Between Destiny and Diplomacy: American Exceptionalism Evolution Post-Cold War

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The enduring ethos of American exceptionalism has shaped U.S. foreign policy across multiple presidential administrations, influencing both domestic politics and international relations. This concept is deeply embedded in the national identity of the United States, asserting that America possesses a unique role in the world, characterized by a moral mission to lead and a destiny distinct from other nations. While much has been written about the origins and historical applications of American exceptionalism, there is a critical need to examine its contemporary implications and transformations, especially in the context of rapidly evolving global challenges. This dissertation seeks to bridge this gap by analyzing the concept's influence on U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War era, offering a comprehensive examination of its trajectory through four successive administrations.

American exceptionalism has been pivotal in defining the United States' approach to international engagement, from military interventions to diplomatic strategies. The notion that America acts not only on behalf of its interests but also for a supposed greater global good has justified both unilateral actions and a foreign policy marked by exemption. This dual nature presents a paradox that is central to understanding American international affairs: the balance between acting as a global leader and adhering to the same international norms and laws that govern other nations. By examining this dichotomy, this study aims to uncover the nuances of American exceptionalism and its practical effects on international relations.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to clarify how American exceptionalism has adapted and persisted, influencing both the strategies and the rhetoric of U.S. administrations to justify them. As the global order becomes increasingly multipolar, with emerging powers like China and the resurgence of Russian geopolitical influence, the United States finds itself at a crossroads. The ways in which American exceptionalism shapes U.S. responses to these challenges will have profound implications not only for international stability but also for the U.S.'s role on the world stage. Thus, it is important to provide new insights into how entrenched ideologies like exceptionalism adapt to new political realities, influencing policy decisions that have global ramifications. Furthermore, this research contributes to the academic discourse by exploring the intersection of ideology, policy, and engagement through the lens of American exceptionalism. It offers a critical analysis of secondary sources and builds on existing scholarship to present a nuanced view of how U.S. foreign policy has evolved in response to both internal beliefs and external pressures. By doing so, it adds to our understanding of how deeply held national narratives can shape, and sometimes constrain, a country's foreign policy options.

The primary aim of this dissertation is to elucidate how American exceptionalism has been redefined and employed by different U.S. administrations in the post-Cold War era, with specific attention to its impact on foreign policy decisions. Chapter I, the literature review, will offer a comprehensive historical background of the concept of American exceptionalism both in academia and foreign policy. Throughout Chapters II to V, I will examine the conceptual shifts in American exceptionalism from the Clinton administration through to the Trump administration, assessing how these shifts have influenced U.S. engagement with the world, and evaluating the implications of these policies for international law and the current global order. Through this analysis, this dissertation aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of American exceptionalism, enriching the academic and practical discussions surrounding U.S. foreign policy and its global implications.

Chapter 1: Existing Literature

Origins of American Exceptionalism as an Imperialist Ideology

American exceptionalism is a concept that has developed over time and across various presidential administrations. The concept finds its roots in the early expressions of America as a unique entity, diverging from European precedents with a distinct mission and identity. It encapsulates the belief in the United States' unique role and destiny, fuelled by historical, philosophical, and religious influences that have evolved in American civil society.

The first author to describe America and its institutions as being exceptional compared to other nations was Alexis de Tocqueville (1839) in his book *Democracy in America.* There are many theories of how the American people began to think of themselves as exceptional, and they all contribute to the wider debate of how this explains the composition of beliefs that form the American national identity. The belief in America as an exceptional entity is a concept that began to take shape even before the development of the U.S. as a sovereign nation. Smith (2003) highlights the role of early Puritan settlers in creating a sense of American identity as the 'chosen one'. Although Puritanism in colonial America represents the early development of what is now known as American exceptionalism, other religious denominations were also prominent during that period (Stark and Finke, 1988). Each contributed to the pervasive belief that America was a nation chosen by God, a sentiment reflected in the Constitution following the country's independence.

However, it is the 1776 revolution that seems to have created the basis of a national identity that has its foundations in being distinct from the rest. Greene (1993) regards this idea as a direct consequence of the end of British colonization, noting that the U.S. was the first colony to break free from the chains of the world's largest empire at the time. A combination of revolutionary achievements, religious influences, and the aspiration for Enlightenment ideals to flourish cultivated a sense of accomplishment that evolved into a belief in American exceptionalism. Bowden (2009, p. 203) points out that "the baton of a standard bearer and forger of civilisation was believed to have passed from Europe to America".

Ceaser's (2012) work makes an important distinction between the two possible meanings of this concept. He highlights that exceptionalism can be either "something *different* about America or something *special* about America" (Ceaser, 2012, p. 8). 'Different' essentially refers to the empirical differences of American society in comparison to other nations. It merely serves for descriptive and comparative purposes. 'Special', on the other hand, carries a normative claim to these differences, implying a certain superiority of American uniqueness. Consequently, Ceaser goes on to explain that this supposed exceptional nature of American society has an intrinsic missionary character. Thus, this belief of exceptionalism as a mission becomes one foundational basis of American justifications for imperialism (Litke, 2010).

American Exceptionalism as an Instrument of Foreign Policy

Exceptionalism is expressed and implemented through foreign policy. As a result, it can be observed and analyzed through the "ideas and actions" of states and their representatives (Holsti, 2011, p. 382). The broader concept of exceptionalism is not exclusively an attribute of American international affairs, as various nations have manifested different forms of exceptionalist discourse, embracing either the exemplary or the missionary variant of the concept (Nymalm and Plagemann, 2019). However, American exceptionalism has been more prominently displayed than any other form in the international system, especially in the post-World War II order. During the Cold War, the efforts of various U.S. administrations were aimed at creating an international order that mirrored U.S. institutions and at preventing Soviet communism from establishing a similar level of global influence. This mission is deeply influenced by more than just the obvious economic gains that typically drive imperialism according to more traditional Marxist views. It is also rooted in the belief in a supposed universality of U.S.-led institutions. Ruggie (2003, pp. 1-2) argues that this stems from the assumption of uniqueness and superiority of American institutions, which have shaped their national identity in ways that transcend traditional notions of "blood and soil". Consequently, this distinctive foundation of exceptionalism not only permits but actively encourages the U.S. to advocate for its universal applicability.

Another key characteristic of American exceptionalism is its historic reliance on unilateralism. This approach is driven by a belief in the unique destiny of the United States among nations, which in turn frequently motivates and justifies its unilateral actions in international relations (Khong and Malone, 2003, p. 14). An example of this can be seen during a 1998 interview with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, when she replied "We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future" upon being asked about U.S. direct military involvement in the Gulf War (U.S. Department of State, 1998). Ruggie (2003) suggests that it is this combination of unchallenged power and missionary unilateralism that defines the *exemptionalist* character of American foreign policy, as the US is not subject to international law the same way other sovereign states are. However, it is worth saying that exceptionalism can also be associated with a *nonexemptionalist* foreign policy, as states can also choose a non-confrontational diplomatic strategy and engage in multilateral policymaking. Nymalm and Plagemann (2019, p. 18) argue that this was the case with Nehru's India, as well as Turkish foreign policy before 2016, as both countries proclaimed that their exceptional nature drove their commitment to international law and their special role in mediating conflicts.

Nymalm and Plagemann (2019) highlight that this missionary aspect of American exceptionalism presents a paradox that is important to note. The paradox lies in what Laclau (1992, p. 87) names the "chasm between universality and particularity", as a nation's claim to a unique understanding of universal values – influenced by its specific cultural, historical, or institutional context – requires its success in foreign policy to achieve these values globally. Thus, the worldwide achievement of these values depends on the particular history and actions of this nation, suggesting that global benefits are tied to the success of one country's distinct path. This suggests that what is positioned as universally applicable must first be filtered through, and possibly limited by, the singular lens of American experience and power dynamics.

American Exceptionalism in the Post-Cold War Order

An important aspect of American foreign policy is its recurrent portrayal of international conflicts as a binary clash between 'good versus evil,' with the U.S. consistently casting itself as the former while often arbitrarily assigning the latter role. Lipset (1996, p. 20) argues that "Americans must define their role in a conflict as being on God's side against Satan," suggesting that a sense of moral superiority is necessary to justify their mission. Wallace (2013) contends that this binary framework, deeply infused with religious discourse, was crucial in garnering support for U.S. foreign policies that, despite their predatory nature, were aimed at defeating the Soviets in the post-World War II order. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was no immediate 'evil' entity to challenge Western civilization, leading to the momentary dissolution of the old moralist binary narrative along with the communist threat. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that American exceptionalism had disappeared. U.S. foreign policy during the 1990s, particularly in the latter half of the decade, continued to reflect this ideology. McCrisken (2003) argues that the emergence of a new unipolar world endowed the U.S. with both the power and the mission to shape a new international order. In this context, the U.S. continued to lead, adapting American exceptionalism to meet the new challenges it faced.

However, many authors argue that the terrorist attacks of September 11, and the ensuing 'War on Terror' marked the beginning of a new era in American foreign policy, one deeply entrenched in American Exceptionalism (Patman, 2007; Rojecki, 2008; Wheeler, 2003; Saito, 2008). This shift is illustrated in Pont's (2007) analysis of numerous speeches by President George W. Bush, where he identifies an increasing prevalence of exceptionalist narratives. The speeches notably revived the 'good versus evil' binary, often grounded in religious assumptions of moral superiority. The military interventions and unilateral strategies pursued by the Bush administration significantly tarnished the U.S.'s reputation in international relations and led to increased scrutiny of its role as a leader in the global order. Löfflmann (2015) suggests that this backdrop compelled the Obama administration to reevaluate how the U.S. engaged globally to pursue its objectives, leading to the adoption of a strategy known as 'leading from behind.' This approach involved redefining the application of American exceptionalism in foreign policy, maintaining a highly interventionist stance, nonetheless. In contrast, some scholars argue that the Trump administration represented a shift towards isolationism and restraint, advocating for leading by example (Dimitrova, 2017; Abdulkareem, 2018). However, many contest this view, asserting that Trump's policies reflected a form of absolute unilateralism similar to Bush's (Stranne, 2020). Despite appearances of isolationism in his speeches, Trump's foreign policy in practice continued the exceptionalist trajectory that has characterised much of U.S. foreign policy since

World War II (Abrams, 2017; Odriozola, 2017; Stranne, 2020).

Chapter 2: Selective Humanitarianism and Clinton's Approach to American Exceptionalism

A New International Order and Clinton's Selective Humanitarianism

American foreign policy during Clinton's administration did not follow a straightforward pattern one can easily analyze or categorize. According to Schlesinger (1999), the first four years of his presidency marked a move away from idealism towards a more practical approach to handling international affairs. This is due to the completely new international political structure his administration inherited. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Clinton was the first president to serve two full terms in a world that was no longer divided into two opposing blocs, leading a lone economic power in an international order that did not offer any competition. This period is often considered the height of American hegemony, and it naturally produced new challenges that required new approaches to foreign policy. The end of the Cold War did not immediately establish a new global political order; instead, it offered the United States an opportunity to extend its influence due to the destabilization it caused in many regions. Therefore, the use of American exceptionalism during Clinton's presidency can be examined through how his foreign policy aimed to shape this new political order by engaging with these relevant areas.

Following the breakup of Yugoslavia, the situations in Bosnia and later in Kosovo presented significant challenges to the Clinton administration's foreign policy. The war in Bosnia was a foreign affair that Clinton inherited from the previous presidency. In fact, before the conflict erupted, the Bush administration had lost any interest in the region due to the end of the Cold War, assuming that Yugoslavia had "outlived its importance" (Danner, 1997, p. 7). Clinton's campaign in 1992 regularly attacked the neutrality of the previous administration regarding the conflict in Bosnia, promising "much more aggressive positions" (Clarke, 1995, p. 4). Curiously, the Bush administration believed America's best interest was in prioritizing the peace efforts led by the European Union. This stance offers two benefits: first, it moves away from the exceptionalist narrative that America is superior in knowledge and bears the responsibility of leading the path to peace, particularly in a conflict within a region previously neglected and deemed unimportant by the US; second, as Clarke (1995) explains, it recognizes that for a resolution in the region to be reached, the EU is the obvious candidate to lead the negotiations, given its closer proximity and its history of interactions with the involved parties.

However, Clinton's campaign rhetoric advocated for a more direct American intervention in the region, adopting a moral activist stance. He heavily criticized the previous administration, claiming it had neglected Milosevic's tyranny (Clinton, 1992). Despite many critiques of how the previous administration handled this crisis, is important to recognize that Clinton's campaign was not just about exposing Bush's lack of engagement with the Balkans. Beyond this critique, Clinton (1992) articulated his 3-step plan for America's foreign policy in a new international order:

Today there are new tests of leadership as well. The first is to grasp how the world we live in has changed. The second is to assert a new vision for our role in this dynamic world. The third is to summon all of our strength, our economic power, our values, and, when necessary, our military might in the service of our new vision.

Understanding in what ways the international order has changed due to the collapse of the Soviet Union is significantly easier today with the advantage of over three decades of academic research. It is reasonable to contend that conducting such an analysis in the immediate aftermath presented a great challenge for Clinton's administration. Nonetheless, Clinton articulated his vision for the United States' role in this new world early on, as he further explained:

My administration will stand up for democracy. We will offer international assistance to emerging fragile democracies in the former Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe, and create a democracy core to help them develop free institutions.

In these statements, the missionary aspect of US exceptionalism becomes apparent. This is not only because Clinton believed it was the duty of the U.S. to assist these affected areas in becoming democratic, but also because he

advocated for the establishment of institutions that are "free" according to American standards. The third and final step of his plan focuses on how he intends to realize this vision, specifically through leveraging the political, economic, and military power of the U.S. to enforce its will and secure its interests. This approach highlights a broader narrative of American exceptionalism that views the United States not merely as a country among countries, but as a model of democracy with a unique capability and mission to shape the new order after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc.

Despite these promises of decisiveness and action, Clinton's administration showed some restraint during the first two years of his presidency, especially regarding the Balkan crisis. This hesitation stemmed from a combination of insufficient political backing for intervention and the broader prevailing belief that the region did not align with US interests (Larres, 2004). The situation changed in 1995 when NATO airstrikes played a crucial role in temporarily ending the conflict in Bosnia. The airstrikes were conducted without any specific United Nations Security Council resolution authorizing them directly. Despite the involvement of multiple NATO members in this operation, the intervention cannot be considered de facto multilateral. This is due to NATO's structure, which, although intended to facilitate cooperation between countries, actually concentrates decision-making power disproportionately in the hands of one member, the United States (Weber, 1992; Ruggie, 1992).

It is important to note that Bosnia was not the exception during Clinton's presidency. The 1990s were a decade where humanitarian interventions started to become normalized and carried through in other regions too, more famously in Somalia, Haiti, and later in Kosovo. They often justified on the moral grounds of stopping atrocities and protecting civilian populations, epitomizing a period where American foreign policy was heavily influenced by the ideals of humanitarianism. However, this approach also exposed inherent contradictions within American exceptionalism. It often led to selective interventions, as evidenced by the contrasting inaction during the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, as well as other more contemporary conflicts such as the ones in Syria, Burundi, Yemen, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic (Cunliffe, 2017, p. 467). This selective nature illustrates a form of political exceptionalism where decisions to intervene are based not only on humanitarian needs but also on political interests and broader strategic targets. It reflects a commitment to assert and maintain U.S. leadership in the global order post-Cold War, as it advances a narrative of selective moral responsibility. This approach aligned its foreign policy with the missionary overarching goal of shaping an international system conducive to American values and interests, ostensibly under the pretext of humanitarianism (Tusan, 2015).

Chapter 3: The Bush Doctrine of Exceptionalism and America's New Crusade

September 11 and the New American Mission of 'Good vs Evil'

Foreign policy was a challenging area for George W. Bush during his initial presidential campaign. Ironically, his presidency is largely remembered for this exact subject, despite persistent doubts throughout his campaign about his expertise in this area. He heavily relied on his advisors for information about international events and possible appropriate responses (Daalder and Lindsay, 2003, p. 2). Nevertheless, this did not deter him from having his personal view on America's place in the world. Throughout his campaign, he advocated for a more reserved approach to U.S. foreign policy, criticizing what he described as Clinton's mistake of "overcommitting our military around the world" (Bush, 2000).

Between his election and the terrorist attacks of September 11, it was evident that he favored a foreign policy focused on strengthening the military through unilateral means. He unsigned the Rome Treaty that established the International Criminal Court, withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and repudiated the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban (Patman, 2006, p. 972). These actions reflect a continuation of an exceptionalist foreign policy aimed at satisfying the military-industrial complex and enhancing capabilities unilaterally. As the sole global hegemon, the U.S. possessed all the necessary means to pursue this approach, and Bush did not hesitate to do so. Thus, it is difficult to fully grasp the profound impact that the September 11 attacks had on both the Bush administration and American civil society as a whole. They shattered the illusion that the hegemonic power leading the post-Cold War order was untouchable.

The attacks marked a turning point in Bush's foreign policy as they provided a new enemy that justified the continuation of American leadership. Thus, they gave the U.S. a new mission, one that was unilaterally decided and unilaterally conducted. However, the first challenge for the administration was to construct a narrative that could rally domestic support for this new cause. Bush (2002a, para. 35) used the commotion created by the attacks to establish a binary narrative of '*good* versus *evil*', positioning the U.S. as the unequivocal leader:

We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name. By confronting evil and lawless regimes, we do not create a problem, we reveal a problem. And we will lead the world in opposing it.

This perspective outlined a mission in which the U.S. was to lead the world, a scenario that allowed no room for neutrality. Nations were either in alignment with the U.S. or, if not, they were labeled as evil and treated as enemies. Perhaps this missionary ethos was most vividly showcased during Bush's 2004 State of the Union address:

America is a nation with a mission, and that mission comes from our most basic beliefs […] Our aim is democratic peace […] America acts in this cause with friends and allies at our side, yet we understand our special calling: This great republic will lead the cause of freedom.

Bush did not perceive the terrorist attacks as a reaction to a prolonged history of problematic American foreign policy in the Middle East. Instead, he perceived them as an attack on American values, responding by reinforcing an exceptionalist view of America's place in the world, one that emphasized a mission to reshape an entire region according to these values (Britton, 2006, p. 131). Once established, this exceptionalist narrative was actively employed by the Bush administration to justify unilateral interventions in the ensuing wars that deepened U.S. military entanglement in the Middle East. September 11 did not necessarily mark a turning point in U.S. foreign policy—given that interventionism and unilateralism were already known key components of American international engagement — it did, however, usher in a new mission. This mission, much like during the Cold War, was framed within a stark "good vs evil" dichotomy, serving to justify U.S. leadership against a new enemy.

The new wave of exceptionalist entanglement

The 2003 invasion of Iraq and the official justification given by the Bush administration serve as a clear illustration of how American exceptionalism can be useful in blurring a narrative in favor of war. As we found out after the events that happened, there was a clear distinction between the rhetoric publicly pushed to justify military intervention and the de facto reasons that led to the invasion, which was ultimately unilaterally decided without UN support. Even members of the Senate openly questioned the exceptionalist rationale behind the case for war, as evidenced by Wisconsin Senator Russ Feingold's 2002 statement in the Senate:

We're being asked to vote on something that is unclear […] We argued, Mr. President, to get on board and bring the American people with us, but we don't know where the ship is sailing.

Indeed, the justifications for a full-scale invasion and regime change remain unclear even today. The official rationale hinged on the connection of two weak claims. The first was that Hussein's regime had links to al-Qaeda and international terrorism. Although Bush never directly made the link between September 11 and Hussein's regime, Gershkoff and Kushner (2005, p. 525) demonstrated that the way he constructed his official speeches addressed to the nation "compelled listeners to infer a connection". Additionally, they concluded that the overwhelming support for the invasion would not have been as substantial without Bush publicly promoting a narrative that suggested this link. The second claim posited that Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction that were a threat to U.S. security. This assertion was supported by the alleged connection between Hussein and al-Qaeda, suggesting that Hussein's regime could potentially supply these weapons to terrorist organizations. Today, this claim is widely recognized as a fabrication, as these weapons were not found. Moreover, the underlying premise that a regime would transfer such expensive and valuable assets to an unstable and uncontrollable party is fundamentally illogical. If a terrorist organization ever used such weapons, it would certainly imply severe retaliation against the supplier state, highlighting the implausibility of such an argument (Sagan and Waltz, 2013, p. 183-184).

The binary nature of the '*good* versus *evil*' framework adopted by the Bush administration ultimately led to the creation of problematic and brutal engagement strategies. Since the enemy consisted of 'rogue states' and international organizations motivated by evil rather than specific political motives, the Bush administration understood that traditional laws of war, developed over centuries by the 'good' states and their institutions, were inapplicable during the war on terror (Saito, 2008, p. 71). This was the exceptionalist rationale that led to many human rights violations by unilateral actions of the U.S. during the War on Terror.

For instance, the Bush administration's decision to detain over 600 alleged terrorists at Guantanamo Bay prison, which was designed to hold only 250 individuals, raised international concerns. Suspects were held without charge or trial, labeled not as prisoners of war entitled to Geneva Convention protections but as "enemy combatants" (Gregory, 2006, p. 414). This designation enabled the bypassing of established international law and denied detainees basic legal rights, leading to sanctioned instances of torture following Bush's (2002b), memorandum, which stripped these prisoners of their internationally recognized human rights. This was not the exception, as similar abuses were reported at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, where U.S. soldiers tortured detainees on foreign soil (Gordon, 2006). These actions symbolize the U.S.'s profound disregard for international law, demonstrating moral and ethical exceptionalism in deviating from conventional norms (Einolf, 2020, pp. 152-154).

The narratives surrounding what happened in Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, as well as the broader foreign doctrines of the Bush administration, are a clear illustration of the paradoxes of American exceptionalism. The "good vs evil" paradigm that defined the War on Terror was ultimately aimed to project a supposed American moral superiority, as well as a unilateral right to define and administer justice globally. However, the methods employed in order to enforce a moral stance deviated not only from international norms but U.S. constitutional principles too.

This divergence between ideal and action reveals a critical tension within the concept of American exceptionalism. On one hand, it purports to promote a global standard of law; on the other, it justifies exceptions to these standards when they serve a national interest, either economic or political (Song, 2015). The events of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib became symbolic of these exceptions, challenging the international community's perception of the U.S. as a model of democratic governance post-Cold War. Bush's mission to promote freedom was one that now is remembered for torture and other human rights violations, as well as for its failure. The resulting global backlash not only diminished U.S. moral authority but also highlighted the dangers of exceptionalist thinking when it undermines the very values it aims to promote (Johnson, Mora, and Schmidt, 2016). American Exceptionalism under Bush further exacerbated already strained relations between the United States and the Middle East, with repercussions that continue to resonate today. It prompted a regime change in Afghanistan that was doomed from the start. It deepened U.S. military entanglement in a region that has been grappling with the consequences of Western imperialism for over a century, with no apparent end in sight.

Chapter 4: Libya, Drones, and Exceptionalism Redefined Under Obama

Redefining American Exceptionalism

In 2009, when asked by a European reporter at a NATO summit if he believed in American Exceptionalism, Obama replied "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism" (Obama, 2009). This might suggest that he dismissed the concept as merely a display of national pride, a sentiment that nearly all countries have always sought to cultivate, especially in the era of nation-states. However, later in the same interview, Obama articulated his vision for American leadership, one that diverged from the post-war American foreign policy tradition:

I see no contradiction between believing that America has a continued extraordinary role in leading the world toward peace and prosperity and recognizing that leadership is incumbent, depends on, our ability to create partnerships because we can't solve these problems alone.

This position diverges from the conventional exceptionalist narrative employed by both Clinton's liberal interventionism and Bush's unilateralist obsession, as it endorses a higher degree of collaboration than the previous

two administrations (Loefflmann, 2015). This vision advocates for the notion that the United States, as an already established hegemon, possesses a unique potential to collaborate with other nations, and it should take advantage of this status to legitimize its leadership not through military might or individualizing global interests, but through multilateralism (Lindsay, 2011). Obama attempted to redefine American exceptionalism, shifting from a doctrine of singular leadership to a blueprint for multilateral engagement, emphasizing not merely partnership over predominance, but asserting predominance through partnership.

Nonetheless, redefining American Exceptionalism does not by any means implicate abandoning its underlying political objective of justifying and maintaining a US-led international order. While the concept has evolved to embrace modern realities and global expectations, its foundational aim—to maintain America's leadership role on the world stage—persists. A clear illustration of this is the 2012 Department of Defense report titled 'Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense'. This report essentially functions as a kind of 'manifesto' detailing the approach the US intends to take in its foreign policy and the primary areas of focus for engagement.

The publication of this report yields two significant insights: Firstly, it reveals that the Obama administration sought to distinguish its approach from the errors associated with the Bush doctrine by reshaping the methods the United States uses to achieve its objectives. This shift emphasizes technological superiority, agile military forces, and a network of global alliances and partnerships, illustrating an effort to modernize the application of American Exceptionalism in foreign policy. Secondly and most importantly, it confirms the continued presence of a fundamental political aim, demonstrating that American Foreign Policy inherently embodies an exceptionalist perspective, not just strategically inclined towards leading a global order but also perceived as predestined for this role.

Leading From Behind in Libya, Drones, and the Continuation of the War on Terror

The approach of 'leading from behind' that the Obama administration adopted during the Libyan crisis of 2011 serves as a compelling illustration of the redefined concept of American exceptionalism discussed above. This strategy was fundamentally about coordinating international efforts, leveraging the United States' capabilities to support and enable a coalition, rather than positioning the U.S. at the forefront of military intervention. The US consciously allowed a NATO and an Arab coalition to take more visible roles in the operation, limiting itself to providing other indispensable capabilities such as intelligence, logistical support, and precision bombing (Mueller and Project Air Force, 2015). Nevertheless, the operation demonstrated a form of leadership that is exceptional in its reliance on diplomatic influence rather than on military might alone. Bellamy and Williams (2011, p. 843) stress that the approval and collaboration of the League of Arab States (LAS) played a key role in influencing Obama's decision to intervene. This approach involving the League of Arab States shows Obama's efforts to steer his administration away from Bush's engagement policies with Arab countries and institutions, policies that significantly damaged US ties in the region and that Obama wanted to distance himself from (Gerges, 2013, p. 301).

The campaign in Libya began with UN approval through Resolution 1973 in order to protect Libyan civilians, framed as a humanitarian intervention (United Nations Security Council, 2011). However, the mission quickly shifted towards targeting Muammar Gaddafi and ultimately ending his regime, a goal it achieved (Robson, 2024, pp. 16-21). This was largely driven by the strategic interests of NATO countries in Libyan oil (Elharathi, 2014, p. 83). The strategy of 'leading from behind' demonstrated an interventionist approach rooted in American exceptionalism. It aimed to secure Western economic interests under the guise of promoting democracy, but ultimately, it failed primarily due to the lack of a post-conflict governance plan, leading to a power vacuum and subsequent civil war. The intervention escalated violence, worsened the humanitarian situation, and enabled the rise of terrorist groups. It also caused regional instability, strained international relations, and undermined nuclear non-proliferation efforts (Kuperman, 2015). The intervention inadvertently promoted further conflict rather than stability or democratic governance.

'Leading from behind' was not a strategy confined solely to the conflict in Libya. It was devised to sustain U.S. involvement in areas with a long history of American military entanglement. The abandonment of a direct military intervention and occupation strategy was simply replaced with other types of military engagement that led to an expansion of the 'war on terror' (Glaser and Thrall, 2017). As data from the Pentagon indicates, Obama's administration saw a record level of arms sales to its Middle Eastern allies (Houck and Weisgerber, 2016). This

indirectly escalates American capacity in the region through the consolidation of important alliances. This approach allows for a form of engagement that mitigates the immediate risk of American direct intervention in regional conflicts or crises (Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper, 2016). However, this strategy is not devoid of long-term consequences. The historical precedent set by the U.S. arms supply to the Taliban illustrates a complex paradox where today's strategic asset can evolve into tomorrow's foreign policy challenge and failure (Parenti, 2001, pp. 31-37). Nevertheless, the hike in arms sales during Obama's tenure illustrates an attempt to shift engagement strategies towards the strengthening of multilateral regional alliances.

Additionally, the Obama administration sanctioned drone strikes at a frequency ten times greater than that of Bush's (Zenko, 2017), even though it is often regarded for supposedly favoring a foreign policy of restraint and reconciliation. The drone policy under President Obama demonstrates that, despite the rise in multilateral engagements during his administration, this method of conducting foreign policy was frequently set aside when convenient. Woods (2012, as cited in Cachelin, 2022, p. 445) notes that the expanded deployment of military drones facilitated a transition from Bush's "torture and extraordinary rendition" to Obama's "industrial-scale extrajudicial execution." Drones ensured that this transition led to a more concealed form of military intervention, with the U.S. government generally refraining from commenting on or acknowledging reported drone strikes occurring beyond recognized conflict zones (Brooks, 2014, p. 89).

The Obama Administration's continuation of the 'war on terror' saw the United States employing drone strikes under a legal rationale that stretches traditional interpretations of 'imminent threat' and 'self-defense' in international law, effectively reinterpreting legal norms to suit its own strategic interests (Brooks, 2014, pp. 91-97). This practice erodes the fabric of international law, weakening the consensus on critical principles and threatening the stability of the international legal order. It embodies a clear manifestation of American exceptionalism, as the U.S. places its interpretations and actions above established international consensus, signaling a departure from multilateral decision-making processes.

Within this framework, it becomes apparent that the Obama administration did not endeavor to relinquish its leadership stance *vis-à-vis* Arab nations. Rather, it strategically altered its methods of engagement in order to minimize scrutiny and veil its military interventions. The Obama administration indeed sought to diverge from the Bush administration's policies of engagement. However, this shift was not based on a change of stance or a misidentification of the many political and economic objectives within the region. Instead, it was driven by increasing international pressure and declining domestic support for direct military occupation as a strategy to combat terrorism. Thus, the Obama administration's approach of 'leading from behind' represents a legacy of continued exceptionalist foreign policy. While it diverges from previous strategies in its execution, it retains the same targets and results in similar consequences, as illustrated by the situation in Libya

Chapter 5: The Personalisation of Exceptionalism in Trump's America

From the "Exceptional We" to the "Exceptional Me"

Trump's electoral approach was strategically directed at white demographics experiencing economic distress, notably those in industrial towns across the Midwest. He attributed the deterioration of their economic conditions primarily to immigration and the impacts of globalization. His campaign strategy leveraged a sense of nostalgia for a better past among these populations. This sense of nostalgia is illustrated by his campaign slogan "Make America Great Again," which insinuates a decline from America's once exceptional status—a status purportedly recoverable and, crucially, restorable by him alone. This slogan embodies a classic populist narrative, a perspective widely acknowledged within academic circles (Prooijen et al., 2022; Rowland, 2019).

However, his portrayal as an unprecedented anti-establishment figure, intent on restoring a lost American way of life, diverges from traditional expressions of American exceptionalism observed in the post-Cold War context. It represents a significant shift in presidential rhetoric from the exceptional "we" to the exceptional "me" (Gilmour et al., 2020). This shift from an exceptional collective identity to a self-proclaimed exceptional individual stems from his mistrust of the American liberal world order and its institutions.

Trump personally has expressed reservations about the concept of traditional American exceptionalism, yet he maintains a belief in the superiority of the United States. Li (2022) contends that Trump adopts a commercial interpretation of exceptionalism, suggesting that for him, success in business is the pathway to being exceptional. This comes from the viewpoint that Trump sees US-led institutions, especially NATO, as burdens that have persistently imposed financial costs on the US. Trump made several threats of pulling the U.S. from the alliance during a summit meeting in 2018 if other members did not increase their spending in the organization (Landler and Cooper, 2018). For his ongoing (*editor*: now finished) re-election campaign, Trump (2024) is maintaining this narrative, as evidenced by his remarks at a rally in South Carolina where he stated:

I've been saying, 'Look, if they're not going to pay, we're not going to protect, OK?' One of the heads of the countries said, 'Does that mean that if we don't pay the bills, that you're not going to protect us?' That's exactly what it means. I'm not going to protect you.

Trump believes that in order to be exceptional, the US must stop functioning as a provider for its allies, arguing this behavior questions the foundation of American superiority. For him, exceptionalism entails not merely attaining success but achieving it while engaging on equitable terms with other sovereign nations, supposedly in financial dealings—though this notion conveniently overlooks disparities in military and strategic commitments and privileges.

Chaos in the Liberal Order

Perhaps a more relevant slogan used during his campaign to articulate the principles of his proposed foreign policy was "America First". The importance of this expression in his electoral strategy hinges on the way he structured his narrative, utilizing the two principal slogans of his campaign to reinforce each other. His overarching aim was to "Make America Great Again," with "America First" serving as the proposed means to this end. These slogans did not provide specific solutions, yet they did not need to; his populist narrative was strategically designed to garner votes rather than offer detailed solutions to the issues facing the U.S. Essentially, Trump's narrative gradually but firmly established an idea of societal chaos in the American mind in order to allow him to promise order and prosperity as solutions (De Vreese et al., 2018). Thus, it is essential to distinguish between Trump's rhetoric and his actions while in office, as this chaos he deliberately designed often created a discrepancy between what he proclaimed and what he enacted.

This idea of creating chaos is present in Trump's foreign policy. His presidency marked a notable departure from many previous commitments to liberal internationalism and the policies of the Obama doctrine. He withdrew from active participation in multilateral organizations, neglected the maintenance of longstanding trade and military alliances, and curtailed the promotion of liberal democracy (Lacatus and Meibauer, 2021). Even when compared to the administration of George W. Bush, there were clear differences. Unlike the previous republican president, Trump's rhetoric did not subscribe to the belief that the US holds a sacred duty to eradicate tyranny worldwide (Schaefer, 2016).

Additionally, the Trump administration's National Security Strategy (NSS) did not emphasize the significance of strategic alliances and international structures in combating various threats (Stranne, 2020, p. 113). Trump's mistrust of the traditional international liberal order is rooted in his desire to reshape it in such a way that the US can lead it predominantly on its own. A recurring theme in his administration's NSS (White House, 2017, p. 3) is the portrayal of the U.S. as having naively pursued cooperative strategies with nations that the document now designates as "strategic competitors":

These competitions require the United States to rethink the policies of the past two decades—policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners. For the most part, this premise turned out to be false.

The quote reflects a critical reassessment of prior U.S. foreign policy strategies, specifically the post-Cold War era's reliance on diplomatic engagement and economic integration as tools for achieving global stability and transforming rivals into cooperative partners that helped the U.S. to lead the liberal order. This pivot is a manifestation of American

Exceptionalism in one significant way. It underscores the belief in the distinctiveness of American values and interests, suggesting that the U.S. must protect its sovereignty against what it perceives as the adverse effects of global interdependence, even if this interdependence has been traditionally led by U.S. interests. As allies grow politically and economically and become less dependent on U.S. assistance to pursue their international interests, they are increasingly viewed as strategic competitors and, ultimately, as rivals.

The Myth of Isolationism

Trump believed it was necessary to unchain the U.S. from numerous agreements and institutions that not only limited its ability to exercise political and economic power but also hindered its potential to gain further dominance. One example of this is the withdrawal from the 2015 Paris Agreement designed to mitigate climate change. Trump (2017) justified this decision based on the premise that the accord would undermine the U.S. relative power in comparison to other nations:

The Paris Accord would undermine our economy, hamstring our workers, weaken our sovereignty, impose unacceptable legal risks, and put us at a permanent disadvantage to the other countries of the world. It is time to exit the Paris Accord and time to pursue a new deal that protects the environment, our companies, our citizens, and our country.

This decision illustrates American exceptionalism under Trump's presidency, as it disregards the commitments of 195 other sovereign states to a critical global cause. Trump ultimately sees this agreement as a threat to the United States' long-term capacity to lead the global order.

The Trump administration also distanced itself from other multilateral agreements and institutions, notably the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). This pattern combined with the "America First" policy has been interpreted by some scholars as indicative of an isolationist foreign policy (Dimitrova, 2017; Abdulkareem, 2018). However, this is not the case. The "America First" policy marked a return to the kind of *absolute unilateralism* characteristic of the Bush administration, though in a context not defined by the war on terror, but by escalating economic challenges within the US (Stranne, 2020, p. 103). Trump aimed to shift from the Obama administration's strategy of employing perceived multilateralism to a stance of embracing unilateralism, adhering to an exceptionalist foreign policy that merely altered how it was conducted

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have extensively analyzed the enduring concept of American exceptionalism and its profound influence on U.S. foreign policy across various administrations in the post-Cold War order. This study reveals a clear pattern of what Stranne (2020) calls "*progressive continuity"*, whereby each administration, despite apparent ideological shifts, has perpetuated a foreign policy framework rooted in a belief in America's unique destiny and mission in shaping the world according to their interests. The research establishes that American exceptionalism is not merely a static belief but a driving force in the evolution of U.S. foreign policy. It has adapted over time, influencing policy decisions from military interventions to diplomatic engagements. It has justified extensive U.S. involvement overseas, often completely disregarding international norms and laws that govern other nations. The administrations from Clinton to Trump have each utilized the rhetoric of exceptionalism, albeit in forms tailored to their political agendas and the global context of their times.

The implications of these findings are significant for both foreign affairs offices and the broader academic understanding of international relations. Firstly, the persistence of exceptionalism in U.S. foreign policy highlights a predictable pattern of unilateral engagement that has persisted throughout different administrations and their different doctrines. Secondly, it challenges the international community to reassess the efficacy and equity of a world order disproportionately influenced by a single nation's ideological framework. American exceptionalism engenders a policy environment where *exemptionalism* is not only expected but deemed necessary. This stance is evident in various strategic decisions, from the withdrawal from international accords to the justification of military interventions.

Looking forward, several avenues for future research present themselves. One critical area is examining how American exceptionalism might evolve in response to emerging global challenges such as China's rise and climate change. Another fruitful area could be exploring the internal critiques within the U.S. about the tenets of exceptionalism, especially as American society becomes more diverse and its civil society more interconnected with the global community. It is also important to acknowledge the limitations of this framework. While the ideological underpinnings of exceptionalism profoundly shape U.S. actions abroad, attributing American foreign policy solely to this belief system oversimplifies the complex interplay of economic, political, and strategic interests that also drive U.S. international behavior. Recognizing these different drivers provides a more nuanced understanding of U.S. foreign policy and its global implications.

In conclusion, the core message of this research is the recognition of American exceptionalism not as an erratic influence but as a consistent and central doctrine shaping U.S. foreign policy. Understanding this can explain why America often pursues policies that appear contradictory to its professed constitutional values and international norms. The recognition of this pattern is crucial for forecasting and interpreting future U.S. foreign engagements, although one should not assume this will remain unchanged. As we continue to witness its manifestations in global affairs, it remains imperative to engage with and critically assess this ideology. Only through such rigorous scrutiny can we hope to fully understand its implications and perhaps guide it toward fostering a more cooperative and equitable international order.

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