

How National Identity Influences US Foreign Policy

Written by Milo Kershaw

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MILO KERSHAW, AUG 7 2018

American national identity has influenced the foreign policy of the United States in a number of ways. National identity can be defined as an overarching system of collective characteristics and values in a nation, American identity has been based historically upon: "race, ethnicity, religion, culture and ideology" (Huntington, 2004, p. 12). This essay shall argue that American national identity has influenced foreign policy in three distinct ways. Firstly, the American exceptionalism of the American national identity has influenced foreign policy through two schools of thought, exemplary and interventionist. Both see the United States as the global ideal but differ on whether this should be actively spread or left to admire. Secondly, this essay shall examine how American national identity and its implicit othering has influenced what or whom is deemed friend or threat by the United States. Thirdly, and finally, this essay shall examine ethno-racial and cultural influence on the foreign policy of the United States and how different groups influence policy formulation.

This essay reaches the conclusion that American exceptionalism leads to US foreign policy not only acting in a missionary fashion but also in a manner that it would not deem acceptable for other states to act. Exceptionalism also leads the United States to assume that the rest of the world desires the values that the US itself upholds. Alongside this, this essay concludes that the value systems of the American national identity lead to the conceptualising of other powers who uphold polar values as existential threats. Finally, this essay concludes that the ethnic/cultural/racial makeup of the American national identity influences foreign policy but is somewhat limited by the ingrained culture of White Anglo-American identity. Overall this essay asserts significant influence to national identity on the foreign policy of the United States, adopting a firmly constructivist stance.

The idea that the United States of America is in some way different from other countries, that it is a 'city upon a hill', that it is exceptional, has always been paramount to the American national identity, and has exerted significant influence throughout history over the foreign policy of the United States (Edwards, 2018, p. 177). American exceptionalism involves three key notions: the USA is the model society free from the problems of the Old World, it is also capable of avoiding those problems that have faced all states with time and has a special destiny (Edwards, 2018, pp. 177-178). This trifecta of assumptions influences foreign policy through implying that all American action on the world stage is performed with good intentions and that the United States, in its actions, knows "what is best for the world" (Edwards, 2018, p. 177). As Edwards explains there have been two main schools of thought in articulating American exceptionalism in US foreign policy – exemplary and interventionist (Edwards, 2018, p. 180). Exemplary exceptionalism was the largely dominant trend until the Spanish-American War when a turn in policy toward interventionism began – which largely became cemented in the post-1945 world (Edwards, 2018, pp. 179-180). Exemplary exceptionalism can be seen to have influenced American foreign policy in the Early Republican administrations' policies of avoiding foreign commitments alongside twentieth-century reservations toward joining the League of Nations (Edwards, 2018, p. 179). Lodge (a key anti-League figure) saw the League's military commitments as reducing American autonomy and ability to remain merely exemplar (Edwards, 2018, p. 179).

Interventionist exceptionalism has been the dominant strand of the two in American national identity following the end of the Second World War. This notion of exceptionalism works on the basis of the USA having a pre-ordained role to act as a global harbinger of their self-perceived unequalled values; American democracy, free market economics and liberty, bringing this about wherever possible, and seeking to support those who share these ideals – this is the "American mission" (McCartney, 2012, p. 259). This aspect of American identity has influenced the foreign policy of

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the United States in its promotion of its values abroad – for example bringing about regime change toward democracy through military intervention. This is exemplified by the assertions by the G.W. Bush Administration that bringing American democracy to the Middle East was a desirable move not only in terms of promoting American values but that these values, due to their exceptional quality, would be panacea to the region's issues and loved by its people (Monten, 2005, p. 112). This lies contrary to research carried out in 2004 which shows overwhelmingly negative attitudes toward the USA by Middle Eastern/Arab nations, particularly in then-occupied Iraq alongside largely negative attitudes toward American-style democracy and freedoms (Zogby International, 2004, pp. 3-5). This report also demonstrated notable decline in opinion in the six nations surveyed between 2002 and 2004 – this reflects declining Arab opinion of the US following the 2003 Iraq War (Zogby International, 2004, pp. 3-5).

One can argue that the American exceptional national identity influences the United States to be overly interventionist in spreading its values due to its assuredness of their supremacy. This leads to foreign policy debacles in which the USA attempts to bring about regime change in states that do not desire the values that the USA seeks to disseminate. This is made all the more problematic by the self-righteousness of the cause created by the exceptionalism present in the American psyche. This exceptionalism also means that the USA engages in the aforementioned interventionism, yet viciously opposes other powers attempts at spreading their own values – the USA, due to its exceptional nature, is just in its actions, whilst others are not. This attitude can be seen in the 1947 Truman Doctrine – in which the USA set out its policy of containing the spread of Communism and preventing regime change, particularly regime change away from American-style democracy (Current History, 1947). Here one can see both the United States fulfilling its mission of spreading its values alongside its assertion that it is wrong for other powers to follow suit. This demonstrates the influence of American exceptional national identity on foreign policy: The United States believes its values to be above reproach, due to this these values should be spread, the USA has the right intentions in spreading said values due to their exceptional quality – this too makes it erroneous for other powers to seek to spread values contrary to those of the United States.

American national identity has played a significant role in influencing what or whom is deemed (or not deemed) a threat in US foreign policy formulation. As Zevelev explains, identity is not only a matter of self-perception but a matter of what other actors think of you (Zevelev, 2002, p. 450), and as Hixson adds, what you think of them, identity exists with an entity with whom to differentiate oneself from – an entity to other (Hixson, 2008, pp. 5-6). Identity is constructed in self-perception, how others perceive us, and by how we view others. The manner in which American national identity has constructed the enemies and friends of the United States is important, because it is central to how and why foreign policy is carried out. One can see the influence of the othering caused by national identity and its affect on foreign policy most clearly in relation to US foreign policy toward the USSR post-1945. This foreign policy, against a former ally, was set out to contain and combat the power wherever possible. Why did this happen? The American national identity emphasises four key factors: democracy, free markets, personal liberty and Judaeo-Christian values (Campbell, 1992, pp. 29-32). Due to its advocacy of socialist/communist economics and its totalitarian and atheistic tendencies – the USSR was deemed anathema to American identity – in fact it was considered a truly existential threat (Campbell, 1992, pp. 29-32). The fear for the survival of the American identity and the United States itself can be witnessed in the National Security Council documents from the Cold War period. These documents express great fear toward the nature of this communist other and what it means for American identity, advocating aggressive foreign policy measures in response; one can discount a propagandising agenda in these documents as they were, at the time, “top secret” (Campbell, 1992, pp. 29-32). This evidence is particularly important in that it demonstrates the influence national identity has even at an elite level, thus challenging realist arguments – giving credence to a constructivist interpretation of American foreign policy (Schmidt, 2012, p. 13).

Responses to challenges to religiosity in foreign states have also been indicative of American national identity's influence on foreign policy. Eisenhower's interventions to prop up the Christian government in Lebanon and Chiang Kai-Shek in Formosa demonstrates the US foreign policy commitment to Judaeo-Christian values both at home and to states who uphold them (Gunn & Slighoua, 2011, p. 40). One can also see exceptionalism in Eisenhower's supposed religious interventionism in the cases of the Guatemala coup and the conspiracy to overthrow Mossadeq in Iran. Both governments were democratically elected yet despite this, the United States intervened to bring about their overthrow – both on religious grounds but also because they were leftist governments in the Cold War period (Gunn & Slighoua, 2011, p. 40). Here one can note that the United States is willing to compromise its principles in a manner

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that it would not deem acceptable for other states to do – democracy is only acceptable if it elects a government that is of the American nature. Despite the Truman Doctrine, it is perfectly acceptable in the American national identity, due to its exceptional nature, to orchestrate coups against democracies in order to advance the interests and values of the United States.

The ethno-racial and cultural aspects of American national identity influence US foreign policy. One can see the influence of European aspects of national identity in that the United States primarily perceives of itself as a Western power (Aysha, 2003, p. 120) and orientates itself and its policy, generally, toward the European states. This can be seen as a signifier of an overarching American civilizational identity – the USA is Western (Huntington, 1993, p. 22). One can see, more particularly, the White Anglo-Saxon influence on foreign policy; the United States has maintained for much of its history, a special relationship with the United Kingdom (DeConde, 1992, pp. 5-6). Due to the aforementioned, the USA has exercised significant pro-British tendencies in its foreign policy (DeConde, 1992, p. XI (preface)). The White Anglo-Saxon racial influence on American identity has played a significant role in formulating the foreign policy of the United States. This influence has run from the 19th century onward in the process of removal and assimilation of “non-White others” from North America (Taesuh, 2015, p. 744), the refusal to annex Cuba due to the large numbers of Black people who lived there (DeConde, 1992, p. 47), annexationist rhetoric toward Canada on grounds of Anglo-Saxon racial unity (DeConde, 1992, p. 47) to the Reagan administration’s use of Whiteness as a device to encourage patriotism and legitimate an aggressive foreign policy (Lipsitz, 2006, pp. 73-77). Noting the impact of the social constructs of race and ethnicity is important because, as Hixson notes, the ethnic and racial makeup of a state justifies what action is taken, especially violence toward “external enemy-others”, and whether this action is legitimated domestically (Hixson, 2008, pp. 8-11).

It is interesting to note the assertions of Huntington in relation to the ethno-racial national identity of the United States. Huntington sees the USA as moving away from its White Anglo-Saxon predominance toward an increasingly multicultural makeup (Huntington, 2004, p. 10). Huntington believes that this will move US policy from a Western focus to one focused elsewhere; for example a more Hispanic United States being orientated toward Latin America (Huntington, 2004, p. 10). One can see the influence of Huntington’s theory of identity and foreign policy in contemporary politics; President Trump’s campaign focused heavily on getting tough with Mexico, increasing border security on the Southern border and the “Muslim ban” policy (Vidal, 2018). This can be seen in a similar vein to Reagan’s appeals to whiteness to legitimate policy (Kimmel, 2017) and arguably as an attempt to prevent Huntington’s prophesised identity shift. The past influence of ethnic diasporas in the multicultural national identity can be seen in a number of cases, for example; Cuban exiles advocating for harsh sanctions against the Castro regime in the Cold War (Huntington, 2004, pp. 286-287) and in the Post-Cold War era under the Clinton administration (Petras, 1996, pp. 269-271). Another significant instance in which minority groups have influenced foreign policy is the Armenian lobby’s attempt in the 1990’s to secure Senate recognition of the Armenian genocide – an action which was only stopped by a lengthy filibuster (DeConde, 1992, p. 196). Turkey had promised severe consequences for such a recognition (DeConde, 1992, p. 196). This is significant in that a minority group nearly jeopardised a relationship with a key ally – contrary to realist foreign policy aims at an elite level – again evidencing identity-based constructivism’s influence on foreign policy. Whilst these groups have exerted significant influence over US foreign policy, particularly post-Cold War, (Ambrosio, 2002, p. 9) they have had to operate within the framework of an Anglo-American worldview in order to experience any success (DeConde, 1992, pp. 196-197). This demonstrates that whilst a multicultural national identity does influence US foreign policy, the over-arching Anglo-American identity is an ingrained limiting force.

In summation, American national identity plays a significant role in influencing the foreign policy of the United States. American exceptionalism drives the United States to believe that it is legitimate in all of its foreign policy actions – its intentions are above reproach. Past-exemplarism drove the USA to adopt a policy of non-interference. Now-dominant interventionist exceptionalism drives the USA to spread its values worldwide through any means – even war. The USA in its exceptional character also believes that all nations desire such values to be implemented. This character also drives the USA to act contrary to how it deems other states should act. The key tenets of American identity – democracy, individual liberty, religiosity and free-markets drive the USA to other those who hold differing views and to ally itself with those who uphold the same values. Again, however, the exceptional nature of American identity shines through, in that it is acceptable for the United States to proselytise and intervene in the name of its values yet

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it is also acceptable for the United States to overthrow democratically elected governments. Finally, the cultural/ethnic/racial makeup of the American national identity influences foreign policy through the advocacy of the interests of said groups, and in justifying the taking of action against those that are othered by them. The multicultural influence is largely moderated, however, by the more pervasive, White Anglo-American national identity, which provides a framework for said interests to operate in, whilst also advocating its own agenda. Overall, American national identity plays a significant role in influencing the US foreign policy – the values and systems that the USA seeks to advocate are socially constructed and their worth is intrinsically linked to the identity of those who value them.

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Written by: Milo Kershaw
Written at: The University of Sheffield
Written for: Dr Benedict Docherty
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