

American Exceptionalism at a Crossroads

Seongjong Song

The main goal of this research is to review and examine how the narrative of American exceptionalism has evolved over time, *inter alia*, in different administrations of the United States. The frequency in the usage of “American exceptionalism,” which came into use during the twentieth century, has increased exponentially for the last couple of years. The term, which began as a beacon of light and democracy as envisioned in John Winthrop’s “a City upon a Hill” in 1630 has undergone significant changes over the last four centuries. American exceptionalism has been used to justify a variety of purposes, from territorial expansion, Wilsonian idealism, a global crusade against an “Evil Empire,” to a preemptive strategy, and even as a political weapon for punishing opponents. Lastly, especially in view of the ongoing war on terrorism, three prominent strands of American exceptionalism are discussed: exemplarism, expansionism and exemptionalism.

Key Words: American exceptionalism, foreign policy, ‘shining city on a hill,’ Manifest Destiny, Wilsonianism, Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama, Bush Doctrine, exemplarism, expansionism, exemptionalism

“American exceptionalism” is at a crossroads. What started out as a beacon of democracy and freedom in John Winthrop’s 1630 sermon “a City upon a Hill,” the term has evolved over a lengthy period of time spanning close to four centuries, during which it has been intermingled and imbued with distinct strands of narratives such as exemplarism, expansionism and exemptionalism. History came full circle when Russian President Vladimir Putin admonished President Obama for evoking “American exceptionalism” as a pretext to launch a military strike against Syria; a phrase, ironically, that had been invented by one

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of Putin's predecessors 100 years prior. Additionally, in the midst of an explosive increase in the appearance of the term, American exceptionalism has been increasingly used as a political weapon to bludgeon domestic opponents for lack of patriotism during election campaigns. As the US-led military campaign to degrade and destroy the emerging threat from ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) has unfolded, the critical question to be raised is, "Why does the US have such a challenge getting Muslim countries on board to help the US save them?"

"Exceptionalism" is a relatively recent term that came into use during the 20th century. Politicians, authors, and historians adopted it to characterize the unique nature of American society and to envision America's global role (Tomes 2014). American exceptionalism does not refer to a single monolithic body of thought. Rather, it includes a wide range of unique features, from religious liberty and political freedom to justice, republicanism, egalitarianism, individuality, democracy, laissez-faire economics, social mobility, equality before the law, economic prosperity, and populism (Lipset 1997; Wilson 2009, 455).

As peculiar as it may sound, the inventor of the term "American exceptionalism" is none other than Joseph Stalin, the Soviet dictator. According to Max Lerner (1957), the social science indexes showed that it was not until the late 1950s that the term "exceptionalism" emerged in the literature, with one noticeable exception. In the 1920s, Jay Lovestone, then the leader of the American Communist Party, felt that somehow America's 'destined path' to communist revolution might be postponed compared to other European nations. Terrence McCoy (2012) wrote that when Stalin was informed that the proletariat in America was not interested in revolution, he demanded that Lovestone end this "heresy of American exceptionalism." In Stalin's first use of the term, exceptionalism was nothing more than an aberration from the normal.

Exceptionalist thinking constitutes a powerful driving force behind American foreign policy. The remarks of Obama (2009c) during his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in 2009 illustrate the heavy influence of exceptionalism on the *modus operandi* of American foreign policy: "The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms." In a broader sense, American exceptionalism is the belief that the US is "qualitatively different" from all other nations.

The idea of American exceptionalism became famous in what Seymour M. Lipset (1997, 17) describes as the "foreign traveler" literature about how America differs from Europe. The earliest and most famous account describing the US as exceptional is Alexis de Tocqueville's (2003) *Democracy in America*, written in the 1830s. Lipset notes, "Tocqueville is the first to refer to the US as exceptional—that is, qualitatively different from all other countries" (Lipset 1997, 18).

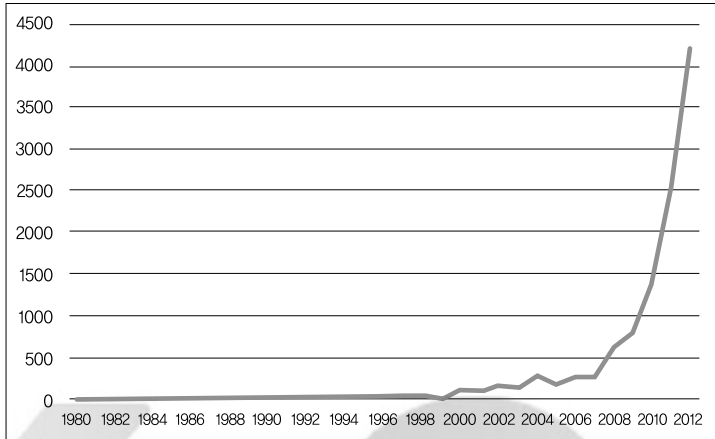
The meaning and application of exceptionalism has been constantly evolving throughout American history and foreign policy. Tracing and clarifying the different variants of exceptionalism throughout history can be a valuable method for understanding US foreign policy (Ullman, 1975). The main goal of this research is to review and examine how the narrative of American exceptionalism has evolved over time, *inter alia*, in different administrations.

SELECTING HISTORICAL MILESTONES FOR 'EXCEPTIONAL' NARRATIVES

Exceptionalist discourse is on the rise in American politics. Terrence McCoy (2012) found that the term “American exceptionalism” appeared in US publications 457 times between 1980 and 2000, climbing to 2,558 times in the 2000s and 4,172 times in 2010-12. As shown in Figure 1, it was not until the 1980s that American exceptionalism made a sudden resurgence in the media. *Factiva Survey* credited *The New York Times* with being the first mainstream publication for the revival of the concept in 1980 when it called on then-presidential contenders Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan to address core issues facing the nation, including American exceptionalism (McCoy 2012).

For the purposes of reviewing and examining the possible changes in the narrative of American exceptionalism, historical benchmarks were selected based upon several criteria: (1) contribution to the formation and establishment of the concept, (2) noticeable change in the tone and meaning, (3) relationship between American foreign policy and the term, and (4) frequency in the use of the word. Out of the last four hundred years of history, from the Puritans' voyage to America in the early 17th century to the present, six milestones have been selected in accordance with four yardsticks: (1) Winthrop's “a City upon a Hill” speech (1630), (2) Manifest Destiny and the Monroe Doctrine, (3) the Wilson administration, (4) the Carter and Reagan administrations, (5) the G. W. Bush administration, and (6) the Obama administration.

Figure 1. Exponential Increase in Discussion of 'American Exceptionalism' in US Media



Source: Adapted from J. Karabel, "'American Exceptionalism' and the Battle for the Presidency," *Huffington Post*, February 21, 2012. Updated with 4,172 times in 2012.

In essence, this paper aims to closely follow the historical footprints of American exceptionalism, with specific focus on the aforementioned historical junctures, in an attempt to analyze how its narrative has evolved over time, thereby drawing out valuable implications about the foreign policy of the United States, during the course of exploring clues to the following inquiries within the context of the changing nature of American exceptionalism: What is the historical origin and background of its emergence and germination? What is the role of American Exceptionalism and to what extent has the term been associated with foreign policy in the selected administrations? What are the defining characteristics, if any, of US foreign policy in relation to the concept of American exceptionalism, and how have they evolved or changed with the passage of time? How can the distinctive nature of American exceptionalism in different administrations be categorized into its prominent strands, such as exemplarism, exemptionalism, and expansionism? And, what are the strategic implications of the term on contemporary American foreign policy, for instance, in the ongoing fight against terrorism?

THE EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

“A CITY UPON A HILL”

When King James I (1566~1625) succeeded Queen Elizabeth I on the English throne, many Puritans and separatists began to lose their faith in England as a redeemer nation (Bercovitch 2012, 39). The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century fractured the cohesion of European Christianity and led to the creation of numerous new religious sects, many of which began to face religious persecution by the government. One such sect was the Puritans, which endeavored to “purify” the existing England Church whose Catholic “rights,” they believed, had no foundation in the Holy Bible. By the time of the early 1600s, the Puritans were facing religious persecution at the merciless hands of Charles I (1600~1649), who was widely known to brutally crack down on religious dissenters (Napoli 2013, 27).

A group of Puritans fled England and formed the Massachusetts Bay Colony, with its headquarters in Boston, to build a spiritual model for Europe and the world. The Puritans “were charged with a special spiritual and political destiny” to create “a New World” (Madsen 1998, 1-2); for them, America was their Promised Land—a New Israel. Foremost, the Puritan Pilgrims were fleeing the “Old World” in search of religious freedom to practice their own beliefs. The Pilgrims also regarded themselves as a community chosen and favored by God, whose exodus to the New World was rather analogous to that of the Israelites fleeing Egypt. The Puritans saw their journey to the New World as a “Puritan reenactment of the Exodus narrative revolved around a powerful theology of chosenness” (McLaren et al. 2009, 69).

Central to their worldview was the concept of predestination, the belief in a divinely ordained ‘plan’ for the world, and the notion that God had a particular ‘covenant’ with humanity (Williams 1992, 164-165). Puritan ideology did not emphasize the notion of ‘overspreading’ the entire continent, for “Puritan leaders...were opposed to the rapid expansion of their population into Indian territory, which they regarded as the realm of nature under Satan’s control” (Saito 2010, 60).

Prior to landing in America, John Winthrop, the Puritan leader of the Massachusetts Bay colonists, “described the special destiny awaiting the community of saints as they voyaged to Massachusetts” (Madsen 1988, 18). The wilderness of America was a figurative *Tabula Rasa*—a chance to construct a society free from the oppressive weight of the European past (Baritz 1964, viii-ix). Aboard the ship *Arbella*, Winthrop (1630) delivered a sermon, titled “A Model of Christian Charity”:

“For we must consider that we shall be as 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.”

In his sermon, Winthrop obviously referred to the community the colonists would be building as a “City upon a Hill.” This was a reference to the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus said to his followers: “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matthew 5:14). The colonists were to build a New Jerusalem. The concept of the New World would be a *sui generis* experiment in its purity. Consistent with this idea, the revolutionaries fighting for American independence saw the upheaval of 1776 as a dramatic and fundamental break from the Old World. Revolutionary rhetoric was steeped in biblical quotations, and intended to prepare the people for creating a new society. The idea of mission or of a special destiny is a well-known part of the American narrative. Winthrop’s most famous words often would be quoted by President Ronald Reagan centuries later.

MANIFEST DESTINY

The rationale that the new American Republic adopted for building a New World was the notion that the English system had broken down. There exists a wealth of evidence that the American Founding Fathers utilized *jus gentium* casuistry as a justification for colonization (Ford and Rowse 2012, 17). In order to establish the legal basis for the War of Independence, the American leadership elaborated the claim that they, rather than the British king of the Old World, were in possession of the right to colonize North America. They complained that the king had failed to pass laws necessary for colonies, resulting in “a long train of abuses and usurpations” in an attempt to enforce “absolute Despotism.” The Founding Fathers enumerated a litany of malpractices in the Declaration of Independence, berating King George III for having “plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people” (Saito 2010, 71).

In justifying this demand, the colonists were inspired by the concept of natural law proposed by John Locke (2010, 287), “where the rights to life and liberty were inseparable from that of property, and property rights derived from the human labor invested to improve nature.” The colonists were bound and determined to multiply the value of “wastelands,” neglected by Indians for far too long (Saito 2010, 69). In a similar vein, the Founding Fathers claimed that their singular geographical position gave them the advantage of having greater distance from the

incessant warfare of Europe and from the “Old World.”

Following the image defined by Winthrop, America was meant to be a beacon to the rest of the world, but not one yet capable of exporting its values and its principles to distant foreign countries. America’s leaders cautioned about the risks of international involvement and instead focused on building what in their views could be the greatest federal republic the world had ever seen. George Washington’s “Farewell Address” is perhaps the most consummate speech made in accordance with the principles of cautious foreign policy vis-à-vis Europe. Stepping down from the presidency in 1796, he warned: “The great rule of conduct for us ... is to have with [Europe] as little political connection as possible ... [I]t must be unwise for us to implicate ourselves by artificial ties in the ordinary vicissitudes of her [European] politics” (Washington 1796). Similarly, while defending constitutional principles in 1814, John Adams (Ekirch 1963, 43) warned, “We may boast that we are the chosen people; we may even thank God that we are not like other men; but, it will be but ... the delusion, the self-deceit of the Pharisee.”

Overall, throughout America’s embryonic days, its priorities were centered on nurturing its democratic institutions and propagating them westward across the continent. Furthermore, the early concept of exceptionalism was defined by the nation’s refrainment from entanglements across the Atlantic, rather than by a higher mission in the world. Before America set out on the long march of westward expedition in earnest, Adams and Washington already presciently warned against the dangers of the expansionist tendencies of exceptionalism.

In the 19th century, the first critical moment when the idea of an American ‘mission’ influenced the conduct of foreign policy was the period of ‘Manifest Destiny.’ The term was coined in 1845 by John O’Sullivan and quickly assumed popularity in mainstream discourse, for it evoked the earliest English settlers’ vision of a “new Canaan” (Saito 2013, 106). O’Sullivan used Manifest Destiny as a way of criticizing other countries for interfering with the “natural” process of westward expansion by the US.” In 1783, George Washington described the US as a “rising empire.” Between 1803 and 1853, as a result of the Louisiana Purchase, the acquisition of Florida, the annexation of about half of Mexico, and the occupation of the Oregon Territory, the US extended its territorial claims to encompass all of what is now known as its “lower forty-eight” states. In 1867, it also claimed possession of Alaska by virtue of its “purchase” from Russia (Saito 2013, 107).

Adding to the shifting perception of Americans was Frederick J. Turner, a Harvard professor and architect of the so-called “frontier thesis.” In his book “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” he cogently asserted that the

success and spirit of the US was inseparably tied to the country's westbound expansion (Beisner 1975, 18). According to this thesis, the American frontier laid the foundation for liberty and freedom because it geographically and physically unshackled America from the Old World with its European mentality (Hodgson 2009, 468). For Turner, American characteristics were forged in the tribulation of the frontier experience that nurtured those core values, such as democracy, independence, individualism, equality and self-reliance (Nayak and Malone 2009, 266).

Through what became known as the Monroe Doctrine, the US announced in 1823 that the Americas were no longer open to colonization by Europe (Saito 2013, 126). For the rest of the 19th century, the US leaders and journalists used Manifest Destiny to justify the continuation of expansionist policies against indigenous Americans and Mexicans. Manifest Destiny, in tandem with the Monroe Doctrine, proved a powerful justification for keeping the European powers from the affairs of the newly created nation-states in the Western hemisphere. By the end of the 19th century, the US had subdued the entire North American continent and turned its sights overseas. The US had successfully redefined itself as a great power and stabilized the narrative of American exceptionalism (Ruggie 2006).

For many scholars, the concept of American exceptionalism connects directly with the ideas of Manifest Destiny and the frontier thesis. The concept of Manifest Destiny, as discussed in the early 19th century, represented the belief that American expansionism was inevitable and providential, and that "Americans were a chosen people intended by Heaven to spread across the continent" (Ekirch 1963, 43). As the nation gained relative power, the concepts related to American exceptionalism, grounded in the belief in a greater American mission and Manifest Destiny, would continue to influence American thinking about national greatness beyond its shores, thereby planting the seeds of an expansionist mentality.

MESSIANIC AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Until the turn of the 19th century, America's foreign policy goals were basically quite simple: to fulfill the country's Manifest Destiny and to remain free of entanglements overseas (Kissinger 1994, 34). Prior to 1917, President Woodrow Wilson's foreign policies were largely dedicated to American neutrality and keeping the US out of World War I. However, despite an initial reluctance to go to war in Europe, once the decision was made to fight, Wilson used "all the resources at his disposal" (Martel 2011, 148-154).

Germany, in its recklessly unlimited submarine warfare, torpedoed and sank

the British merchant ship and ocean liner, *RMS Lusitania* on May 7, 1915 (Preston 2003, 14). The massacre of civilians profoundly shifted US public opinion and shocked domestic audiences, causing American outrage. It was not until Wilson addressed the “League to Enforce Peace” on May 27, 1916, that he first outlined his policy “Peace without Victory” (Thompson 1985, 335). What Wilson proposed when America did enter the war was a peace achievable only by “total victory” (Kissinger 1994, 49).

Wilson, the embodiment of this tradition in American exceptionalism, knew how to harness the mainsprings of American motivation. Rejecting power politics, he knew how to strike the chords of the hearts among his compatriots. Wilson grasped that America’s instinctive isolationism could be overcome only by an appeal to its belief in the exceptional nature of its ideals (Kissinger 1994, 44). For Wilson, the justification of America’s international role was ‘messianic’: America had an obligation, not to the balance of power, but to spread its principles throughout the world (Kissinger 1994, 30). Wilson depicted World War I as one motivated by moral aims. Moreover, he attempted to portray America’s engagement as a “crusade” on some level (McDougall, 1997, 137). Wilson’s (1915) worldview, epitomized in his “Fourteen Points,” was deeply rooted in his interpretation of the American experience and mission. America could no longer be the isolated beacon of liberty and freedom envisioned by Thomas Jefferson. Instead, according to Wilson, America would be the creator of a new world order based on higher moral principles that were closely interconnected with the principles of ‘messianic’ exceptionalism.

During his time in Paris, Wilson concluded that the US had begun to establish its place as a world superpower (Brzezinski 2013, 41). Ambrosius (2006, 148) writes, “Wilson welcomed this hegemonic role, although he never explicitly acknowledged it as such.” From the American perspective, Wilson represents, for better or worse, the preeminent era of idealism in American foreign policy, as well as the early stages of American hegemony and liberal internationalism. Ambrosius argues that Wilson’s ideals influenced a wide range of seemingly disparate political leaders, including Herbert Hoover, Henry Kissinger, Ronald Reagan, William J. Clinton, and George W. Bush (Fry 2003, 712). Today, Wilson’s foreign policies and worldview are encapsulated in the foreign policy tradition of Wilsonianism. Wilsonianism also represents a precursor to democratic peace theory, which hypothesizes democratization as a means to decreasing the likelihood of war (Gat 2005, 73-100). The challenge of studying Wilson through the lens of American exceptionalism is that, as Ambrosius (2002, 33) states, “Wilson assumed that other peoples shared his own perspective and would readily adopt his conception of American nationalism as a viable model.” This perspective has

continued to cause problems for the American public and policymakers.

“Wilson transformed what had begun as a reconfiguration of a neutrality policy into a set of propositions laying the groundwork for a global crusade. In his view, there was no substantial difference between freedom for the US and freedom for the entire world. The ambitious enterprise of the League of Nations failed because America was not yet ready for such a global role. Nevertheless, according to Kissinger (1994, 46-47), “Wilson’s intellectual victory proved more seminal than any political triumph could have been. For, whenever America has faced the task of constructing a new world order, it has returned in one way or another to Woodrow Wilson’s precepts.”

RENAISSANCE OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

After the crushing defeat in Vietnam, Daniel Bell (1975, 204-205) unambiguously declared, “The belief in American exceptionalism has vanished with the end of empire ... History has traduced Manifest Destiny,” and concluded that American exceptionalism “foundered on the shoals of Vietnam.” The Vietnam War left a lasting scar on American society, with many critics ridiculing the idea that the US had some exceptional or divine role as a guardian of democracy around the world as being “hypocritical, delusional, and capitalist-imperialist propaganda” (Brooks 2012, 65). The apparent solution was for the US to take refuge in the theory of détente. The Nixon administration increasingly emphasized the role of détente as a step not necessarily toward a better world but away from a worse one, while de-emphasizing the lofty objective of transforming US-Soviet relations.

Jimmy Carter may be best remembered for what was widely seen as his failure to uphold the ideal of American exceptionalism. The captivity of 55 American hostages for 444 days in Iran played a decisive role in portraying his career as a leader of the US in decline (Brooks 2012, 75). In her essay “Dictators and Double Standards,” Jeane Kirkpatrick (1979, 40-41) asserted that liberals such as Carter had no monopoly on morality or idealism, pointing out that the “administration’s moralism ... renders it especially vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy.” Carter’s foreign policy, along with détente, crumbled during the final days of 1979 with the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan and installation of a pro-Soviet puppet regime. Détente’s critics berated Carter for his naiveté. The enunciation of the Carter Doctrine was tantamount to a renunciation of the president’s cherished vision of more self-reliant democracy, and his sudden about-face in proclaiming this new approach to foreign policy did not save him from defeat in his 1980 bid for re-election (Bacevich 2012, 182).

It was not until the early 1980s, when Ronald Reagan was elected president, that exceptionalism became the mantra, ideological boilerplate, and cliché for

politicians, intellectuals, journalists, and media opinion leaders. Reagan (1974) was a great admirer of Puritan John Winthrop's exceptionalist rhetoric. In 1974, he delivered a famous speech, reminiscent of Winthrop's "City upon a Hill," demonstrating his special affection for this metaphor well before he rose to power: "We cannot escape our destiny nor should we try to do so ... We are indeed ... the last best hope of man on earth."

During his first term in office, President Reagan crafted his foreign policy based on his firm belief that morality should define America's Cold War strategy. He was convinced that good and evil were in fact ethical categories that are practicable in international politics. In Reagan's "evil empire" speech in 1983, he dubbed the Soviet Union "the focus of evil in the modern world," while on the other hand, the US was a "shining city on a hill," committed to the eternal convictions propounded in the Declaration of Independence and dedicated to ensuring other countries live and flourish in freedom (Reagan 1983). The foundation of Reagan's belief that the US was in an epic battle between good and evil with the Soviet Empire was his "unshakable conviction" in American exceptionalism (Cannon 2000, 711). Reagan (1982) wholeheartedly believed that God had chosen America for its devotion to a sacred mission to positively reshape human history. Reagan (1989) once again returned to the "shining city on a hill" in the final paragraphs of his farewell address, emphasizing how pivotal and essential American exceptionalism was to his worldview: "I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it."

It appears apparent that Reagan was profoundly moved by the biblical image of the shining city on a hill, an image that remains vividly alive today. Reagan is remembered as one of the most successful presidents in combining a sense of American exceptionalism with a duty to leadership. The famous rhetoric of "Evil Empire" imbued with his conviction of the validity of American exceptionalism would re-emerge later in US President George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil" pronouncement in keeping with a pedigree of invoking a moral struggle between good and evil.

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE BUSH DOCTRINE

In a 1996 *Foreign Affairs* article, neo-conservative authors William Kristol and Robert Kagan wrote, "Somehow most Americans have failed to notice that they have never had it so good." That was "an intoxicating moment" (Harland 2013, 112) for the US, a fleeting period between the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York. With no immediate threat on the horizon, Americans were losing their focus on issues of foreign affairs. Kirkpatrick (1990, 40-45) explained, "There is no mystical American 'mission' or

purpose to be ‘found,’” and the very success of the US had left its political leaders ‘adrift’ (Kristol and Kagan 1996, 18).

Realist restraint was swiftly abandoned in reaction to the shock of September 11, 2001. Less than 24 hours after the 9/11 attacks, George W. Bush (2001) declared, “The deliberate and deadly attacks ... were more than acts of terror. They were acts of war.” White House Counsel Alberto Gonzales sent a notorious “Torture Memo” to Bush reading, “The war on terrorism renders obsolete key provisions of the Geneva Convention on enemy prisoners.” The memo paved the road to Abu Ghraib, and many Americans still say that Americans “lost part of their soul” as a result (Cohen 2012). However, it should be remembered that the Geneva Convention and the prohibitions against torture articulated in the UN Convention against Torture were ratified by the US and accepted as a *ius cogens* (Saito 2010, 56).

During 2002-2003, in a dramatic reversal of pre-9/11 thinking, the Bush administration advocated the view that the US must flex military muscle more forcefully (Tomes 2014, 42). Daalder and Lindsay (2005, 13) commented that Bush’s foreign policy “turned John Quincy Adams on his head” and argued that “the US should aggressively go abroad in search of monsters to destroy.” Some analysts pointed to Bush’s “divine” political interpretations as the cause of his administration’s exceptionalist stance (Mertus 2003). Before Bush’s election to the presidency, it was noted that he “believes he is on a direct mission from God,” and he said, “I feel like God wants me to run for President” (Harris 2003).

Bush asserted the imperative of shouldering the burden, unilaterally if necessary, of leading the world into the dawn of a new era. Daalder and Lindsay (2005, 2 and 13) termed this new attitude toward American foreign policy ‘unbound,’ depicting multiple objectives pursued simultaneously: embracing pre-emptive strategy, withdrawing from several international treaties, shifting to coercive intervention, downplaying multilateralism, and retreating from diplomacy. These features were quickly merged together in the promulgation of the so-called Bush Doctrine (Bush 2002).

Robert Jervis (2003, 365-366) identified ‘four pillars’ of the Bush Doctrine: (1) the US would work to consolidate its global pre-eminence and prevent the emergence of a hostile competitor; (2) the US would adopt a “pre-emptive strategy” against rogue states and their terrorist allies; (3) the US would need to take unilateral measures; and (4) democracy promotion could serve as a weapon in the war on terrorism. The fourth pillar, democracy promotion, was the centerpiece of the Bush Doctrine.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, political philosophers explored whether history contained an underlying sense of *telos*. Embracing the idea of historical

eschatology, such scholars as Francis Fukuyama (2006) provided the notion that the worldwide adoption of democratic ideology would be a harbinger of an 'end of history.' The authors of the Bush Doctrine somehow believed that the propagation of liberal democracy would ensure enduring peace between nations and serve as a vital antidote to the problem of Islamic jihadist violence (Dalacoura 2005, 974).

Claes Ryn (2009, 25-26) criticized what he called the "neo-Jacobin" element of Bush's democratization theory: "The new Jacobin is convinced that he knows what is best for all mankind, and if much of mankind shows reluctance to follow his lead, it is to him a sign that injustice, superstition, and general backwardness ... is standing in the way of progress." Jowitt (2009) argued, "In response to 9/11, President Bush replaced Fukuyama's Marxist-like teleology with a 'Leninist' understanding of American agency." Supporting Jowitt's view, Gaddis (2008) argued that, instead of their predecessors' so-called "Menshevik" approach, the Bush cabinet adopted "Bolshevik" overtones "to jump-start the engine of history," showing impatience with the slow pace of historical progress.

The majority of critics focused not so much on the basic goal as on the "overly narrow conception of power and the excessively limited range of instruments employed to achieve US goals" (Buckley and Singh 2006, 22), and there was a conspicuous shift away from Nye's (1991) ideas about the efficacy of soft power during the Bush era (Dargiel 2009). Others said "pre-emptive strategy" provided *carte blanche* for the "preventive" use of force (Hendrickson 2002, 1-2), and that the purported support for democracy was merely "a gleaming rhetorical edifice" for armed intervention (Carothers 2007) and a post-facto "rationalization" for regime change in Iraq (Layne and Thayer 2006, 86-87). Still others pointed to the Bush Doctrine's "radical" departure from previous thoughts about international relations (Renshon and Suedfeld 2013, 58-59).

By all accounts, the monopoly of the War on Terror and the logic of democracy promotion from the early days of the Bush administration represented the epitome of American exceptionalist thinking. The rhetoric of "Axis of Evil," in keeping with the pedigree of "Evil Empire," was the stepping stone for embarking on a global fight in the struggle of good vs. evil, which harkens back to the Lincoln era when a 'good' civil war was waged against the 'evil' of slavery (Allin and Jones 2012, 33). It was with the righteous spirit of American exceptionalism that the US launched a global war on terrorism in response to the 9/11 attack. On a personal level, Bush was unabashedly a zealot of American exceptionalism, provoking antipathy, enmity and derision from people of the world who regarded it as hubris, arrogance, and a lack of respect for other cultures and values that were not made in America.

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AS A POLITICAL INSTRUMENT

From the outset of the 2007 presidential primary campaigns, the divergence in the meaning of American exceptionalism between opposing camps became obvious: for conservative Republicans, the US remained the last bastion of freedom and justice, whereas for liberal democrats, it was precisely the concept of exceptionalism vociferously touted by Bush that warranted fundamental change. During the primaries, Obama knew the public had lost faith in the War on Terror and adopted drastic change as the campaign's rhetorical fulcrum. His opposition to the war on terrorism provided him with "a moral edge over other contenders" (Ivie and Giner 2009).

During his first year in office, President Obama revealed signs of discomfort with American exceptionalism. Considering his liberal *gestalt*, it might be reasonable for Obama to give some credence to the notion of exceptionalism. His reluctant stance toward the exceptionalist idea was palpably revealed during a Q/A session with reporters in Strasbourg. When asked about American exceptionalism, Obama (2009a) replied, "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism, and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism." His answer was something of a sea change away from the "Lincolnian" oratory glorifying America as "the last best hope of man on earth" (Lincoln 1862). Obama (2009b) consistently showed reluctance to use exceptionalist rhetoric in his speech at West Point, which was replete with restraints, balances, cautions and limits. Conservatives concluded that the pillars of American exceptionalism were in danger during the Obama presidency, and that "the survival of American exceptionalism" was at great risk (Ponunu 2010).

Beginning in Florida with the 2010 senate races, when US Senator Mark Rubio made "exceptionalism" the central theme of his campaign (Zeleny 2010), the term became a buzzword among Republican candidates, as it struck a chord with voters, resonating with nostalgia for Reagan's beloved ideal of America as a "shining city on a hill." Conservatives found the exceptionalist rhetoric a useful political instrument that worked to their advantage (Jones 2010). Obama did not run on an anti-exceptionalism platform, but his self-effacing "leading from behind" did not sit well with voters enamored with the ostentatiously high-profile exceptionalist rhetoric of conservatives.

During the 2012 presidential election, Republican candidates were firing on all cylinders in a competition to demonstrate their loyalty before the altar of American exceptionalism. Mike Huckabee, a candidate during the 2008 Republican presidential primary, set the tone in his concerted onslaught against Obama by lambasting him for being drastically different from his predecessors, adding, "To deny American exceptionalism is in essence to deny the heart and

soul of this nation” (Tumulty 2010). Newt Gingrich (2011, 13-14) warned, “Our government has strayed alarmingly” from the principles of American exceptionalism. During the 2012 campaign, Mitt Romney repeatedly asserted that Obama “doesn’t have the same feelings about American exceptionalism that we do” (Meht 2012). The conservative columnist Kathleen Parker (2011) flayed Obama for not using the words “American exceptionalism” in his 2011 State of the Union speech, and Dinesh D’Souza (2010) went so far as to argue that Obama was “endowed with radical, anti-American socialism by the anti-colonial rage of his Kenyan father.”

As the theme of American exceptionalism has increasingly become a political football, conservatives found a strange bedfellow in their camp, none other than Vladimir Putin. In his *New York Times* opinion article, Putin (2013) reprimanded Obama for resorting to “American exceptionalism” as a pretext for a unilateral military attack against Syria. He did not mince words in his admonition to Obama, arguing, “It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation.” When Senator Robert Menendez said, “I almost wanted to vomit” over the Putin editorial, many Americans agreed (Kopan 2013). Obama’s (2013) response was succinct and to the point: “The world is better” for active US leadership.

Putting the Putin anecdote aside, the 2012 presidential election proved to be a watershed moment for American exceptionalism. Henceforth, the term has degenerated into a political weapon, especially for Republicans to pummel Democrats for their audacity in admitting America’s incapacity to provide all the answers and solutions. On the part of Democrats, they were of the view that the more the term is recited, the less attractive it appears, making the US look arrogant and hypocritical.

In the face of mounting pressure from the conservative camp, Obama has made a curious decision to strike a balance between traditional notions of American exceptionality and his reluctance to use the term. His careful calculation finally was visible in his speech at West Point. While confessing, “I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being,” Obama (2014a) added, “We cannot exempt ourselves from the rules that apply to everyone else ... That’s not leadership; that’s retreat.” Indeed, he is *the first* US president who has ever tried to maintain a balance between the liberal idealism and down-to-earth realism by invoking the concept of American exceptionalism.

However, in laying out a strategy to degrade and destroy ISIS soon thereafter, Obama (2014b) made a stunning about-face in dramatically reviving the idea of American exceptionalism and US global responsibilities: “America, our endless blessings bestow an enduring burden. But as Americans, we welcome our respon-

sibility to lead ... [W]e stand for freedom, for justice, for dignity. These are values that have guided our nation since its founding.” It should be remembered that the timing of Republicans marching *en masse* to the drumbeat of American exceptionalism in 2010 coincided with the fact that “a huge majority of Americans (80 percent)” showed their agreement with the idea of exceptionalism (Jones 2010). Now that support for attacking ISIS is hovering close to 70 percent (Riechmann and Agiesta 2014), it is high time for Obama to jump on the bandwagon. While political necessity forces Obama to embrace the idea of exceptionalism, his innovative use of the term is reshaping its tone and rationale to his advantage, with his emphasis on the virtuous side of American exceptionalism. That is without question a welcome change for the better.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The metaphor of a “City upon a Hill,” the root of contemporary American exceptionalism, represents a beacon and an example to the world, not one that aggressively spreads its ideals and values to other countries. Manifest Destiny, in tandem with the Monroe Doctrine, transformed Puritan thought into America’s 19th century expansionism and provided a rationale for subjugating the entire North American continent. Wilsonian idealism, in its essence, equated freedom in the US with the need to promote freedom throughout the entire world. Therefore, it was inevitable for the United States, by “crusade” if need be, to assume a messianic role to foster democracy around the world. A humiliating and prolonged captivity of Americans in Iran, coupled with an ineffably gargantuan debacle in Vietnam, to a large degree presaged the historic resurgence of American exceptionalism during the Reagan administration, culminating in his now legendary “evil empire” rhetoric.

After a brief hiatus during that “intoxicating moment” following the end of the Cold War, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the righteous ethos of exceptionalism provided President George W. Bush, a formidable fighter in the struggle of good against evil, with justification to lay out a strategy of unilateral preemption and embark on a global war on terrorism. During the Obama administration, especially during the 2008 and 2012 presidential election campaigns, the exceptionalist narrative took a strange turn by metamorphosing into a political weapon *for the first time*, one that could be conveniently used to rebuke, chastise and pummel opponents for harboring a different belief and/or could demonstrate, prove or reinforce loyalty to the spirit of exceptionalism. After four centuries of vicissitudes, the American exceptionalism envisioned by Winthrop’s shining “city

upon a hill” had become anathema to contemporary politicians.

Nothing is permanent or irrevocable, especially in view of the rather curious migration of the narrative of American exceptionalism from a shining “City upon a Hill” to Manifest Destiny to Wilsonian idealism and eventually to its use as a political instrument for rebuking opponents. That being said, it is of paramount importance to bring this historical analysis into perspective with a view towards understanding and gleaning valuable insights from the broader strategic implications of the findings in relation to American foreign policy, including the ongoing war to degrade and destroy ISIS. For starters, the seemingly random transmutations in exceptionalist narratives can be categorized into three groups: exemplarism (e.g., “City upon on a Hill”), expansionism (e.g., Manifest Destiny, Wilsonian idealism, Reagan’s version of “shining city on a hill”) and exemptionalism (most US administrations, but exemplified most strongly in the Bush Doctrine).

Exemptionalism is a malignant variant of exceptionalism. President Obama said, “We cannot exempt ourselves from the rules that apply to everyone else (because) that’s not leadership; that’s retreat. That’s not strength; that’s weakness.” In essence, American exemptionalism is a prime source of self-inflicted wounds. The abrogation of the ABM Treaty, withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol, revocation of the Treaty on the ICC, refusal to ratify the CTBT, and the effective rendering of the Geneva Convention “obsolete”—these are a fraction of the exemptionalist manifestations of exceptionalism. It became almost second nature for the US to exempt itself from international norms, rules, regimes, treaties and regulations, or to devise numerous provisions of reservations or loopholes to the detriment of international “rule of law.” The Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (1969) unambiguously stipulates, “A party may not invoke the provisions of its internal law as justification for its failure to perform a treaty.”

At the heart of expansionism lies an aggressive, messianic, and oftentimes imprudent version of exceptionalism. The central problem of expansionism is a belief that Americans regard themselves as a chosen people who are obligated to fulfill the divine mission of propagating democracy throughout the world. This extension of Manifest Destiny is present in America’s current foreign policy incarnations. For one thing, as James Ceaser (2012, 9-10) warned, a religious and dichotomous worldview is dangerous in this day and age because it worsens and intensifies a mortal struggle between jihads and crusades, thereby forfeiting the hope of true peace. The track record in the enterprise of exporting democracy is well below par. According to James L. Payne (Higgs and Close 2007), Great Britain and the US sent the military abroad 51 times to engage in democratic nation building, but they succeed in establishing democracy in only 14 countries,

with the success rate less than 30 percent. Enterline and Grieg (2008, 342) found that not only had nearly 63 percent of 43 *imposed* democratic regimes failed—including Iraq and Afghanistan—during the observation period (1800-1994), but also the average durability of *imposed* democratic regimes had been 13.1 years. Bruce Russett (2005, 405) warned, “Military interventions have sometimes installed democracy by force, but they have more often failed, and the successes have been immensely expensive in lives and treasure.” Another danger of expansionist exceptionalism is that it bolsters the false belief in American infallibility and the inerrancy of their actions and their system. However, the truth of the matter is that we, as human beings, cannot help but make mistakes.

A ray of hope in exemplary exceptionalism is stemming from the sense that the US is exceptional in what it represents and stands for. The root can be traced back to the wisdom and prudence of the 18th century in American history. George Washington, in his 1796 “Farewell Address” as discussed earlier, warned against the danger of involvement beyond commercial relations in foreign entanglements. True strength, not power, comes from the principle that the US could best serve the world by being an awe-inspiring example; a shining light on the hill.

As it stands, the American democratic model has proven difficult to be grafted onto societies with histories and cultures different from those of the US. The occasionally dysfunctional federal government, extremely polarized Congress, and worsening human rights record does not make American democracy an attractive model for other countries to emulate. American exceptionalism, taken for granted from its inception until the end of the previous millennium, has been seriously questioned and challenged in the face of the inexorable rise of China, increasingly recalcitrant and defiant Russia, and the growing threat of global terrorism. The extreme solipsism embedded in American exceptionalism has become untenable.

It is interesting to observe the dramatic increase, as stated at the outset of this article, in the use of American exceptionalism in US public discourse. One of the plausible reasons would be the intensifying polarized political infighting between liberals and conservatives over the current status of American exceptionalism. Conservatives argue that American exceptionalism is in grave jeopardy under the Obama administration, while liberals dismiss the allegation as another ploy to score political points. In all fairness, this controversy seems to imply that Americans are now starting to take a long and hard look at the concept of exceptionalism in its traditional meaning. Truthfully speaking, American exceptionalism has been taken for granted, at least up until now. At the same time, however, it is also true that many peoples and countries believe in the exceptionalness of their own history: Romans, Greeks, Russians, Koreans, Chinese, Anglo-Saxons,

just to name a few, and now those same countries are questioning the exceptionality of American exceptionalism.

Andranik Migranyan (2013) summarized the essence of the traditional sense of American exceptionalism as follows:

At the heart of this American dream and exceptionalism, lay the foundational notion that people have unlimited possibility to move up the social ladder without regard to national origin, starting social stratum, ethnic, religious or other association by birth ... Another, very important feature of American exceptionalism was the certainty of Americans that they had the best Constitution—one that was created by a single stroke, thanks to the genius of the Founding Fathers ... Then there is the belief that American society is a nearly classless one.

Despite the rosy vision of American exceptionalism as depicted above, there is no shortage of literature on the bleak and less than encouraging picture of the stark reality on the ground. The American dream is fading into distant memory, though not into the dustbin of history. The middle class, the once proud backbone of American society, is becoming an endangered species, while new classes such as *tech Oligarchy* and the *Clerisy* are on the rise. Economic inequality is worsening, which in turn hampers upward social mobility. Even though the US remains a predominantly religious society, the religiousness is fast becoming less exceptional, as Americans are turning away from the church. The war fatigue of the general public is palpable and significant, despite the recent spike in the support for taking military action against ISIS. That is precisely the reason why Vladimir Putin wrote his provocative article for *The New York Times*, warning, “It is very dangerous to foster the idea of exceptionalism among Americans.”

Without question, American exceptionalism is at a crossroads. Harvard University’s Stephen Walt (2011) proclaimed that the dogmatic belief in American exceptionalism makes it “harder for Americans to understand why others are ... often alarmed by US policies and frequently irritated by what they see as US hypocrisy.” If the US comes to understand the reason, then it would not be difficult to find the answer to the next question that was raised at the outset of this article: “Why does the US face such a challenge getting Muslim countries on board to help the US save them?” The genuine hallmark of American exceptionalism lies in embracing America’s long-standing capability of adapting and taking the best from others. Indeed, if history has taught us anything, it is that nations are ultimately made by those who live in them.

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