

# **Sanctions from on High:**

The Legitimizing Power of American Exceptionalism

**Benjamin Bartu**

Linfield College

## **Keywords:**

American Exceptionalism / Iraq War / League of Nations / United Nations / Cambodia / Legitimacy

## **Abstract:**

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- II. Exceptionalism & The Iraq War
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“To the making of these fateful decisions, the United States pledges before you — and therefore before the world—its determination to help solve the fearful atomic dilemma—to devote its entire heart and mind to find the way by which the miraculous inventiveness of man shall not be dedicated to his death, but consecrated to his life.”

—Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Atoms for Peace,” UN Speech, 1953

*& the war was only in its infancy then  
learning how to kill us in the morning & in the evening  
in houses & on street corners, in Humvees & when  
we return home the war is most proficient at killing us  
one at a time two at a time*

—Maurice Emerson Decaul, “& the War Was in Its Infancy Then”

“The need for exchange is clear.”

—Laura Nader, *What the Rest Think of the West*, p. xix

## **Acronyms**

**DoD** Department of Defense  
**ICC** International Criminal Court  
**IGO** Intergovernmental Organization  
**ILO** International Liberal Order  
**IMF** International Monetary Fund  
**UN** United Nations  
**WMD** Weapon of Mass Destruction  
**WWI** World War One  
**WWII** World War Two

## On American Exceptionalism

“The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults.”

—Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM HAS been interpreted and re-interpreted as everything from a double-edged ideology to a domestic political division (Lipset, 1996, & Jouet, 2017). At times it has been called a myth and at others given mythological importance (Hodgson, 2009, Bossie & Knoblock, 2011). Notions of American greatness and distinction have inspired and paved the way for the founding of such international institutions as the League of Nations, United Nations, World Bank, and IMF (Easterly, 2006, & Cottrell, 2018). As often as it has been attributed with serving as key inspiration for these multilateral institutions, it has been accused of helping to justify unnecessary wars and undermine the very international liberal order it made possible (Robertson, 2006; Bacevich, “Tragedy Renewed,” and *The Limits of Power*).

Whether interpreting its darker or brighter sides, however, a single dimension of American Exceptionalism threads through the literature at large: This is the capacity of those who seek to achieve a political objective to utilize American Exceptionalism as a means to an end. Since the US’s inception, American Exceptionalism has played an essential part in sanctioning American policy, both at home and abroad. In this respect, Exceptionalism occupies a place very similar to religion in the state apparatus of US government: It legitimizes (Fox, 2011). Measures of the US’ superiority have been used time and again to excuse and/or permit any and all actions administrations have resolved to take, necessary or otherwise, humanitarian or colonial: from the quintessential role the country and its leaders have played in the founding of multilateral institutions (Cottrell, 2018) to the colonizing of the Philippines and Iraq war (Karnow, 1989, and Haass, 2008).

This paper will devote the bulk of its energies to reexamining the Iraq war, specifically the role American Exceptionalism played in implementing US policy in the lead-up to the invasion, as well as in legitimizing the actions of the US. Several other historical cases will be examined in brief as well, including the founding of the League of Nations and the United Nations, as well as the bombing of Cambodia during the Vietnam War. Rather than testifying to the fact or fiction of American Exceptionalism, as so many have done before (Friedman, Mandelbaum, & Walt, 2011, Koh, 2003, Tilman, 2005, Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*, Hodgson, 2009), this paper instead

argues that American Exceptionalism serves as a vital legitimizing factor for the United States government, which it uses to justify adhering to a different set of rules from those other nations are expected to follow. Sometimes this takes the form of the United States exempting itself from UN treaties or starting wars in defiance of international law, and at others it means embarking on greatly ambitious multilateral projects. The ultimate goal of the paper is to provide a new working definition for American Exceptionalism as a tool employed by US government to give more legitimacy to its actions, and the hope is that the line of thinking presented here will be applicable to case studies made of government policies and actions, as well as providing a new way of understanding the methods by which the United States government functions.



THE HISTORY OF American Exceptionalism predates the origins of the US itself. French traveler Alexis De Tocqueville is most often attributed with having invented the idea of American Exceptionalism in his seminal work *Democracy in America*, thoughts attributing a special significance to the country had long been in circulation (Lipset, 1996, Hodgson, 2009).

However, even before the release of De Tocqueville's work, America was being distinguished by citizens and settlers in ways which suggested an inherent superiority over the rest of the world. Particularly noteworthy among these is John Winthrop's "Model of Christian Charity," speech (1630), in which the governor urged Puritan settlers sailing with him aboard the *Arabella* to treat the land to which they traveled as a "city upon a hill," echoing the words of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Chace, 1997). Winthrop's speech has been canonized as one of the "sacred texts of that account of history known as 'American Exceptional-ism,'" (Hodgson, 2009, p. 1).

Despite Winthrop's and De Tocqueville's roles in developing the idea of American Exceptionalism, the first recorded use of the term, would not appear until the 20th century, and, as with Tocqueville, would also be originate from a non-American. In 1929, Joseph Stalin, speaking with American communist Jay Lovestone about the lack of revolutionary will in the United States, used the term not to laud but rather to critique America's difference (McCoy, 2012, Morgan, 1999). What troubled the dictator was the seeming inability of members of the US proletariat to fall in line with the Marxist model, unionize appropriately, and make the transition to socialism. This resistance was in part a symptom of America's unique history: Rather than evolving out of a feudal system, America was conceived as a democracy, distinguishing it historically from all other modern states (Tocqueville 1840, Lipset & Marks,

2000). Where Stalin's qualms have faded into history, however, Tocqueville's observations have acquired a fresh relevance in the 21st century, thanks to the efforts of the GOP.

Over the course of Obama's presidency the Republican Party worked to redefine American Exceptionalism, transforming popular understanding of the idea to suggest the US possesses an inherent superiority over other nations. This was done to give a shot in the arm to the Republican's efforts to defame president Obama. Members of the GOP such as Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, and Donald J. Trump all made claims attacking Obama's belief in "American Exceptionalism," as they defined it (Jaffe, 2015 & Jouet, 2017). This was a far cry from Tocqueville's comprehension of what "exceptional," meant as relates to the US, which for him was the way in which its history merely distinguished it from other nations, in ways which might be better at times and worse at others.

Though these sentiments of superiority — religiously motivated or not — have always been a part of the fabric of American society, what is vital to understand is that the term "American Exceptionalism" has not always referred to an inherent superiority possessed by the United States — this is a recent development. However, America's difference from the rest of the world has always been a topic of discussion (Lipset, 2000 & Tocqueville, 1840), and has often been used to set America apart in a positive light (Wilson, 1902 & Winthrop, 1630). Of the new shift to American Exceptionalism standing solely for American greatness, Varon (2011) has noted that there are real risks present in such patriotic flattery, namely the "continued inattention to problems warranting urgent concern," (p. 124).



THE ACADEMIC LITERATURE traditionally defines American Exceptionalism as the idea or reality of the US' uniqueness among nations, due to its history and values (Dunne & Mulaj, 2010, Britton, 2006). Perhaps the most succinct definition offered for understanding American Exceptionalism in the 21st century is that provided by Patman (2006), who categorizes American Exceptionalism as the "informal ideology that endows Americans with the conviction that their nation is an exemplary one," (p. 964). The results of this perception of self as exemplary have given rise to a sense of duty to improve the state of the world (Easterly, 2006). Over the course of modern history, this has taken many forms, from the vital assistance America provided in forming IGOs to the ways it has sought to model other nations after its own institutions through military conquest (Karnow, 1989; Phillips, 2007; Zinn, 2008).

American Exceptionalism has been understood in a range of ways covering all ends of the political spectrum, from being evidenced by attitudes of anti-governmentalism and anti-intellectualism (Jouet, 2017), to the capacity of Americans to focus on the “here and now,” (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011). Hodgson (2009) has warned about the dangers of viewing America’s difference from the rest of the world as something solely to tout and praise. Strong arguments also exist rebuffing claims that the United States’ “exceptional” nature does more good than harm for the rest of the world (Friedman, Mandelbaum, & Walt, 2011).

In many ways, the argument over America’s place in the world today is staged over how exceptional it is (Avery & Mclaughlin, 2013). In the 20th and 21st centuries, presidents use the idea of American Exceptionalism at every given opportunity to invoke feelings of “goodness, righteousness and civilization,” in citizens (Ibid., p. 172). This is to say that even before the GOP turned the phrase “American Exceptionalism” into an unchallengeable assertion of American greatness, the idea of the United States being distinct from other nations was enough to evoke feelings of patriotic goodwill in US citizens. Come the collapse of the Soviet Union, many felt American superiority to be all but confirmed, as the US suddenly found itself the lone superpower in a post-cold war era (Hodgson, 2009). Though material wealth and power may be supplied as ‘evidence’ for the idea that America is inherently superior to other countries, it is the suggestion that America is unconditionally superior from which the concept draws its true strength (Ibid.).

Nevertheless, the US sees itself as and acts like the “indispensable nation,” (Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*). Many do in fact find this feeling legitimate, such as Koh (2003), who notes that “the United States remains the only superpower capable, and at times willing, to commit real resources and make real sacrifices to build, sustain, and drive an international system committed to international law, democracy, and the promotion of human rights.” (p. 1489). Sure enough, America’s sudden enjoyment of unilateral power read to some as a unique opportunity to create international change. Smith (1994) argued no nation had a role as vital to altering and rectifying autocratic states and regimes in the post-cold war era as the US. Coupled with the notion of American Exceptionalism, the US’ new preponderance helped justify intervention as a quintessential component of combatting non-Western ideologies and forms of government (Easterly, 2006). Perhaps in their raw form utterances acknowledging American Exceptionalism would be incapable of galvanizing extreme acts such as direct intervention, Bacevich (“Tragedy

Renewed”) has noted the tradition fuels a deep-seated need America possesses to demonize its enemies, and it is this which mobilizes the spirit of superiority within.<sup>1</sup>



EXPRESSIONS OF SUPERIORITY in American thought and rhetoric appear in a multiplicity of forms. This is because American Exceptionalism fuels the drive of individuals across all political lines. Hodgson (2009) notes that Martin Luther King, Jr. and segregationist George Wallace alike were believers in American Exceptionalism, although two more opposite interpretations might have been hard to come by. For Hodgson himself, American exceptionalism has to do not with the inferiority of others, but the inherent superiority so many Americans believe exists in themselves and their country.

Three particular varieties of American Exceptionalism inform most commonly articulated understandings of this superiority complex. These expressions of exceptionalism whose roots are religious (in this paper, the “Winthropian form”), based on the valor of the United States’ government and legal framework (the “Tocquevillian form”), and/or based on the US’ role in the world (the “Wilsonian form”). The last of these frequently melds with the other two; while these three varieties are by no means mutually exclusive, there are certain components within each that can be separated from the others and examined for deeper understanding.

Winthropian exceptionalism does not just acknowledge America’s religious background, but argues that background to be reason enough to declare the United States superior, setting the country apart for its purported hallowed heritage (phrases such as “One nation under God,” being a prime example). George W. Bush is perhaps one of the politicians best known in recent history for his deep religious conviction. In 1999, the former president cited the political philosopher or thinker he felt he most identified with to be Jesus Christ, and claimed throughout the 2000 elections that he believed God wanted him to be president (Miller, 2001). We are reminded of Winthrop’s own oration, revelatory in the way it associated early ideas of America with Christian thought, which continues to shed light on the current relationship between religion and government in the country today: Over 90% members of the House of Representatives and Senate are Christian (Pew Research Center, 2015) and 89% of Americans believe in God (Gallup, 2016). It is no surprise, then, that a strong link between politics and religion would exist

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<sup>1</sup> The question for another paper is whether or not attitudes of exceptionalism can survive without attitudes of superiority. And how does America’s own legacy of racism intersect with these?



in this country (Barber, 2012); the proportion of Americans who assign importance to their religious belief has long been far greater than that of other Western societies (Lipset, 1996).

Tocquevillian exceptionalism focuses, rather, on America's legal and political institutions, and the ways in which it is set apart because of the documents that have informed the nature of its government — namely, the constitution. Tocquevillian exceptionalism in particular embraces US sovereignty and the tradition of Exemptionalism because of its admiration of the constitution, often prioritizing American interests over international law (Ignatieff, 2005 & Spiro, 2000). At its core, exemptionalism “encourages US administrations, when deemed necessary, to exempt themselves from the rules that others are expected to follow,” (Foot, 2008, p. 709). The US does indeed treat international law differently from the rest of the world, and more than once has refused to sign almost unanimous conventions or follow the rules of Just War.

Wilsonian exceptionalism differs from the previous two varieties in that it turns its attentions to the rest of the world. Grown out of the Winthropian and Tocquevillian traditions, Wilsonian exceptionalism encourages an interventionist spirit, one that seeks to “fix” other nations that are seen as being less enlightened, due to religious and/or governmental differences. Hodgson's (1993/4) critique of the Wilsonian tradition in particular does a terrific job of assessing its many flaws, including “a veiled but real willingness to play the bully, a considerable ignorance of the realities of the world, and a miscalculation of domestic political mood and forces,” (p. 5). Both Democrats and Republicans have identified with Wilson and what they refer to as “Neo-Wilsonianism,” which has been critiqued for assuming one can know what is best for the other states of the world, particularly those not in the canonical “West,” (Hodgson, 2009 & Easterly, 2006).

What all these forms of exceptionalism have in common is their tendency to promote feelings or lead to belief in the inherent “greatness,” of America. This comes across especially in the discussion of values which the US holds dear, which are often misaligned with America's historical record of behavior as well as with the country's interests. As Kassel (2015) notes, “by laying claim to the ideals of equality democracy, and human rights, the United States holds itself to a higher standard in word, while trouncing those values in deed.” There is perhaps no better case of such “trouncing” to be found in the 21st century than that of the Iraq War.

## **Exceptionalism & The Iraq War**

*“Someone will always want to mobilize*

*Death on a massive scale for economic  
Domination or revenge. And the task, taken  
As a task, appeals to the imagination.”*

—Robert Hass, “Bush’s War”

IN FEBRUARY OF 1990, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein stood before the Gulf Cooperation Council and gave a formal address concerning the future of the Arab world and the state of Israel. Over the course of the speech he acknowledged America’s rise as a unilateral power in international affairs, blaming this emergence primarily on the Soviet Union’s steady decline. Hussein went on to predict that it was probable the US would use its newfound preeminence in coming years to ignore international law and flout the ILO other nations abided by (Hussein, 2001).

For all Saddam’s criticisms, it would be less than a year before Iraq breached international law itself, invading the neighboring country of Kuwait on August 2, 1990. Then-president George H. W. Bush managed to quickly assemble a US-led coalition in response and, endorsed by the UN security council, ousted Saddam Hussein’s troops from Kuwait. The conflict, called the Gulf War, turned out to be a lot more short-lived than anticipated, with Iraqi forces utterly outgunned by the US’ more advanced weaponry. Allied forces suffered 378 casualties, while tens of thousands of Iraqis were killed (Kidder & Oppenheim, 2007). Hussein was denounced as a tyrant and a terrorist, both for his attack on Kuwait as well as for those crimes against humanity he had committed in the past (Robertson, 2008). Ironically, until the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, a vital strategic point for controlling circulation of oil worldwide, the US government had been relatively silent regarding Saddam’s tarnished human rights record (Ali, 2002).

There was an opportunity at the end of the Gulf War to oust Saddam from power, but both president Bush Sr. and defense secretary Dick Cheney decided against it, as they believed the allied troops would have to become occupying forces in Iraq, a guess proved all too correct a decade later, in the Iraq invasion of 2003. The major psychological result of Gulf War, however, had nothing to do with Saddam himself. The ease with which the allies’ won the conflict, due to advance planning and technological superiority, was fuel to the fire of the “Big-Dick” complex taking hold of the US government now that it was the lone great power on the world stage. With none left to oppose America, any and everything seemed possible.

Cut forward a decade. September 20th, 2001. Nine days have passed since Al-Qaeda’s attacks upon the world trade center and the pentagon, and attempted attack on the white house. An open

letter to President George W. Bush, signed by intellectuals Francis Fukuyama, Jeane Kirkpatrick, William Kristol, and others, is written urging the president take action against Iraq. “It may be the Iraqi government provided assistance in some form to the recent attack on the United States. But even if evidence does not link Iraq directly to the attack, any strategy aiming at the eradication of terrorism and its sponsors must include a determined effort to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq,” (Fukuyama et al., 2001). These academics were not the only Americans interested in invading Iraq. The vulcans, the higher-level members of Bush’s administration, had a vested interest in intervening there as well (Mann, 2004). The very night of 9/11, cabinet members were already discussing possible invasion scenarios (Frontline, 2008).

The national security and foreign policy team around Bush already, prior to 9/11, were determined to exercise US imperial power in what is seen as a genuinely unipolar moment — as opposed to the international reality we are now experiencing, in 2017. The US power was seen as unmatched and at its helm were Rumsfeld, Cheney, and the rest of the self-proclaimed “Vulcans” who wanted to use it. In 2000 they had not yet found how and to what end. The war on terror had arrived, and here was their chance.

From the September 15th meeting of the Bush cabinet at Camp David, Wolfowitz had an interest in pursuing Iraq (Whipple, 2017). However, this made no sense at the time. Before the month was out, nonetheless, Bush would convene alone with Rumsfeld and ask him to draw up a battle plan for Iraq (Frontline, 2008, Whipple, 2017). For Bush, the pursuit of Saddam was not just political, but also personal — Saddam had attempted and failed to assassinate Bush’s father in 1993, and was promising monetary rewards to the families of suicide bombers even after the events of 9/11 (Whipple, 2017).

Following the attacks of 9/11, the US sought to “shore up the int’l order by infusing it with a commitment to democratic transformation,” (Kissinger, 2014, p. 322). The invasion of Iraq would come to prove to be the first attempt at initiating this proposed global shift to democracy.

At its onset, the American public was very supportive of the war on terror (Zinn, 2003). Retribution was being called for, and Al-Qaeda was not a big enough target alone. Conflict was being proposed with a state which, to the best of the US government’s knowledge, was uninvolved with the events of September 11th. The vulcans were eager to address the Iraq issue, and over the course of the next two years would search for evidence to justify invasion, as well as harangue other states to support such an action (Frontline, 2008 and Hare, 2004). When insufficient support could be obtained at the UN Security Council, the US opted instead for a

unilateral invasion, aided only by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who had been advised by other members of his administration not to pursue the war (Gaskarth, 2011). This unwillingness to abide with international law is nothing new. Ignatieff (2005) refers to the phenomenon as “exemptionalism”: Americans will use their purported uniqueness to justify following a different set of rules from those other states are supposed to abide by.

If it hadn’t been weapons of mass destruction it would have been something else: Paul Wolfowitz, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Francis Fukuyama, Jean Kirkpatrick (etc. ad infinitum) saw it as the necessary extension to the War on Terror. The UN security council voted to give Iraq “a final opportunity to comply,” (see UNSC Resolution 1441).

In the final hours leading to war, when the ultimatum was passed to Saddam Hussein that he and his sons had 48 hours to surrender, as the clock ran out, with no sign of either surrender or an admission of possession of nuclear weapons in sight, many in the administration — including the president himself — felt, “the only logical conclusion was that he had something to hide,” (Bush, 2010, p. 224).

The US’ patience with Saddam and the UN alike ran thin, and it invaded Iraq unilaterally.

There are a host of criticisms to level against the Iraq War, among which are the lack of a link to Al-Qaeda or 9/11, the unilateral action taken by the United States without a UN mandate, setting a dangerous precedent, and the ultimate discovery of zero WMDs in the country (Visser, 2010, p. 30). Rather than extensively dissect these mistakes, American Exceptionalism’s role in informing key cabinet members’ legitimizing of the actions they proposed to take will be examined. Three members of the administration — Bush, Rumsfeld, and Cheney — will be examined individually, and a set of quotes from other sources will also be scrutinized.



IN A SPEECH given at the military academy “The Citadel,” during the 2000 election campaign, George W. Bush framed his perception of America’s role in a pre-9/11 ILO. “In the world of our fathers, we have seen how America should conduct itself... We have seen power exercised without swagger and influence displayed without bluster. We have seen the modesty of true strength, the humility of real greatness. We have seen American power tempered by American character. And I have seen all of this personally and closely and clearly,” (Bush, 1999). Here, Bush speaks to a historical greatness he sees the US as possessing, one that stems in part from its

conduct in previous wars. Obviously, he is not taking into account both sides of America's checkered history abroad, given his omission of the failures in the Vietnam War and elsewhere, choosing instead to focus on all the country has achieved. Nevertheless, it is clear that for Bush that the actions of former US administrations contribute to the "real greatness," the country possesses under new ones. Rather than judging individual administrations here on their own merits, he is choosing instead to employ a reductivism that allows him to laud the country as a whole, for the actions of a few.

As early as the 2000 election campaign Bush was asked what his administration would do if Saddam Hussein was suspected of being "close to acquiring a nuclear weapon," to which he responded, "He'd pay a price... The price is force, the full force and fury of a reaction," (Miller, 2001, p. 209). This stands in contrast with the statement of leveled, tempered use of power made above in Bush's 1999 speech at The Citadel: It shows that even before the attacks of September 11th, 2001 — which would make frequent appearances in the administration's rhetoric when arguing for war with Iraq — that Bush's cabinet was not opposed to the possibility of a pre-emptive attack against Iraq.

Once the attacks of September eleventh, 2001 did occur, Bush's response was clear: "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world," (Avery & Mclaughlin, 2013, p. 173). The president's message for the public was that the US had been attacked not for its mistakes abroad, or its flaws, but because of an inherent superiority, which he did not follow up by providing any grounded evidence for. Rather than use the shock of 9/11 to not only construct a policy for going after those responsible and turning the eye inward, to ask what role the US could have had in inspiring such an attack against it, Bush chose to wage a War against Terror, a nebulous enemy that could not be struck by drone or bombed out of existence. The administration spent little time reflecting and got right down to the nastier business of reaction.

In his announcement of the war against terror, George W. Bush said "This crusade...this war on terror is going to take a while," (Phillips, p. 308). Here, in his connection of the endeavors the US was set to embark upon with the holy, we see echoes of Winthropian Exceptionalism, as the battle became one in the minds of many — the president himself, perhaps — one of biblical proportion, and simplified to a matter of good against evil. A mistaken utterance or no, this choice to use the word "crusade," imparted a Christian sanction upon the matter of the war against terror, dividing it along religious lines in a way reminiscent of Samuel P. Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations."

Calling the citizens of America to military action in a 2002 speech, Bush said “We want to be a Nation that serves goals larger than self. We have been offered a unique opportunity, and we must not let this moment pass. My call tonight is for every American to commit at least two years, 4,000 hours over the rest of your lifetime, to the service of your neighbors and your nation.” This was an active attempt to galvanize the population to take part in a latent militarization the kind which the administration had seemed intent on avoiding (One of Rumsfeld’s key objectives in the Iraq strategy was to have as few boots on the ground as possible): It was clear that Bush and his cohort were planning for war. Also worth noting is the sense of obligation which the president refers to in this passage. “We must not let this moment pass,” feels more an order from on high than it does a suggested approach, and the feeling about the phrase is one of righteousness. One must keep in mind that what Bush is essentially saying with this line is that it is the responsibility of the American public to ensure that the response to the uncertainty surrounding Iraq’s possible possession of WMDs is to not let wait and find out whether Saddam does or does not hold them. Rather, the doubt surrounding their existence should be used to mobilize the US and other members of the ILO to war with Iraq. A year later, this would become a reality.

In a speech made in early 2003, Bush again referred to American soldiers, discussing their moral inclinations. “[Members of our Armed Forces] know that America's cause is right and just: liberty for an oppressed people, and security for the American people,” (Bush, 2003). Here, the soldiers are being spoken for and America framed as not only a correct country, but one capable of dispensing justice internationally. There is truth to this. Wanting to depose a regime as brutish as Saddam’s is by no means an ignoble goal: Rather, the methods employed are where the sleaziness seems to seep in. For Bush, it became a matter of focusing on the US’ perseverance and morality, rather than the ways in which this would be imposed upon others. When the language turned to that of certain invasion, it was with an ultimatum attached — Saddam’s continued reign and America’s own freedom were portrayed as incompatible. As the president put it, “We are led, by events and common sense, to one conclusion: the survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands,” (Ikenberry et. al, 2009, p. 1)



DONALD HENRY RUMSFELD was secretary of defense for president Bush, and played a key role in the lead-up to war with Iraq. In a 2002 DoD news briefing on the matter of finding WMDs in the country, he uttered his most popular quote; “[A]s we know, there are known

knowns...things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns...we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns -- the ones we don't know we don't know...it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones,” (Rumsfeld, “DoD News Briefing”). Rumsfeld was well-known for his evasive language and penchant for the unspecific (Seely, 2003). Ironically, a single line from the Qur’an’s Sura of Youssef, read alone, does a far better job of surmising the US’ policy towards Iraq as it grappled with the idea of a pre-emptive strike; “we do not bear witness except to what we have known, and we could not keep watch over the unseen.” (Qur’an, 12:81). Rumsfeld’s knack for reductiveness would be revealed again when, on April 11th, 2003, in response to a question posed about the looting occurring in Iraq, Rumsfeld bluntly replied “Stuff Happens.” The laissez-faire nature of the statement was impactful enough to become the title of a David Hare play (Hare, 2004).

Further into 2002, as Rumsfeld and others continued to develop the US’ policy toward Iraq, the secretary of defense was asked to present to Congress. In his opening statements, he claimed, “Our job today...is to try to connect the dots before the fact. It's to try to anticipate vastly more lethal attacks before they happen. And to try to make the right decisions as to whether we should take anticipatory self-defense. Actions or preventative actions before such an attack occurs,” (Rumsfeld, “U.S. Policy Toward Iraq”). Rumsfeld is discussing the attack of Iraq and the ousting of Saddam Hussein from power before the dictator has an opportunity to acquire WMDs. This is a speech being made in light of the fact that there are UNSCOM members searching Iraq for weapons of mass destruction who have not found any evidence as to their existence. What Rumsfeld is suggesting is the US consider launching a pre-emptive attack on Iraq, in direct breach of international law and the tenets of Just War. Rumsfeld is able to make these points and suggestions at all because of the spirit of exemptionalism which runs through American political culture, directly linked to the intense feelings citizens of the US feel for their constitution; it is Tocquevillian Exceptionalism at work. Farther into the speech, Rumsfeld again hints at the possibility — desirability, even — of a pre-emptive strike, claiming, “The goal must be to stop Saddam Hussein before he fires a weapon of mass destruction against our people.”

Closer to the events of 9/11, Rumsfeld said in an interview with NBC’s Meet the Press, “We have a choice, either to change the way we live, which is unacceptable, or to change the way that they live, and we have — we chose the latter,” (Rumsfeld, 2001). Here again we see attitudes of American superiority reflected, as Rumsfeld tacitly acknowledges that America could change some parts of its fabric, perhaps, even, improve, but then goes on to reject this notion and instead says that, rather than do this, a more American vision and way of life will be imposed upon others who do not conform. Although there is the matter of international justice to be considered

for criminals, those who were uninvolved in the 9/11 attacks would have been better left out of this revenge strategy. The administration's willingness to force change on others without even considering changing themselves combines the matter of exceptionalism and the unipolar moment to create what would become the debacle of post-Saddam Iraq.



DICK CHENEY HAD at various points both supported and opposed the invasion of Iraq. While working as secretary of defense for George Bush, Sr., he cautioned against moving into Iraq after the Gulf War to oust Saddam from power due to a fear of becoming entrenched in a nation building project (Kidder & Oppenheim, 2007). Immediately following the events of September 11th, 2001, he again suggested the Bush administration keep out of Iraq, saying "If we go after Saddam Hussein, we lose our rightful place as good guy," (Baker, 2013, p. 145). Here again we detect elements of American Exceptionalism in an administration member's worldview, envisioning the US as having a "rightful place" as benevolent power.

Just a year later, however, Cheney's tune had changed — and Rumsfeld was with him. Following a briefing with a group of senators about weapons in Iraq, Max Cleland, one of the senators present, wrote in his impressions of the meeting that "[Rumsfeld and Cheney] have already made the decision to go to war and to them that is the only option," (Ibid, p. 217). Only a few days before the meeting with Cleland and other senators, on August 26th, 2002, Cheney had indeed said in a speech, "There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction," (The White House, 2002). This was not only misinformation on the Vice President's part, but also a way to coax the US into the pre-emptive strike which Rumsfeld was at this time advocating for, one that would happen in defiance of international law, in the fashion of Tocquevillian Exceptionalism.

Cheney would admit that same year that he was familiar "[W]ith the arguments against taking action in the case of Saddam Hussein. Some concede that Saddam is evil...but that, until he crosses the threshold of actually possessing nuclear weapons, we should rule out any preemptive action. That logic seems to me to be deeply flawed. The argument comes down to this: yes, Saddam is as dangerous as we say he is, we just need to let him get stronger before we do anything about it," (Cheney, 2002). This was a gross oversimplification of the actual interpretations of those who opposed the conflict, and in true Tocquevillian Exceptionalist fashion, also flew in the face of international law. Here, Cheney is framing the case for not engaging in pre-emptive action as one made solely out of foolishness, rather than acknowledging



the dangerous precedent which would be said by engaging in unilateral action outside of permission for such an attack being provided by the UN.

Several years after the invasion began, at a black tie dinner at Washington Hilton, April, 2008, lauding DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, Cheney remarked, “One thing we didn’t have a lot of in Desert Storm was the unmanned aerial vehicle. But thanks to DARPA, that technology was advancing rapidly in the early ‘90s. And we’ve been able to use it all the time in both Afghanistan and Iraq—for reconnaissance, for remote sensing, and to strike the enemy,” (Weinberger, 2017, p. 339). Here Cheney revealed the advantages which technological advancement had provided for him and his colleagues in helping him launch the Iraq War, and the contribution it had to sustaining America’s unilateral place in the world order. Reflecting on the lead-up to the Iraq War and the invasion itself, Cheney and Rumsfeld both seem to be the hopeful hunters for that feeling Herman Kahn described best as ‘wargasm,’ (Weinberger, 2017, p. 115).



AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM LEAD in many ways to institutional hubris. When Al-Qaeda attacked the United States on September 11th, 2001, the US government was aware of its existence, but many saw it as no great threat (Wright, 2006). However, the attacks touched something deep and previously undisturbed in the American psyche. The US became something of a sleeping giant, woken and wounded.

Mann (2004) notes, the Bush administration’s approach to foreign policy became “considerably more pronounced,” (p. xiii) after 9/11, more about fighting “evil” than eliminating the conditions that give rise to terrorism — the issue here is that without formulating a strategy which might cut off the problem at the root there could be little hope of ever actually bringing an end to Bush’s War on Terror. In a way, it ensured perpetual conflict. Furthermore, the War on Terror provided the necessary justifications to take further action against the US’ enemies. And so the US stumbled into Iraq, a conflict that the literature considers a “war of choice” (Haass, 2009, & Orr, 2004).

As the 9/11 commissioner’s report shows, “Countering terrorism has become, beyond any doubt, the top national security priority for the United States. This shift has occurred with the full support of the Congress, both major political parties, the media, and the American people,” (Zelikow, 2004, p. 361). The events of 9/11 not only gave rise to the war on terror, they

ensured it was a non-partisan issue. And it wasn't the commissioner's report alone which prioritized the countering of terrorism: Many high-level members of G.W. Bush's administration have admitted they at the time saw it as crucial to attack the *practice* of terrorism, not just Al-Qaeda (Feith, 2008 & Bush, 2010). This distinction between a highly broad, difficult to define set of actions on the world stage and a singular extremist group would prove in many respects to contribute to the United States' undoing. The attacks made against "terror," did not need to be, as the 2002 National Security Strategy indicates, made in response to violence, but merely the threat thereof, seemingly in defiance of the international rules of war: "[The United States] will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right to self-defense by acting preemptively against such terrorists," (White House, 2002, p. 6). Understandably, the rhetoric from Washington leading up to the Iraq War came across to many in the world as a message of Americanization (Baker, 2013, p. 216).

Because of this, the suggestion of going to war in Iraq was interpreted by most other states in the world as a threat to global peace (Orr, 2004). As Major General Tim Cross informed former British Prime Minister Tony Blair as the US and Britain readied for war, "I do not think that we are ready for post-war Iraq." Nothing came of this warning (Gaskarth, 2011, p. 409).

While Cross warned Blair of the dangers of getting embroiled, members of the Bush administration attempted to frighten senators into just this course of action through "secret meetings," staged in secure rooms. Recollecting an episode from 2004, senator Ben Nelson says, "I was looked at straight in the face and told that UAVs could be launched from ships off the Atlantic coast to attack eastern seaboard cities of the United States. Is it any wonder I concluded that there was an imminent peril to the [US]?" (Gardner, 2013, p. 131).

Just as Tim Cross predicted, the US and British alike were not greeted with the expected acclaim in Baghdad. "By the summer of 2003 a resistance movement aimed at driving US forces from the country had already attacked American soldiers," (Dodge, 2010, p. 1269). A study released by the Pew Research Center (2003) shortly after the invasion found that the war had "widened the rift between Americans and Western Europeans, further inflamed the Muslim world, softened support for the war on terror, and significantly weakened global public support for...the U.N. and the North Atlantic alliance."

Perhaps the results were unavoidable. The visceral response to the attack on the world trade centers was one experienced worldwide. After 9/11 magazine in Paris ran the now-famous headline "We are all Americans now," in its issue (Hare, 2004), and of the events of 9/11, Tony

Blair speaks of an almost religious level of inspiration he felt as a result of witnessing the unfolding; “The moment I saw what was unfolding and realized the scale of it and realized the likely use of it I did feel a really deep sense of mission.”



A SIMILAR SITUATION to the rhetoric surrounding the Iraq War could be drawn for the colonizing of the Philippines, the Vietnam war, the willingness of the US to support the United Nations but not to sign the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and so on and so forth. We see trends of exemptionalism and supposed American superiority appearing throughout history. The narrative of the aftermath to the Iraq invasion, once it got underway, is one of swift victory turned sour. From the invasion’s beginning, many died, always far more Iraqi than American. When the US left the country some eight years later, the vacuum it created birthed the Islamic State. Though the terrorist group is now being pushed back, there’s no getting rid of IS’ message. International terrorism will persist until the socioeconomic conditions that give rise to such movements are addressed at their root (Ikenberry et. al, 2011).

The causes of anti-Americanism were also not mulled over, and nothing was done to remedy these sentiments. Part of the reason why a military response was so favored by the US was due to the position of key unilateral power in which it found itself in the lead-up to the Iraq War. To reduce international anti-American sentiment would have required a reframing of foreign policy, one the US was not prepared to make.

Originally hoping to have extracted forces by September 2003 (Bensahel, 2007), the protracted stay in Iraq was unexpected and poorly prepared for. There were never more than 183,000 troops in Iraq, and at times as few as 139,000. Of those, non-US members of the coalition never contributed more than 17.3% of troops involved (Bensahel, 2007). Following invasion, a RAND corporation report showed before invasion that Iraq’s “population would require 500,000 troops on the ground,” to achieve stability (Bremer III, 2006, p. 10).

Furthermore, there was no extended air campaign in Iraq before boots on the ground (Friedman, 2004). According to Friedman (2004), there were three intelligence failures on the part of the United States: To understand Iran’s influence on Iraq’s Shiite population, to be aware of the postwar guerrilla campaign Saddam Hussein had organized, and, most tellingly to find any WMDs at all (p. 301). This raises a question not only of flawed intelligence but also of the ability

of the rhetoric employed by the members of the administration — in the absence of hard evidence — to use doubt to achieve the objectives they had set for themselves.

It was not defeating Iraq's government — under three weeks to collapse makes the war the swiftest conquest of a modern state to date — but the restoring of some semblance of order which proved to be the difficulty (Steed, 2016, p. 126). It took only 21 days to conquer Baghdad, with minimal casualties to the US side (139 American lives were lost) (Stephens, 2014). Stephens (2014) goes on to assert the failure of the Iraq war was not the choice to invade, but rather one of a “timid application of force,” (p. 62).

Despite the fact that Bush's administration and the vulcans themselves were members of the GOP, we must remember that Iraq was a nonpartisan affair. In a speech justifying her vote for the invasion of Iraq, 2008 and 2016 presidential candidate Hilary Clinton claimed it clear “that if left unchecked, Saddam Hussein will continue to increase his capability to wage biological and chemical warfare and will keep trying to develop nuclear weapons,” (Stephens, 2014, p. 59). In a Gallup poll conducted in March 2003, 75% of Americans thought that it was not a mistake to send US troops into Iraq.

A year after the war's onset, Kofi Annan publicly declared the US' choice to invade to have been a breaching of international law. The US had lost legitimacy, and found itself mired in a war it had no right to be in. When Bush's “beacon of light,” had an opportunity to turn the eye inward and make lasting changes to US foreign policy, it chose instead to destabilize the ILO, and the rhetoric employed to sanction such action oozed with a spirit of superiority and a feeling of American exceptionalism.

## **Beyond Iraq: Exceptionalism Elsewhere**

“What is the word, then, for those of us in the West who apply one standard to ourselves, and another to others?”

—David Hare, *Stuff Happens*

IRAQ IS ONE case among many for the evidencing of American Exceptionalism's role in shaping the United States' actions in the world. Though the war delegitimized the United States and destabilized the world order, that same ILO would not have existed were it not for American efforts. Though there may be a plethora of criticisms to be raised against American Exceptionalism, it is important to note that it is not solely a malevolent force (Lipset, 1996).

It was exceptionalism which led former president Woodrow Wilson to endeavor to create the League of Nations, an organization which, in a post-WWI environment, he hoped would be capable of maintaining peace the world over (Pedersen, 2015 & Cottrell, 2018). As he said in his famous fourteen points speech, “The program of the world’s peace, therefore, is our program; and that program, the only possible program, as we see it, is this,” (Wilson, 1918). Herein we see an uncompromising nature to Wilson’s ideas of how the structures of world order should be imposed upon other countries. By drafting his fourteen points and presenting them as the tenets by which world peace might be achieved, he has taken upon himself the role of agenda setter.

Wilson’s attempts to establish LN support in the United States would also lead to his lauding of the capacity of Americans “to do the right thing,” (Wilson, 1919). Conveniently for Wilson, “the right thing,” in this case was a vote cast in support of the founding of the League of Nations, which came down to congress. The senate voted in favor 55-39, missing the required mark of a two-thirds majority (Glass, 2014). Unlike George W. Bush and the Vulcans, Wilson’s attempts to galvanize an exceptional interventionist spirit failed. The successes his political descendants would in large part be attributable to the injury caused the nation on September 11th, a catalyzing incident of which no equivalent existed for Wilson. In effect, he found his brand of exceptionalism (Wilsonian) combatting the sovereignty-loving, constitution-oriented nature of Tocquevillian exceptionalism, which would ultimately triumph. In effect, one interpretation of American greatness would be used to stifle another.

The United Nations, following the decline and fall of the League of Nations, would become the US’ attempt to restore a world order fallen apart in the wake of WWII. Then-president FDR had learned from the mistakes of the League and Wilson alike, such as failures in forward planning. He began drawing up plans for the United Nations before the war had even ended (Weiss, 2015). When the organization was founded in 1945, it represented a landmark breakthrough, in terms of quantity of countries which joined its cause but also, more importantly, its creation of international human rights (Ignatieff, 2005).

Since its creation, the UN has developed, proving to be a deeply flawed organization at times and an extremely useful one at others. From denuclearization to fighting famine to creating the ICC, it has certainly had its share of successes, but failures have been met with as well — notable among these the genocide in Rwanda and the oil-for-food program in Iraq (Polman, 2004 & Spencer, 2015).

Since its inception, and due to its structure, the UN has been largely unable to play much of a role in conflicts in which great powers have considerable interests (Jones, 2007). This has been demonstrated in the case of Iraq and Vietnam alike, and veto power only helps skew the balance of power between large states and small. However, the opportunity to create some sense of solidarity and union between states which it has allowed should not be cast aside as nothing at all. As FDR said in his 1944 state of the union address, “The one supreme objective for the future...Security. And that means not only physical security which provides safety from attacks by aggressors. It means also economic security, social security, moral security—in a family of Nations,” (Roosevelt, 1944).

A less flattering portrait of American exceptionalism at work is the way in which it helped morally sanction the illegal bombing of Cambodia, initiated by Nixon in March of 1969 (Power, 2002). The bombing was done to target North Vietnamese transportation channels which ran through Cambodia. Nixon said of these, “North Vietnam...has stripped away all pretense of respecting the sovereignty or the neutrality of Cambodia.” In this demonization of North Vietnam’s actions, Nixon is placing America on a pedestal of moral superiority, that he might thereby sanction the United States’ choice to drop more bombs on Cambodia than were dropped by the allies in all of WWII (Grabar, 2013). This bombing campaign has been noted as one of the primary factors which made the rise of the Khmer Rouge possible (Mydans, 2011, & Frontline, 2011). As Journalist Richard Dudman observed, the bombing “was radicalizing the people of rural Cambodia and was turning the country into a massive, dedicated, and effective rural base,” (Grabar, 2013). Far before the Iraq War, and in circumstances proving both positive and negative, we see American Exceptionalism helping to galvanize support for the US’ actions.

## **Conclusion: American Exceptionalism Now**

“I believe America to be exceptional in the same way I believe the British believe in British exceptionalism, the Greeks in Greek exceptionalism, etc.”

—Barack Obama, 2013

ACCOMPANYING THE TRANSFORMATIONS of definition American Exceptionalism has undergone in recent years has been a tumultuous election season which grappled with the American public’s understanding of their place in the world. “American Exceptionalism,” became synonymous with “American Superiority,” over the course of Obama’s time in office, as the GOP managed to redefine it for their purposes.

Democratic candidate Hilary Clinton declared during the election that “America is great because America is good,” recycling an old misquotation of Reagan’s which attributed this phrase to Tocqueville. At a glance, the comment overlooks the many flaws of this country, and reminds to some degree of Wilson’s own aspirations for American “benevolence.” Used by Clinton as a retort to Trump’s campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” the phrase epitomizes ideas of self-righteousness and superiority which have been observed appearing throughout political rhetoric. More than anything else, the suggestion that America is a special place because it is “good,” is not only reductive, it discounts much of history. A recent poll conducted by Pew did indeed find that though “Most Americans think America is great, but fewer think it’s the greatest,” (Tyson, 2014). In other words, despite the repeated assertions made by the GOP testifying to American superiority, there is an evident feeling that somehow the US is falling behind. This could be said to have started with the prolonging of the Iraq invasion, when the unipolar moment for the US began steadily fading into history.

President Donald Trump wields his own brand of exceptionalism, one that reminds of a fundamentalist tradition, a harkening back to some former time. Like Hilary, he also borrowed quotes from Reagan in the 2016 election, notably his campaign slogan: It was Reagan who first said “Make America great again,” (Bank et. al, 2017). As he was gearing up for his campaign at the 2015 Conservative Political Action Conference, Donald Trump evoked the spirit of American Exceptionalism, participating along with other members of the GOP in attacks against Obama: “Maybe my biggest beef with Obama is his view that there’s nothing special or exceptional in America — that we’re no different than any other country,” (Jouet, 2017). But Trump’s at times gone against the grain when discussing American Exceptionalism. Notably, in a moment of agitation during an interview, he said, “What, you think [America] is so innocent?” (Bacevich, 2017). In this off-cuff response of Trump’s we see a previously unheard-of turning of the eye inward, incredibly ironic given the seeming inability of the source of the comment. However, it is indicative of a possible larger shift in the discourse of American Exceptionalism and the way in which America understands both itself and its place in the world.

Trump’s behavior in the 2016 election is its own allegory for the trajectory of American Exceptionalism. As Donald Trump continued to rise in first the primaries and then become the nominee for his party, the standards to which he were held were fundamentally different than those of other, career politicians. The rules of the game, indeed, seemed not to apply to him, because of his vitally “different,” background and his over-the-top style. Being exempted from following an implicit set of rules of what would normally comprise “good behavior” made it possible for Trump to succeed on a campaign ridden with slander and controversy. As Jouet

(2017) observes, it was not Trump's fundamental position on issues which most varied from the usual stance taken by the GOP, but rather his style. Surely enough, many members of the GOP had worried that the US was becoming less exceptional, or at least of American "superiority," being under threat (Jouet, 2017, p. 41). It was Trump who took the opportunity to turn this feeling of loss into a spirit of nostalgia, creating his own variety of American Exceptionalism. Whether this rhetoric ends up being capable of galvanizing or transforming US foreign policy over the course of Trump's presidency remains to be seen, but it certainly played a vital role in getting him elected.

Despite the worries over the US' fall from grace, America is far from no longer being a preponderant superpower on the world stage. It still holds the leverage and possesses the military capabilities to make the same mistakes it has in the past (Iraq, Vietnam, Cambodia) through ignoring international treaties. In equal measure, it remains capable of effecting great change — its contributions to the ILO carry a weight and import which many smaller countries, states without traditions of exemptionalism, cannot hope to muster. Exceptionalism is engrained in the United States' culture, and if history is any teacher, members of government will continue to invoke it well into the future, to suit their own purposes and legitimize their actions.

The story of American Exceptionalism is fraught with twists, turns, and transformations of the very nature of the term's meaning. But a use for it has always been found in the speeches and rhetoric of government. Other powers, such as China and Russia, continue to rise and the United States' unilateral moment drifts farther into the rearview mirror. In light of this, American Exceptionalism's use and meaning will most likely be re-evaluated accordingly by America's political parties, to continue to find justification for those actions each are determined to take. Just as it is the US' fate to continue to contend with globalization and its role in the world stage in a post-Iraq world, notions of exceptionalism certainly aren't going anywhere. Though the way in which they are packaged and presented may differ depending on the administration or actor and the goal sought, American Exceptionalism will remain a quintessential force relied upon to influence US policy and sanction the international actions this country chooses to take.



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