is both destined and entitled to play a distinct and positive role on the world stage.

The actual phrase "American exceptionalism" was originally coined by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin as a critique of a revisionist faction of American communists who argued that the American political climate was unique, making it an 'exception' to certain elements of Marxist theory. U.S. president Ronald Reagan is often credited with having crystallized this ideology in recent decades. Political scientist Eldon Eisenach

argues in the twenty-first century American exceptionalism has come under attack from the postmodern left as a reactionary myth: "The absence of a shared purposes ratified in the larger sphere of liberal-progressive public policy beginning with the assumption of American exceptionalism as a reactionary myth [4].

The only thing wrong with this self-congratulatory portrait of America's global role is that it is mostly a myth. Although the United States possesses certain unique qualities from high levels of religiosity to a political culture that privileges individual freedom the conduct of U.S. foreign policy has been determined primarily by its relative power and by the inherently competitive nature of international politics. By focusing on their supposedly exceptional qualities, Americans blind themselves to the ways that they are a lot like everyone else [5] [6].

This unchallenged faith in American exceptionalism makes it harder for Americans to understand why others are less enthusiastic about U.S. dominance, often alarmed by U.S. policies, and frequently irritated by what they see as U.S. hypocrisy, whether the subject is possession of nuclear weapons, conformity with international law, or America's tendency to condemn the conduct of others while ignoring its own failings [7]. Ironically, U.S. foreign policy would probably be more effective if Americans were less convinced of their own unique virtues and less eager to proclaim them. What we need, in short, is a more realistic and critical assessment of America's true character and contributions. In that spirit, I offer here the Top 5 Myths about American Exceptionalism.

Conceptualizing Exceptionalist Foreign Policy Discourse

We conceptualize exceptionalism as foreign policy discourse that is part of a society's debates around its identity as a nation. Exceptionalist discourse expresses a paradoxical relationship between universality and particularity: the exceptionalist state claims particular and exclusive access to the universal good—in

terms of its comprehension and the disposition to realize it beyond its own borders. Exceptionalist discourse is articulated and enacted through states' foreign policy. Accordingly, our notion of discourse encompasses linguistic and nonlinguistic elements [8], or "ideas and acting" [9]. Especially with regard to foreign policy statements, uttering them is practically enacting foreign policy. Foreign policy discourse functions as a set of rules, structure, or frame of intelligibility that is both constraining and enabling in that it makes certain courses of action necessary, desirable, and possible and others unacceptable or inconceivable [10] [11]. In other words, it implies engaging in some types of external action and not others [12]. While we understand all exceptionalist discourses as a form of identity construction, not all identity construction is necessarily exceptionalist, nor do we find exceptionalist elements in every country's foreign policy discourse (see below). Although certain kinds of exceptionalism may be unique to individual states in historical periods in time, exceptionalism as foreign policy discourse is not. Much to the contrary, as our cases illustrate, their family resemblance demands comparisons throughout history and across cases and world regions [13]. Exceptionalist discourse expresses a peculiar link between a state's foreign policy and its self-understanding as a unique society or civilization that is related to some form of higher order revelation or spiritual or otherworldly character. This link is peculiar because it establishes uniqueness as a foundation for, first, a conviction of moral superiority over virtually every other society, based on which the self-ascribed exceptionalist state pursues an allegedly universal common good in its foreign policy conduct. Second, exceptionalism based on uniqueness implies the belief in an exceptional state's disposition as impossible to be replicated by others. This interplay between uniqueness (or particularity) and universality is what constitutes the paradox of exceptionalism: A unique insight into

supposedly universal values and their foreign policy implications is derived from a particular civilizational or spiritual heritage, political history, and/or geographical location. In this understanding, the impossibility of replicating the exceptional state makes the realization of these values (like peace, democracy, individual rights) contingent upon the exceptional 15 state's success in foreign policy. In other words, the universal global good is dependent on the unique and particular history of the exceptionalist state.⁵ This distinguishes exceptionalism from nationalism, a related yet distinct strain of thought that also involves a strong feeling of superiority and, more often than not, exemptionalism [14] [15]. Whereas exceptionalism refers to universalism, nationalism tends to be particularistic and exclusive in nature. Nationalist discourses define superiority first and foremost in ethnic or cultural terms with "finite if elastic boundaries" [16], less in moral or spiritual ones. By contrast, exceptionalist discourses refer to a morality that all humankind should ideally adhere to.⁶ In our understanding, not all countries' foreign policy discourses are exceptionalist. Neither are all those with claims to a foreign policy guided by supposedly universal moral norms. To illustrate this point, recall the debate around Canada or Australia as "good international citizens" or "Global Good Samaritans" [17] [18]. This very concept, as put forward by Australian foreign minister Gareth Evans in the early 1990s, implies that all states should and are in principle capable of fulfilling their moral duties as global citizens. Such duties typically include the defense of human rights, participation in peacekeeping missions, and generally the contribution to the solution of collective action problems globally. Special responsibilities for certain states may arise from certain capabilities or resources; yet, responsibilities in principle are not based on a distinctive status or unique domestic qualities. In fact, the terminology of citizenship incorporates the belief that moral duties and responsibilities are both intelligible

and applicable to all members of international society. Moreover, the good international citizenship in its official variant was motivated at least partly by strategic considerations with regard to an external audience. The result was an exercise in public diplomacy as much as in actual foreign policy. This contrasts with our notion of exceptionalism, which, although routinely serving as a legitimating device for specific foreign policies, is hardly ever directed primarily at foreign audiences [19]. Thus, exceptionalism as foreign policy discourse goes beyond what former US president Barack Obama insinuated in 2009, that is, the banal claim for uniqueness virtually every country can legitimately make [20]. Importantly, the question for us is not whether states are truly exceptional. This is an issue dealt with primarily in historical research focusing on US exceptionalism (as for instance [21]; [22]; [23]; [24] and often brought forward in political commentaries or opinion pieces [25]. Instead, in terms of identity construction, we consider how certain states understand themselves as exceptional and how this not only constitutes their foreign policy discourses but ultimately also among other factors their "being" as foreign policy actors. Although we are aware of the importance of accounting for mismatches between how policies are framed and how they are implemented, we concur with scholars who speak out against treating exceptionalism as either "mere rhetoric" or as just a "manipulative tool employed by policy makers" [26]; [27]. Instead, we follow the understanding that exceptionalist beliefs "frame the discourse of foreign policy making by providing the underlying assumptions and terms of reference for foreign policy debate and conduct" [28]. As such, exceptionalist discourses come in many forms and nuances that can be more or less overt and more or less explicit. For instance, in many cases the content of a speech or certain policies flow out of an exceptionalist self-understanding, without explicitly or even consciously being framed as exceptionalism.

Finally, the claimed insights into a universally valid morality as the exclusive domain of a particular exceptionalist state (or civilization) feed into a conviction of being exempt from those norms, rules, and conventions governing the international relations of all other unexceptional states. However, as will be seen in our case studies, a wider sense of exceptionalism does not necessarily mean exemptions from concrete international rules such as laws or treaties but may instead apply to an expanded notion of logics or “laws of history” [29]. Here, our conceptualization of exceptionalism differs from those arguing that exceptionalism is necessarily exemptionalist, meaning the attitude that the exceptionalist country is not bound by multilateral regimes and agreements to the same extent as other states are or that international treaties should apply to all states except for the exceptionalist state [30]; [31]. Instead, we take exemptionalism as only one of several potential characteristics. Thereby we may risk our framework to be understood as an attempt in diluting an established concept. This, however, would be a misunderstanding. First, we maintain that one can hardly speak of exceptionalism as an “established concept” that goes beyond the case of American exceptionalism. Far from employing a widely accepted definition of exceptionalism, the existing literature is ambiguous about whether exceptionalism and exemptionalism necessarily go hand in hand, or whether the latter is just a possible trait of the former [32]; [33]; [34]. One of our motivations behind writing this article is precisely that one needs to look beyond American exceptionalism to be able to say something about exceptionalism per se. Second, at the core of (almost) all exceptionalisms considered in the literature is the unequivocal belief in a particular insight into the universal good that is understood as vital for international society/mankind/progress in international relations. As a result, all exceptionalist discourses do exhibit certain exemptionalism in the sense that the respective society is understood as being exempt from the “ignorance” other

societies and nations suffer from. Yet, as illustrated below, this exceptionalist characteristic or epistemic exemptionalism does not necessarily translate into the renunciation of international rules and norms. In fact, the opposite may be true. If we simply equated exemptionalism with exceptionalism, we would lose sight of exceptionalism as one amongst several potential motivations behind exemptionalism in international law [35]. To probe the argument, what would happen to our nonexemptionalist discourses (as in our cases of Turkey and India) if we did not count them as truly exceptionalist? Besides the fact that discourses in those countries have explicitly and throughout history articulated their foreign policy as exceptionalist themselves, discarding them as nonexceptionalist, in our view, would be both nonproductive and problematic: Nonproductive, as we might then overlook the potential of these nonexemptionalist foreign policy discourses to eventually become exemptionalist. By contrast, our typology allows us to consider and learn more about shifts in variants of exceptionalism over time. Equating exceptionalism with exemptionalism would also be problematic, as such a narrow definition that largely concurs with American exceptionalism and the confrontational features commonly ascribed to it bears the risk of becoming a self-fulfilling prophesy that is already haunting some of the scholarship on Chinese exceptionalism: this is what rising/great powers (like the United States) do, which is why they will necessarily become confrontational (like the United States). Again, in order to challenge this conventional wisdom, one needs to move beyond a US (and Western) -centric concept of exceptionalism.

American Exceptionalism and the Politics of Foreign Policy

It's a persistent idea: French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville called the U.S. "exceptional" almost 180 years ago. But it's also complicated. The belief that the United States, in its governance, politics, mission, and place in the world, is

unique, and, in its most extreme version, qualitatively superior to other nations abides to this day. The Washington Post recently argued that "American Exceptionalism on the decline," based on a Pew poll that measured opinion about "American culture." Pew found 49 percent of Americans think the nation's "culture is superior," down from 60 percent in 2005. While culture is certainly part of American exceptionalism, it is a small part. A better read on Americans views of the nation's exceptionalism was provided by a Gallup poll from late last year, which found that 80 percent of Americans believe the United States "has a unique character because of its history and Constitution that sets it apart from other nations as the greatest in the world."

With those numbers, it is unsurprising that the Republican presidential candidates have spent a good deal of oxygen and printer ink this campaign season decrying that President Barack Obama does not, they say, believe in American exceptionalism [36]. They point to an answer, applauded by some, at a 2009 press conference where he qualified the idea by saying, "I believe in American exceptionalism leadership is incumbent depends on our ability to create partnerships because we can't solve these problems alone." He's also suggested that American exceptionalism is similar to British and Greek national pride. This was not exceptional enough, it seems, for Republicans. Former Governor Mitt Romney said in this week's Republican foreign policy debate, "We have a president right now who thinks America's just another nation. America is an exceptional nation." Herman Cain, Rick Perry, and Newt Gingrich have all made similar comments [23].

These Republican candidates might be surprised to learn that Obama has talked more about American exceptionalism than Presidents Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush combined: a search on UC Santa Barbara's exhaustive presidential records library finds that no president from 1981 to today uttered the phrase "American exceptionalism" except Obama. As U.S. News' Robert Schlesinger wrote, "American exceptionalism" is a not

a traditional part of presidential vocabulary. According to Schlesinger's search public records, Obama is the only president in 82 years to use the term.

It's tempting to argue that no other president has cited American "exceptionalism" because it's not an actual word, or at least not one fit for presidential rhetoric. But presidents have not talked about "exceptional America" either. "Exceptional nation" or "country" are also both absent from the presidential record. The phrase "exceptional people" pops up in some specific instances, when speaking of individuals and communities. But references to the nation's "exceptional government," "exceptional system," "exceptional idea"? None.

International relations scholar Stephen Walt is the latest in a line of those who have attempted to debunk the "myth" of American exceptionalism. "Although the United States possesses certain unique qualities," he wrote, "the conduct of U.S. foreign policy has been determined primarily by its relative power and by the inherently competitive nature of international politics."

American Presidents, when faced with other proud nations and confronted by the threats and challenges the international system provides to every nation, let alone one with such global and dispersed interests as the United States, tend to agree with Walt, or at least act as it they do. They have avoided rhetoric that suggests the nation is qualitatively superior to other nations [11]. Despite academic refutation, despite a long track record of presidents avoiding it in their rhetoric, and despite a decade of challenges and frustrations that have left the nation struggling at home and abroad, it is springtime for the idea of American exceptionalism. And it is not just Obama and those vying to oppose him in 2012. Former President Bill Clinton admitted in his new book, despite his not using the phrase during his presidency, "I do believe in American exceptionalism. My life has been graced by it."

American exceptionalism is really just another name for a particular version of American nationalism. American nationalism is stirring -- and being stirred

-- for a number of reasons. Its reawakening has complicated the foreign policy politics for the Obama administration and its Republican challengers.

One possible reason that American nationalism is booming could be the nation's recent struggles. Andrew Sullivan suggested as much. A decade of frustrations in war and the economy, have led, as another Pew poll rightly found, to doubts about the nation. Having surely learned from President Jimmy Carter's infamous (if mislabeled) "malaise" speech, today's political leaders, when faced with a crisis in American expectations and beliefs, want to be seen as cheerleaders rather than doomsayers. They cheer most loudly when their team is down a few

Despite America's many successes, the country is hardly immune from setbacks, follies, and boneheaded blunders. If you have any doubts about that, just reflect on how a decade of ill-advised tax cuts, two costly and unsuccessful wars, and a financial meltdown driven mostly by greed and corruption have managed to squander the privileged position the United States enjoyed at the end of the 20th century. Instead of assuming that God is on their side, perhaps Americans should heed Abraham Lincoln's admonition that our greatest concern should be "whether we are on God's side." Given the many challenges Americans now face, from persistent unemployment to the burden of winding down two deadly wars, it's unsurprising that they find the idea of their own exceptionalism comforting and that their aspiring political leaders have been proclaiming it with increasing fervor. Such patriotism has its benefits, but not when it leads to a basic misunderstanding of America's role in the world. This is exactly how bad decisions get made. America has its own special qualities, as all countries do, but it is still a state embedded in a competitive

points. In his 2010 State of the Union, President Obama declared, "I do not accept second place for the United States of America."

Nationalism is not an unusual means of uniting a divided population, especially one as frustrated by economic difficulties, political challenges, and foreign setbacks as America's. In the 1970s, the exceptionalist rhetoric of such candidates as Ronald Reagan appealed to a country overcome by the nation's failure in Vietnam and beset by domestic challenges. While correlation does not always equal causation, the timing of exceptionalism's resurgence in the lead-up to the 2008 campaign suggests the nation's struggles were a driving force in the resurgence [6].

CONCLUSION

global system. It is far stronger and richer than most, and its geopolitical position is remarkably favorable. These advantages give the United States a wider range of choice in its conduct of foreign affairs, but they don't ensure that its choices will be good ones. Far from being a unique state whose behavior is radically different from that of other great powers, the United States has behaved like all the rest, pursuing its own self-interest first and foremost, seeking to improve its relative position over time, and devoting relatively little blood or treasure to purely idealistic pursuits. Yet, just like past great powers, it has convinced itself that it is different, and better, than everyone else. International politics is a contact sport, and even powerful states must compromise their political principles for the sake of security and prosperity. Nationalism is also a powerful force, and it inevitably highlights the country's virtues and sugarcoats its less savory aspects. But if Americans want to be truly exceptional, they might start by viewing the whole idea of "American exceptionalism" with a much more skeptical eye.

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