The Multiple Traditions of American Exceptionalism in Presidential Foreign Policy

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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.

- Barack Obama (2009b)

ABSTRACT

The idea of American exceptionalism has been an important part of presidential political thought and rhetoric about foreign policy, especially since the end of the nineteenth century when the U.S. emerged as a global power. In this article, I examine presidents’ public rhetoric and political thought about this concept in articulating their foreign policy philosophy and actions. I find that there are multiple traditions of American exceptionalism in presidential discourse about the U.S. role in the world, which I term the messianic Americanist, messianic internationalist, skeptical, and circumspect traditions. While the recurrent tradition of messianic Americanism has generally been dominant over time, there is also significant ideational intercurrence, and emergent themes have sometimes departed from this dominant orthodoxy. I conclude by considering whether current and recent administrations suggest a durable shift away from the dominant motif of exceptionalism in presidential foreign policy.

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INTRODUCTION

In April 2009, the Financial Times journalist Edward Luce asked President Barack Obama about the idea of American exceptionalism: “could I ask you whether you subscribe, as many of your predecessors have, to the school of American exceptionalism that sees America as uniquely qualified to lead the world, or do you have a slightly different philosophy?” The question contained a premise that most, if not all, American presidents had fully embraced this notion. But when Obama answered, he simultaneously underscored his commitment to the concept and implicitly challenged it. In declaring “I believe in American exceptionalism” and explaining that he was “enormously proud” of its “history in the world,” Obama affirmed that, like virtually all presidents, he would embrace the idea that America had a unique role and responsibility in foreign policy. At the same time, Obama qualified his profession of faith in this notion by admitting a bias. His belief was equivalent to the British believing in “British exceptionalism” and the Greeks believing in “Greek exceptionalism.” In doing so, Obama seemed to gently push back on the narrative of American uniqueness. Soon Obama was criticized by many conservatives for not sufficiently believing in America’s promise and goodness. Yet his eventual Republican successor had a different view. Shortly before declaring his presidential candidacy, Donald Trump expressed starker skepticism of the idea: “I watch Obama every once in a while saying ‘American exceptionalism’… I don’t like the term.” Rather than praise American global leadership, Trump declared, “I want to take everything back from the world that we’ve given them” (Sargent 2016). These statements by Obama and Trump suggested a broader possible dynamic. In the context of presidential foreign policy, there has been a dominant tradition of American exceptionalism and, at times, challenges to it.
The idea of American exceptionalism is arguably older than America itself. From John Winthrop’s 1630 sermon on the “shining city on a hill” to Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* to the present day, observers of American politics and society have declared and debated the uniqueness of America. These debates are often academic (Shafer 1999; Lipset 1996), focusing on America’s political culture (Hartz 1955), constitutional and legal traditions (Calabresi 2006; Versteeg and Zackin 2014), capacities as a state (Skowronek 1982; Howard 1997; Hacker 2002), economy (Rose 1989), and approach toward human rights (Hertel and Libal 2011). Beyond analyses about whether and how America is different, the more politically charged debates have focused on the extent to which America is special, ranging from claims that America remains an example for the world of the experiment in self-government (Smith 2012) to assertions of its divinely-inspired mission (Tuveson 1968; Hoff 2007; Hodgson 2009; Ceaser 2012).

In Peter Onuf’s (2012, 79) telling, “what makes Americans exceptional is… their self-conscious and self-defining embrace of American exceptionalism throughout their history.” If this is true of ordinary Americans, it is especially true of presidents. Perhaps unsurprisingly, presidents have an interest in claiming to lead an exceptional nation. Leading a redeemer nation means playing the role of redeemer, an asset for an office whose ambitious occupants all hope to be transformational (Howell 2013). In the context of presidential foreign policy, American exceptionalism is an idea that seeks to provide an interpretation of the U.S. role in the world.

Not all claims of exceptionalism in political discourse are the same. Walter McDougall (1997) posits a distinction between exemplarist and crusading visions of America. Patrick Deneen (2012, 33-34) suggests types of exceptionalism that have defined different epochs of American history. “Communal perfectionism” views America as an especially virtuous
community; “liberal isolationism” suggests America is an exemplary liberal country; “liberal expansionism” implies the necessity of geographic expansion to secure the American project. An anti-exceptionalist idea, “global communalism,” posits that national distinctions can be overcome. Positive and negative aspects of exceptionalism have also been applied to human rights, ranging from American efforts at “exemptionalism” from international law and institutions (Ignatieff 2005) to “exceptional global leadership and activism” (Koh 2005, 119).

However, some scholars push back at disentangling types of exceptionalism. Focusing on foreign policy, Hilde Restad (2012; 2014) argues that there has been a dominant unilateral strand of American exceptionalism in the international actions of presidents. Connecting presidents of different political parties and commitments, Restad (2012, 70) links together “the otherwise unlikely grouping of Woodrow Wilson, Ronald Reagan, William Jefferson Clinton, and George W. Bush and their mission to reform the world in the American image.” Instead of a dichotomy of an “exemplary” or “isolationist” versus a “missionary” exceptionalism, presidents have consistently pursued “unilateral internationalism” in their engagement with the world (Restad 2012, 57; Hoff 2007).

In this article, I reconceptualize American exceptionalism in the context of presidential foreign policy, borrowing from Rogers Smith’s (1993; 1997) understanding of American political culture as the product of clashes among the liberal, republican, and ascriptive traditions. I argue that the political thought and rhetoric accompanying presidential foreign policy should be understood as the ideational intercurrence of multiple traditions, all variations and particular understandings of the idea of American exceptionalism. Like Restad (2012), I suggest that there is a dominant tradition of exceptionalism that all presidents have generally embraced. This is messianic Americanism, featuring a belief in a special American mission in the world that is best
pursued primarily through America’s own power (Hoff 2007). But identifying all presidential foreign policies as the same loses sight of political development and the rise of potential alternatives (Mead 2002). Thus, I suggest the existence of emergent traditions that have increasingly challenged this dominant orthodoxy over time. A tradition of messianic internationalism arose out of both world wars, also emphasizing a special U.S. mission in the world but with a new and specific focus on constructing world order through international institutions. Two other traditions emerged as exceptionalism was rethought in the wake of the Vietnam war and, more recently, the second war in Iraq. A skeptical tradition expresses wariness of an active pursuit of any exceptional mission in foreign policy, even as it too holds that the U.S. serves as an exemplary nation. A circumspect tradition candidly admits that the U.S. has often fallen short of its proclaimed ideals in its foreign policy actions, but also still suggests that the U.S. can live up to being an exceptional nation. These traditions also directly interact with each other, and, over time, presidential foreign policy is the cumulative result of this ideational contestation.

In the remainder of this article, I elaborate on these traditions, considering the time period in which the U.S. has been a major global power from 1897 through the present. I focus on the political thought and rhetoric of American presidents, especially examining inaugural addresses that outline presidents’ purported visions. Presidents describe their world views and justify their actions through their use of language. Whether reflecting long-held sincere beliefs or the strategic necessities of the moment, this language tells us something about how they – and we – interpret their foreign policy actions. Though some presidents may embrace particular traditions more than others, this article does not aim to place presidents in categories. Rather, it suggests that all presidents to some degree embrace a dominant strain of exceptionalism, but that some –
due especially to context, but also likely because of beliefs – can depart from that orthodoxy to greater degrees than others. Different traditions may be more influential for particular presidents and administrations.

**THE RECURRENT TRADITION**

All presidents in the era of American global power have, to varying degrees, embraced a recurrent tradition of American exceptionalism – messianic Americanism. Growing out of the nineteenth-century notion of Manifest Destiny (Hietala 2003; Gomez 2012; Frymer 2017), this tradition holds that the U.S. is both a unique nation and has a special destiny of leading the world toward freedom and democracy. Portraying the U.S. as fulfilling a divine mission, success in meeting foes and challenges is considered to be inevitable, with any amount of sacrifice necessary being given. Featuring an emphasis on stark moral contrasts, the U.S. is portrayed as the unquestionably good power fighting against some evil opposing force, with all American actions in foreign policy generally being considered justified. Crucially, this dominant tradition tends to focus on unilateral American power to achieve goals and ideals, sometimes viewing international institutions with suspicion. Again, this is not to say that all presidents completely embrace each of these notions. But on average, all presidents – even those skeptical of this tradition – pay some fealty to it. The analysis here shows a consistency in this tradition over time.

**Messianic Americanism**

American presidents have long proclaimed both the uniqueness of American democracy and the nation’s destiny in the world. The “God of our fathers,” asserted William McKinley (1897), had
“singularly favored the American people in every national trial,” allowing Americans to advance the cause of freedom throughout the world.” “Upon the success of our experiment much depends,” claimed Theodore Roosevelt (1905), “not only as regards our own welfare, but as regards the welfare of mankind.” “Surely,” declared Warren Harding (1921), there must have been God’s intent in the making of this new-world Republic.” Dwight Eisenhower (1957) emphasized both the exemplary and missionary roles of the U.S. “The American experiment has, for generations, fired the passion and the courage of millions elsewhere seeking freedom, equality, opportunity,” he argued. But America could do more than inspire: “These hopes that we have helped to inspire, we can help to fulfill.” The “American covenant,” echoed Lyndon Johnson (1965), “called on us to help show the way for the liberation of man.” Invoking John Winthrop’s sermon, Ronald Reagan (1984) repeatedly exhorted Americans to “remember the most distinctive mark of all in the American experience: To a tired and disillusioned world, we’ve always been a New World and, yes, a shining city on a hill where all things are possible.” Because “advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation,” George W. Bush (2005) even went so far as to proclaim his vision of American exceptionalism to be official policy: “So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”

Most presidents in the last century have also claimed that this unique destiny would be achieved. Harding (1921) proclaimed his “utter confidence in the supreme fulfillment” of America’s destiny. For Eisenhower (1957), the U.S. would bring “the light of freedom… to all darkened lands… until at last the darkness is no more.” Even more bluntly, Johnson (1965) asserted that the U.S. would “bend” the world “to the hopes of man.” As the Cold War ended, George H. W. Bush (1989) declared that the U.S. could move the world “toward democracy
through the door to freedom” and “dare to imagine a new world.” The U.S., George W. Bush (2005) confidently avowed, was “ready for the greatest achievements in the history of freedom.”

Alongside promising inevitable success, presidents have set an expectation that Americans would sacrifice to achieve that goal. Because “much has been given us,” Theodore Roosevelt (1905) explained simply, “much will rightly be expected from us.” “We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution,” John Kennedy (1961) famously declared, promising that Americans must “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend,” and “oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty” in the world. “If American lives must end, and American treasure be spilled, in countries that we barely know,” Johnson (1965) maintained, “then that is the price that change has demanded of conviction and of our enduring covenant.” Americans, Reagan (1981) similarly affirmed, had “never been unwilling to pay that price” that freedom required.

Presidents have also frequently claimed a special righteousness for America. “The unselfishness of these United States is a thing proven,” Harding (1921) proclaimed. Anyone who had “a true understanding of America,” claimed Herbert Hoover (1929), knew that it had “no desire for territorial expansion, for economic or other domination of other peoples” because “such purposes” were “repugnant to our ideals of human freedom.” “We know in our hearts, not loudly and proudly but as a simple fact,” echoed George H. W. Bush (1989), “that our strength is a force for good.” America’s story, claimed George W. Bush (2001a), was “the story of a power that went into the world to protect but not possess, to defend but not to conquer.”

Complementing these assertions of American virtue, presidents have defined foreign policy in terms of stark moral contrasts. The redeemer nation needed to face down evil. The U.S., argued Theodore Roosevelt (1904), owed “it to itself and to all mankind not to sink into
helplessness before the powers of evil.” Facing the specter of communism in the Cold War, Eisenhower (1953) argued that the “forces of good and evil are massed and armed and opposed as rarely before in history… freedom is pitted against slavery” and “lightness against the dark.” Warning against equating America with “an evil empire,” Reagan (1983) emphasized America’s role in “the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil.” In response to the 9/11 attacks, George W. Bush (2001b) argued that the U.S. had a “responsibility to history” to “rid the world of evil.” Moreover, “every nation” would have “a decision to make: Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (Bush 2001c).

This tradition of exceptionalism has also involved presidents focusing on the use of unilateral American power to achieve goals and ideals, sometimes viewing international institutions with suspicion or even open hostility. Of course, the development of international institutions featured a significant American role. But there has long been a strand that, at its core, focuses on American power alone (Restad 2012; 2014). Early in his presidency, Theodore Roosevelt (1901) outlined his vision of the U.S. acting as an “international police” acting “for the sake of the welfare of mankind.” It would be “contemptible” for the U.S., Roosevelt (1904) argued, “to use high-sounding language to proclaim its purposes” and then “refuse to provide” the force necessary to ensure justice in the world. Notably, Roosevelt (1913, 577) would later even write that he viewed multiple powers pursuing a course of action as “usually considerable worse” than “if only one Power interfered.” In the early 1920s, Warren Harding took pains to distinguish his own agenda in foreign policy – which did include selectively engaging in international cooperation on issues of arbitration, a world court, and arms limitations – from Woodrow Wilson’s League of Nations. “Every commitment must be made in the exercise of our national sovereignty,” Harding (1921) underscored, because “a world supergovernment is
contrary to everything we cherish.” His successor Calvin Coolidge (1925) similarly argued that Americans could “best serve our own country and must successfully discharge our obligations to humanity by continuing to be openly and candidly, intensely and scrupulously, American.”

Decades later, even as he paid homage to the newly-established United Nations, Dwight Eisenhower (1953) made it clear that America’s “strength and security” was “a trust upon which rests the hope of free men everywhere.” This propensity was unambiguous under the George W. Bush administration. Indeed, speechwriter Michael Gerson (2007, 89), noted that Bush and Woodrow Wilson shared a similar sense of messianic mission, but contrasted Wilson’s “unrealistic belief” in “the decline or replacement of the nation-state by international institutions” with Bush’s aim to increase the “strength and number of democratic societies.”

**Associated Policies**

This recurrent tradition of messianic Americanism has been more than just a rhetorical trope of presidents. Many foreign policy choices over the last century bore the imprint of many aspects of this philosophy.

Consider first American imperial policies at the turn of the twentieth century (Moore 2017). After gaining control of new territories from the 1898 war against Spain, William McKinley outlined how American imperial rule would fulfill its purported divine mission and asserted America’s benevolence. McKinley (1898) argued that “Spanish rule must be replaced by a just, benevolent, and humane government.” In Cuba, the U.S. would “give aid and direction to its people to form a government for themselves.” More ambitious were his plans for the Philippines. Claiming to want to eventually “afford the inhabitants of the islands self-government,” McKinley (1901) strikingly dismissed Filipino “insurgents” as not reflecting the
will of the Filipino people; “by far the greater part of the inhabitants recognize American sovereignty and welcome it.” The efforts in the Philippines were part of “the high purposes of the American people,” and “in the fear of God,” Americans would “make the bounds of freedom wider yet.” McKinley’s successor, Theodore Roosevelt (1901), also claimed to want “to make them fit for self-government after the fashion of the really free nations,” boasting that Americans had a “disinterested zeal for their progress.” Reflecting on this policy after his presidency, Roosevelt (1913, 544) explained that American nation-building had included “developing the islands in the interests of the natives,” including schools, roads, justice, agriculture, industry, and government. “The work which we are doing there,” William Howard Taft (1909) concurred upon taking office, “redounds to our credit as a nation.” These statements essentially foreshadowed the missions and rhetoric of nation-building under later administrations. Lyndon Johnson (1971, 529), for example, claimed a similar intent for America in the Vietnam war, giving the “South Vietnamese a chance to build their own country and their own institutions.”

Two other actions by Roosevelt were especially significant to this tradition of exceptionalism. The first was Roosevelt’s (1901) pursuit of the construction of the Panama Canal, “one of those great works which only a great nation can undertake.” Roosevelt arranged for a treaty which specified that “the United States alone should do the work of building and assume the responsibility for safeguarding the canal.” Undertaking the project, Roosevelt (1903) claimed, was “required by our position” as a world power. No “old-world government,” Roosevelt (1913, 555) later reflected, would participate. Second, Roosevelt believed that the only way the U.S. could meet its foreign policy destiny was to augment its naval capacity. Once this buildup was completed, Roosevelt utilized this physical manifestation of his vision of exceptionalism by having the Great White Fleet be the first such fleet to travel completely
around the world. “In my own judgment,” Roosevelt (1913, 592) later explained, “the most important service that I rendered to peace was the voyage of the battle fleet round the world.”

Echoes of this messianic Americanist tradition abounded in subsequent presidencies, particularly in the George W. Bush administration. For example, the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief in Africa – “a medical version of the Marshall Plan” (Bush 2010, 333) – reflected America’s duty, as a nation that “had been given a lot,” to “answer the call” to lead the fight against those diseases. But arguably the apotheosis of this particular vision of American exceptionalism was the second war in Iraq. To Bush (2003), America’s responsibility was to advance freedom throughout the world, and “the Iraqi people” were “deserving and capable of human liberty.” Even in the face of substantial setbacks, Bush argued that success would be inevitable. The surge policy, Bush (2007) posited, would safeguard “the survival of a young democracy,” and the “Author of Liberty” would ensure the U.S. achieved this goal. Removing Saddam Hussein from power and creating a democracy in Iraq would begin a “transformation”; “once liberty took root in one society, it could spread to others” (Bush 2010, 232).

All presidents have articulated aspects of this tradition of exceptionalism, and many have fully defined their foreign policies by it. Indeed, that alternative traditions have emerged mainly in the face of serious crises is a testament to the centrality of this tradition to presidential foreign policy.

EMERGENT TRADITIONS

Responding to changes in world conditions and domestic affairs, presidential political thought can shift away from the dominant orthodoxy. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, recalibrations of how presidents articulated American exceptionalism in foreign policy came in
response to calamities. The analyses here examine how a tradition of messianic internationalism arose in reaction to World Wars I and II, while strains of skepticism and circumspection surfaced both in the wake of the Vietnam War and second war in Iraq. These emergent traditions provided alternative formulations for American exceptionalism, each making notable contributions to and critiques of the U.S. role in the world.

**Messianic Internationalism**

Arising out of the catastrophes of two world wars, the tradition of messianic internationalism essentially sought to redirect exceptionalism to a new purpose. It also embraces key aspects of the dominant tradition: American uniqueness, destiny, inevitable success, and righteousness. But it seeks to achieve America’s destiny by focusing on the creation of a broader international order and international institutions as the end goal of American foreign policy. This tradition holds that the U.S. can best project its own democratic success onto the rest of the world through significant building of and engagement with an international system reflecting American values.

This particular understanding of exceptionalism also had durable effects, being associated with the creation of the UN and North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO]. And indeed, earlier in the 1920s, even presidents who disparaged the League of Nations made some nascent moves towards this emergent conception of America’s role in the world with the establishment of the Permanent Court of International Justice, negotiating naval disarmament agreements, and attempting to outlaw war through the Kellogg-Briand Pact (Hathaway and Shapiro 2017). Still, this emergent tradition did not displace the recurrent tradition that focused above all on American power in world affairs.
**World War I.** Woodrow Wilson’s political rhetoric about American destiny bore many of the same hallmarks as messianic Americanism. Wilson (1917b) famously declared America’s unique purpose in entering World War I, asserting “the world must be made safe for democracy.” Accompanying this definition of the U.S. mission were assertions of inevitable American success. Wilson (1917a) vowed that “the shadows” that lay “dark upon our path” would “soon be dispelled, and we shall walk with the light all about us.” Moreover, Wilson expressed confidence that America would be willing to make any sacrifice in pursuit of that victory. “America is privileged,” Wilson (1917b) affirmed in asking Congress for a declaration of war, “to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other.” Furthermore, Wilson (1917a) stressed the unquestionable goodness of U.S. intentions. America had an “unselfish purpose,” desiring “neither conquest nor advantage.” To distinguish the purported noble aims of the U.S. from the other European nations in the war, America would be an “associate, not an ally, of the Entente powers” (Link 1979, 77).

But Wilson’s conception of America’s mission departed sharply from the vision of exceptionalism articulated by prior presidents. The U.S., Wilson hoped, would build a new international order and construct international institutions to maintain peace. Even before U.S. entry into the war, Wilson (1916) called for an American role in constructing an international order, proposing a “universal association of the nations to maintain the inviolate security of the highway of the seas” and “to prevent any war” that would break treaties or start without consideration of the “opinion of the world.” Wilson (1917a) emphasized the destiny of exceptionalism; he intended to apply America’s “principles of a liberated mankind,” while rejecting as false a peace based “upon an armed balance of power.” Wilson’s Fourteen Points,
including the proposal for the League of Nations, reflected his vision of an international order constructed by the United States.

However, Wilson’s vision of a League of Nations was met with skepticism in the Senate. Despite his desire for the Senate to consent to the treaty and approve entry into the League, he proved unwilling to compromise. Wilson (1920) chastised the Senate for not living up to America’s destiny. Rejecting the League, he claimed, was an affront to the nation’s heritage. The U.S. could not “refuse this role of champion without putting the stigma of rejection upon the great and devoted men who brought its government into existence.” Attempting to connect the League to traditional understandings of exceptionalism, Wilson argued that it was “surely the manifest destiny of the United States to lead in the attempt to make this spirit prevail.” Summing up his views in a messianic zeal, Wilson explained that he offered not just “a series of recommendations,” but “a confession of faith.” That faith was a particular vision of exceptionalism: “I believe this to be the faith of America, the faith of the future.” Still, the ultimate rejection of Wilson’s League of Nations proposal by senators led by Henry Cabot Lodge (R-MA) – an ally of the recently-deceased Theodore Roosevelt – showed that the tradition of messianic Americanism was resurgent.

World War II. The cataclysm of a second global conflict allowed Franklin Roosevelt to once again push the boundaries of the dominant orthodoxy of exceptionalism. While he had supported U.S. entry into the League of Nations as a vice presidential candidate in 1920, Roosevelt was more cautious about foreign affairs as he focused on the New Deal in the 1930s. But the rise of fascism abroad and U.S. involvement in World War II led FDR to recouple traditional notions of a unique American destiny in the world with the creation of international institutions.
Roosevelt’s rhetoric about foreign policy hit many of the principal themes of exceptionalism. Emphasizing a unique mission for America, Roosevelt (1941a) declared his dedication to creating “a world founded upon four essential human freedoms”: freedom of “speech and expression” and “worship” and freedom from “want” and “fear.” This vision was connected to the American experience. Each generations of Americans, Roosevelt (1941b) argued, “have moved forward constantly and consistently toward an ideal.” The democratic “faith” of America “has become the hope of all peoples in an anguished world” (Roosevelt 1945a). Success in this mission would be inevitable through citizens’ willingness to make sacrifices. Through “the unbounding determination of our people” Roosevelt (1941d) affirmed, America would “gain the inevitable triumph.” Furthermore, both before and during the war, Roosevelt underscored American righteousness and outlined stark moral contrasts. America would not be motivated simply by “any mere desire for revenge,” Roosevelt (1942) explained, but instead would work “to make very certain that the world will never so suffer again.” The U.S. sought “no aggrandizement” or “territorial changes” to its benefit (Roosevelt 1941c). There could be no “successful compromise between good and evil,” and Roosevelt (1942) declared that “only total victory” would fulfill America’s mission.

But while Roosevelt’s explanation of an American mission bore the general hallmarks of exceptionalist rhetoric, he embraced Wilson’s earlier departure from a more unilateral understanding of America’s world role. Having “learned that we cannot live alone,” Roosevelt (1945a) explained, Americans were now “citizens of the world.” A lasting world peace depended on the U.S. building and cooperating in international institutions. “It cannot be just an American peace,” Roosevelt (1945b) told Congress, “It must be a peace which rests on the cooperative effort of the whole world.” Therefore, Roosevelt warned against repeating what he viewed as
U.S. mistakes in the aftermath of World War I. There could be “no middle ground here,” Roosevelt averred; either the U.S. would “have to take the responsibility for world collaboration, or we shall have to bear the responsibility for another world conflict.” A United Nations, Roosevelt asserted, would mean “the end of the system of unilateral action, the exclusive alliances, the spheres of influence, the balances of power, and all the other expedients that have been tried for centuries – and have always failed.” The U.S. would help lead the world through “a universal organization in which all peace-loving Nations will finally have a chance to join.” In this, Roosevelt succeeded in making a significant departure from the messianic Americanist tradition, as the U.S. helped establish the UN.

*Post-World War II.* FDR’s successor Harry Truman had the difficult task of being the first president to actually attempt to pursue foreign policy through cooperation in the UN. His general depiction of America’s mission in foreign affairs was broadly consistent with the dominant strain of exceptionalism in presidential rhetoric and thought. All of “the free peoples of the world,” Truman (1947a) declared, would “look to us for support in maintain their freedoms.” As the Cold War began, he announced his doctrine that committed the U.S. to containment against the spread of communism: “I believe that we must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way.” Articulating a stark moral contrast, Truman explained that “at the present moment in world history nearly every nation” had to “choose between alternative ways of life.”

Like Wilson and FDR, Truman sought to turn the traditional emphasis on an American destiny to the operation of an international order, particularly through the UN and the new North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In a sharp break from unilateralism, Truman (1955, 271) even claimed to hope that the UN would “eventually work on the same basis as the union of the
United States.” Acting through international institutions posed some challenges for a superpower. But Truman consistently painted even unilateral American actions as working toward this international order (Spalding 2006). In the aftermath of World War II, Truman (1945) explained that the U.S. would maintain “military bases necessary for the complete protection of our interests and of world peace,” but promised these actions would be made “by arrangements consistent with the United Nations Charter.” Similarly, while the Marshall Plan was an American action – continuing the “American tradition of extending a helping hand to people in distress” – Truman (1947b) painted this effort to promote European recovery as consistent with the UN mission. Because of the “central importance in our foreign policy of support of the United Nations,” Truman emphasized that the “purposes of the European recovery program are in complete harmony with the purposes of the Charter.” Furthermore, Truman (1950) justified U.S. action in the Korean War as being through the UN. The attack by North Korea on South Korea revealed communist “contempt for the United Nations.” To not respond would destroy “the hope of mankind that the United Nations would develop into an institution of world order.” Though Truman did not ask Congress for a declaration of war, he claimed legitimacy for U.S. actions because of the support of most UN member states.

Truman had framed all major U.S. moves in foreign policy as supporting a new international order, and NATO and the UN would prove durable. But the unilateral vision of America’s mission in the world would reemerge, as the U.S. found itself in the Cold War as the only western superpower.

Skepticism
A more skeptical tradition of American exceptionalism emerged first in the midst of the Vietnam War and then again after the second war in Iraq. This tradition does not reject exceptionalism, but it does seek to put the brakes on it. The U.S. is still held up as the exemplary nation. But this tradition challenges the prevailing orthodoxy by being more wary of an overly active pursuit of an exceptional mission and destiny in foreign policy.

**Great Power Politics.** Reacting to the Cold War and discontent over Vietnam, Richard Nixon consciously departed from the prevailing orthodoxy of messianic Americanism in his public stances. To be sure, the U.S. would still be enormously active in foreign policy and would set an example for the world. While “no single nation can save the world,” Nixon (1974) stated that America would, through its “example, save the cause of peace and freedom for the world.” In this way, Nixon (1970) claimed, the U.S. could “fulfill its destiny of being the world’s best hope for liberty, for opportunity, for progress and peace for all peoples.” While focusing on seeking a balance of power, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger (1979, 229) likewise emphasized “the moral significance” of America: “only America had both the power and the decency to inspire other peoples who struggled for identity, for progress and dignity.”

But Nixon sought to underscore limits to American power in foreign affairs. As Nixon (1970) argued, “neither the defense nor the development of other nations can be exclusively or primarily an American undertaking.” American “leadership of a whole free world” after World War II, including the encouragement of “other countries to adopt our economic, political, and social ideas,” had been “a noble and unselfish goal in its enthusiasm,” but Nixon (1974) contended that it was “simplistic and occasionally misguided.” Indeed, the Korean and Vietnam conflicts had “sapped too much of our national self-confidence and sense of purpose.” Therefore,
Nixon rejected the notion that the U.S. should “transform the internal as well as the international behavior of other countries,” saying “there are limits to what we can do.” The principal responsibility of the U.S. would be maintaining a global balance of power, instead of seeking the “transformation of other societies.” Kissinger (1979, 915) maintained that this was a significant departure from the prevailing orthodoxy about America’s world role: “all the strands of our international experience ran counter to what we were trying to accomplish.”

Vietnam posed a challenge to this departure. It was a war with hallmarks of the messianic Americanist view, using American power to try to transform a society. Kissinger (1979, 230) later argued that America’s entry into the conflict had been a result “of a naïve idealism that wanted to set right all the world’s ills and believed American goodwill supplied its own efficacy.” Nixon tried reconcile his administration’s more skeptical viewpoint with the perceived need for the U.S. to save face. The U.S. would not “abdicate” its “responsibilities as the most powerful nation in the free world,” Nixon (1974) claimed, but America needed “to reassess those responsibilities” because “unrealistic idealism could be impractical and potentially dangerous.” Yet Nixon could or would not free himself from the established orthodoxy on America’s role in the world when it came to Vietnam. He believed that a “first defeat in our Nation’s history would result in a collapse of confidence in American leadership,” threatening his larger aims. So Nixon tried to split the difference. While the Johnson administration had “Americanized the war in Vietnam,” Nixon (1969) focused on “Vietnamizing the search for peace.” Though Nixon drew back American troops, he continued the costly American involvement for years.

The main objective of Nixon’s foreign policy was the achievement of a stable peace through a global balance of power. This meant focusing on relationships with America’s ideological adversaries through détente with the Soviet Union and the opening to the People’s
Republic of China. Despite his “reputation” as “a very hard-line, cold-war-oriented, anticommunist,” Nixon (1978, 611) later wrote, he was prepared to overcome the sentimentality of American exceptionalism and cooperate with the Soviets, respecting “those who believe just as strongly in their own systems.” To pressure the Soviets, Nixon also sought to establish relations with China, again downplaying the democratic transformation associated with American exceptionalism. The U.S. and China, Nixon (1978, 562) suggested, were brought together by “recognition” that a nation’s “internal political philosophy” would be less important than “its policy toward the rest of the world and toward” America.

Following Nixon’s resignation due to the Watergate scandal, Gerald Ford’s administration also recognized more limits on America’s world role. As Kissinger (1999, 1068) stated, Ford “became President at a time when American foreign policy had to come to terms with its limits.” In the 1970s, a “national trauma… arose from the gap that had opened between historic convictions regarding America’s mission and the practical challenges of a new international environment.” Indeed, Ford’s (1979, 248-249) opinion of the Vietnam War emphasized a sense of the limitations of American power. Though he “had always thought that we were doing the right thing,” Ford conceded that there were many significant questions about the conflict. He wondered whether civilian and military leaders had “stopped to consider that our world commitments might already be too great.” Moreover, while he believed an American victory might have been possible, he noted its tremendous cost of life, economic difficulty, domestic conflict, and a general hit to “U.S. prestige.” Instead of embracing America as world policeman, Ford (1976) defined American exceptionalism as principally exemplary. The “establishment of justice and peace abroad will in large measure,” Ford held, “depend upon the peace and justice we create here in our own country, where we still show the way.”
The highest priority in the Nixon and Ford foreign policy was establishing a global equilibrium, rather than any preordained mission associated with the messianic Americanist tradition. America would influence the world primarily through its example. This alternative vision was opened up by the difficulties America had encountered in Vietnam, shattering the previous orthodoxy of exceptionalism.

*America First.* The second war in Iraq would eventually contribute to an even more skeptical understanding of America’s role in the world under Donald Trump. “I don’t think it’s a very nice term,” Trump had stated as he prepared to launch his presidential candidacy, “I think you’re insulting the world” (Sargent 2016). The foreign policy Trump sought to pursue – sometimes at odds with many in his own administration – reacted to both of his predecessors. He criticized the messianic Americanism of George W. Bush, bemoaning the war in Iraq, and he generally was skeptical of U.S. involvement overseas. “I loudly pledged a new approach” in the election, Trump (2019) told Congress, “Great nations do not fight endless wars.” But Trump also criticized the foreign policy of Barack Obama as weak, claiming “we will never apologize for advancing America’s interests.” Instead, Trump sought to pursue a distinctly transactional vision of foreign policy under the controversial banner of “America First.”

In his inaugural address, Trump (2017) articulated a conception of American exceptionalism distinctly echoing themes of the skeptical tradition. He emphasized that the U.S. had to embrace limits on its global role. Outlining his transactional understanding of foreign policy and alliances, Trump argued, “We’ve made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has disappeared over the horizon.” “From this moment on,” Trump proclaimed, “it’s going to be America First.” Moreover, Trump denied any ambition
to use American power to transform the world or push for democracy. “We will seek friendship and goodwill with the nations of the world,” Trump stated, “but we do so with the understanding that it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first.” The U.S. would not actively pursue exceptionalist goals in foreign policy. Indeed, Trump’s foreign policy has remained deeply skeptical of alliances, international institutions, and, in essence, active U.S. global leadership.

Yet at the same time, Trump spoke of the U.S. setting an example, again showing similarities to the exceptionalist rhetoric of Nixon. “We do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone,” Trump (2017) pledged, “but rather to let it shine as an example for everyone to follow.” To Congress, Trump (2018) connected the exemplar role of America to the nation’s founding: “It was home to an incredible people with a revolutionary idea: that they could rule themselves; that they could chart their own destiny; and that, together, they could light up the entire world.” Thus, while Trump’s actions and attempted actions may attempt to depart from traditional American foreign policy, in his rhetoric, Trump has drawn upon an alternative tradition of American exceptionalism.

**Circumspection**

During and after the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, a circumspect tradition also arose as an alternative critical of the dominant orthodoxies of American exceptionalism. To be sure, presidents articulating this viewpoint still held up the U.S. as an exemplary nation for the world. This tradition is favorable to the idea of American support for spreading democracy and human dignity. But this viewpoint shares the skeptical tradition’s concern about American overreach. Moreover, its crucial distinguishing feature is admitting U.S. fallibility. It candidly
acknowledges that the U.S. has strayed from, fallen short of, or willingly violated its proclaimed ideals in its actions abroad. Downplaying the notion of the U.S. being uniquely allowed to undertake actions in foreign policy because of its exceptional mission, it rather emphasizes America’s moral limits and responsibilities to live up to its claimed exceptionalism.

Post-Vietnam. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, Jimmy Carter came to the presidency seeking a significant reorientation of American foreign policy. Like his predecessors, he embraced the notion of an exceptional mission for America. “Two centuries ago,” Carter (1977a) declared, “our Nation’s birth was a milestone in the long quest for freedom. But the bold and brilliant dream which excited the founders of this Nation still awaits it consummation.” Even as he sought to change American foreign policy, Carter projected continuity, stating, “I have no new dream to set forth today, but rather urge a fresh faith in the old dream.” Claiming that the U.S. “was the first society openly to define itself in terms of both spirituality and human liberty,” Carter stated the idea of the U.S. serving as an example to the world in explicit terms: “It is that unique self-definition which has given us an exceptional appeal.”

But Carter departed from other traditions of exceptionalism in admitting American fallibility and declaring that any notion of exceptionalism needed to be something for the U.S. to live up to, rather than simply benefit from. As Carter (1977a) continued, “it also imposes on us a special obligation to take on those moral duties which, when assumed, seem invariably to be in our own best interests.” A new approach to the U.S. role in the world was required. As Secretary of State Cyrus Vance (1983, 29) later reflected, “a nation that saw itself as a ‘beacon on a hill’ for the rest of mankind could not content itself with power politics alone.”
Acknowledging that America had fallen short of its exceptional promise was central to Carter’s goal. Carter (1977a) called for correcting “recent mistakes” by making “a resurgent commitment to the basic principles of our Nation.” The U.S. could not simply “dwell upon remembered glory,” but instead needed to have “humility,” recognizing its limits in terms of both how much power it could wield and what actions could be morally justified. Rejecting the idea that the U.S. should “be the world’s policeman,” Carter (1979) preferred instead “to be the world’s peacemaker.” Furthermore, a previous willingness to fight “fire with fire” had led to a failed approach, and Carter (1977c) believed that the Vietnam War had been “the best example of its intellectual and moral poverty.” Promising instead that the U.S. would “not behave in foreign places so as to violate our rule and standards,” Carter (1977a) explained that international “trust” was “essential to our strength.”

Seeking to act on this vision, Carter sought to promote human rights and improve both U.S. international cooperation and the image of America abroad. Embracing human rights, Carter (1977c) asserted, would restore America’s “moral stature.” Indeed, Carter invoked an exceptionalist standard by claiming that “no other country” would be as “qualified” to set an example for the world. Another area in which Carter (1977b) sought to achieve these aims was in improving relations with Latin America. He pledged that the U.S. would now have “a high regard for the individuality” and “the sovereignty of each Latin American and Caribbean nation.” Central to this objective was planning to return control over the Panama Canal. Arguing that the U.S. under President Theodore Roosevelt had forced Panama to sign the 1903 canal treaty under threat, Carter (1982, 155) was determined to “correct” the “injustice.” Thus, the new treaty provided for the return of the canal to Panama at the end of 1999.
For Carter, American foreign policy was about living up to claims of exceptionalism, rather than just acting upon them. Of course, even Carter (1977c) admitted that U.S. policy could not just be guided “by rigid moral maxims” because of an “imperfect” world. But Carter had significantly departed from both the orthodoxy of messianic Americanism and from the skeptical understanding of exceptionalism. His major initiatives in foreign affairs, from the Panama Canal treaty to the Camp David Accords, were articulated within this circumspect framework.

Though he took office nearly two decades after its conclusion, Bill Clinton’s understanding of America’s world role was also significantly influenced by the Vietnam War. Like Carter, Clinton did embrace an understanding of exceptionalism consistent with previous presidents. America, Clinton (1995) argued, embodied “an idea that has become the ideal for billions of people throughout the world.” Moreover, Clinton (1993) articulated a need to “continue to lead the world we did so much to make” as the Cold War ended. The cause of “democracy and freedom” abroad would continue to be “America’s cause.” On the whole, Clinton (1997) invoked a bold understanding of the U.S. place in global affairs, asserting that the U.S. remained “the world’s indispensable nation” with “America’s bright flame of freedom spreading throughout all the world.”

Still, though Clinton might have come close to asserting a fully messianic understanding of America’s world role, he pulled back in several ways that indicated circumspection. In the same language as Carter, Clinton (1995) repudiated the understanding of America’s world role articulated by Theodore Roosevelt, arguing that “America cannot and must not be the world’s policeman.” Additionally, like Carter, Clinton (1997) called for the U.S. to live up to its purported exceptionalism, seeking to never undertake actions that would result in losing “the balance of its values.” Moreover, he sought to cooperate more internationally, rather than act
unilaterally. Clinton (2004, 951) was dismayed by Republican opposition “to the test ban treaty, the climate change treaty, the ABM Treaty, and the International Criminal Court,” and he called for greater engagement with the UN. The U.S., Clinton (1999a) asserted, would need “to pay our dues and our debts” to the international organization. Finally, coming full circle, Clinton’s visit to Vietnam addressed the very impetus for the circumspect tradition. Having made the decision to normalize relations with Vietnam earlier in his presidency, Clinton made concessions to problematic U.S. actions on the trip. Being “always on the brink of saying ‘I’m sorry’” without explicitly doing so, he referred to atrocities committed by all sides in the war, including America’s use of Agent Orange. And Clinton admitted to the Vietnamese prime minister that he had opposed the war, even as he said it had been “an honest mistake” (Kalb and Kalb 2011, 151).

With the Cold War over, Clinton essentially sought to fuse a somewhat triumphalist understanding of American exceptionalism, akin to the messianic strand, with the need for circumspection about past U.S. foreign policy. America would serve as an example to the world and would support the promotion of democracy, but there were limits both to U.S. power and what could constitute appropriate moral actions in foreign policy.

**Post-Iraq.** In the wake of controversies over the Bush administration’s “war on terror,” Barack Obama outlined a foreign policy vision akin to the circumspect tradition. Nevertheless, Obama partly embraced the dominant orthodoxy of exceptionalism about America’s indispensability. Obama (2009c) admonished other nations to “remember that it was not simply international institutions, not just treaties and declarations that brought stability to a post-World War II world.” Instead, “the plain fact” was that the U.S. had “helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms.” America had
also acted with good intentions, Obama asserted, and “had borne this burden not because we seek to impose our will,” but instead “out of enlightened self-interest, because we seek a better future.” Even more explicitly, Obama (2013) described the idea of American exceptionalism in his second inaugural: “What makes us exceptional – what makes us American – is our allegiance to an idea,” that humans had “unalienable rights” to “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

But even he espoused an exceptionalist narrative, Obama conditioned it with admissions of American fallibility, indicting the self-righteous confidence of the more messianic strand of exceptionalism in presidential foreign policy. Like Carter, Obama (2009a) called upon America “to choose our better history.” Rather than just proclaiming American virtue, Obama sought to remind the nation that “our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, [and] the tempering qualities of humility and restraint.” The U.S. could not defy its own ideals “for expedience’s sake” in dealing with the challenges of foreign policy because “those ideals still light the world.” Contrary to other presidential assertions that American intentions were always benevolent, Obama emphasized that American power would not “entitle us to do as we please.”

Beyond conceding American fallibility, Obama shared the skeptical tradition’s emphasis on the limits of American power to remake the world. Seeking to make these limits a virtue, Obama (2009a) argued that “our power grows through its prudent use.” Asserting that “enduring security and lasting peace do not require perpetual war,” Obama (2013) reminded Americans that its foreign policy was not simply about military victories: “we are also heirs to those who won the peace and not just the war.” Obama’s concern about American overextension were rooted in the second Iraq War. To Obama (2010), that war had clarified that “all elements of our power,
including our diplomacy, our economic strength, and the power of America’s example” must be used to meet challenges, rather than just resorting to “military force.”

Obama’s vision of foreign policy invoked both the messianic understanding of America’s unique destiny and the skeptical view of the limits of American power. But he distinguished his foreign policy from these other traditions, placing himself more in the circumspect tradition. There had, Obama (2009c) acknowledged, “long been a tension between those who describe themselves as realists or idealists.” Indeed, Obama explicitly defined the skeptical and messianic traditions, noting “a tension that suggests a stark choice between the narrow pursuit of interests or an endless campaign to impose our values around the world.” Rather than embracing either tradition, Obama stated, “I reject these choices,” admitting that America was “fallible” but that a more idealistic view should not be dismissed “as silly or naïve.” Thus, Obama (2013) pledged that the U.S. would cooperate more internationally, but that it would also support this core mission to support democracy everywhere “because peace in our time requires the constant advance of those principles that our common creed describes: tolerance and opportunity, human dignity and justice.” Indeed, Obama (2014) made it a point to increasingly embrace the term as he articulated this understanding: “I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being. But what makes us exceptional is not our ability to flout international norms and the rule of law, it is our willingness to affirm them through our actions.”

In several areas of foreign policy, Obama substantially departed from this vision. He hoped to draw back from endless war, but had to ultimately reengage in Iraq, while the Afghanistan war continued. The reliance on drones for counterterrorism operations certainly invoked a messianic sense that America was exempt from restraints placed on other countries.
But while these areas shared continuities with other presidents, Obama had nonetheless outlined a circumspect vision of exceptionalism along similar lines to Carter and Clinton before him.

**CONCLUSION: EXCEPTIONALISM AND IDEATIONAL INTERCURRENCE**

Presidents do not come into office with a blank slate. Their strategies, policies, rhetoric, and justifications are always impacted by their relationship with their predecessors and the particular political moment in which they come to power (Skowronek 1997). As the preceding analysis suggests, this is true of how presidents speak of and define their foreign policies in terms of American exceptionalism. Presidents likely have sincerely and strategically held beliefs about the appropriate role of America in the world. But the political context in which they are elected and the policies and rhetoric of their predecessors also impact how presidents emphasize distinctive aspects of exceptionalism.

Alternative traditions to the recurrent strain of messianic Americanism emerged largely in response to major world events, some of which discredited the established orthodoxy about the appropriate role of the U.S. to play in world affairs. The messianic internationalist tradition surfaced during two world wars. During World War II, Franklin Roosevelt even warned against retreating to a more unilateral approach as America had after World War I. The skeptical tradition became pronounced in the wake first of the Vietnam War and then the second Iraq War, as presidents needed to confront the limits of American power. The circumspect tradition also conspicuously became prominent in the wake of these conflicts, and presidents were perhaps more able to depict the U.S. as fallible.

However, even as the traditions have emerged and made their mark on presidential foreign policy, the strain of messianic Americanism has periodically resurged precisely on its
ability to critique these alternative traditions of exceptionalism. After World War I, presidents repudiated Wilson’s League of Nations and sought to pursue foreign policy apart from it, even as they more subtly engaged in international cooperation. In the 1980s, Reagan’s (1990, 266) views were influenced by what he perceived as the problems of the skeptical Nixonian strategy and the circumspect Carter approach to foreign policy: “During the late seventies, I felt our country had begun to abdicate this historical role as the spiritual leader of the Free World and its foremost defender of democracy. Some of our resolve was gone, along with a part of our commitment to uphold the values we cherished.” Even within the same administration, presidents can be pulled in different directions. In the wake of criticism of his response to the question about his beliefs in exceptionalism near the beginning of his presidency, Obama subsequently made it a point to directly invoke the term itself more explicitly than his predecessors (Gilmore, Sheets, and Rowling 2016). Donald Trump’s military response to Syria’s use of chemical weapons again civilians, noted Bob Woodward (2018, 148), showed even a skeptic could sometimes embrace “America as the world’s policeman.”

These varying traditions of the general idea of American exceptionalism in foreign policy interact between and within administrations. The intercurrence of these traditions is essential to how presidents justify their approach to foreign affairs and articulate their understanding of America’s appropriate role in the world. Moreover, presidents focus more on particular traditions of exceptionalism based on their authority to repudiate alternative understandings. Recent decades have made this especially clear. Reagan repudiated what he viewed as the insufficiently messianic foreign policies of his three predecessors; Obama sharply opposed George W. Bush’s approach; Trump criticized both the Bush and Obama foreign policies.
Will there be more movement to the recently emergent traditions of exceptionalism in the current political moment? The appetite of presidents and presidential candidates to actively define America’s world role in messianic terms appears to be lacking, and elements of both political parties have sharply questioned an interventionist foreign policy (Kagan 2018; Bender 2019). In 2020, Trump will presumably continue to articulate a relatively skeptical view of America’s world role. On the Democratic side, no candidate seems to promise a return to a messianic Americanist worldview, and all candidates – even as some divisions may emerge over potential American military retrenchment – seem to embrace many elements of the circumspect tradition (Guyer 2019). More generally, the relative decline of American power compared to other rising nations may increasingly change the way presidents espouse the idea of exceptionalism (Go 2011).

Still, it remains unlikely that presidents, occupying an office that has more independent authority to act in foreign affairs than in domestic policy, will discard it either. Whatever particular traditions of exceptionalism they emphasize, all presidents invoke the idea in their political thought and rhetoric. For better or worse, American exceptionalism is associated with the presidency as much as it is with the nation itself.

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