American Exceptionalism as a Basis for the American Consciousness

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Patrick Gathara claims that American exceptionalism 'is based on the old colonial misconception that power bestows moral superiority' (2019). This essay, then, seeks to scrutinise this claim and uncover how this notion of exceptionalism manifests itself in the American consciousness. It will first contextualise and establish the notion of American exceptionalism from a constructivist framework. Afterwards, it will present a case study of Lyndon B. Johnson's rhetoric on The Great Society and Vietnam, and the colonial jeremiads of the Puritan Fathers. The overarching theme of Johnson's speeches is explored through the lens of three recurring moral themes: the condemnation of social injustice, the affirmation of exceptionalist discourse, and the emphasis on fault lines in history. This will demonstrate the lasting legacy of Puritan morality in American culture. The aim here is to accentuate the core elements and order of magnitude of American exceptionalism. Finally, with this framework in mind, this essay will attempt to revise Gathara's claims on the substrate of American exceptionalism by considering it in light of Johnson's rhetoric on Vietnam and the Great Society and its parallels with the sermons of the Puritan Fathers. It will argue that while Gathara is right to trace the roots of American exceptionalism to colonial misconceptions, he reverses the order in which power and moral superiority manifest themselves in the American consciousness. Indeed, both the Puritan Fathers and Johnson stressed that continued American flourishing hinges on sustained moral excellence: America is not morally superior because it is powerful, it is powerful because it is morally superior. Appropriately, then, this essay will conclude that American exceptionalism can be better understood as being fundamentally based on the colonial misconception that moral superiority bestows power.

In his 1840 book 'Democracy in America', Alexis de Tocqueville described US 'exceptionality', without any mention of 'superior', in comparison to the rest of the world. He thus laid the foundation for the concept of American exceptionalism (Tocqueville, 1994). In what follows, this essay will predominantly look at American exceptionalism from a constructivist-cultural-identity lens and explore the phenomenological notion that Americans have about the exceptional history of the US, their role in the world, and the way this lens drives their domestic and foreign policy. It focuses on the underlying myths and the rhetoric employed. Several authors within this framework regard American exceptionalism as an ideology, a cognitive scheme or a perception (Hunt, 2009; Schafer, 1999; Lipset, 1996; Wilson, 1998). Taken together, it can be said that exceptionalism influences how Americans see their own country and the world. In this way it is part of the American identity.

Within this framework, it is irrelevant whether America is truly unique. What is important is how Americans perceive their own country and traditions: 'The United States is exceptional as long as Americans believe it to be exceptional' (Restad, 2012). For our intents and purposes, it does not matter whether the underlying claims are true or false. According to Trevor McCrisken, there is a growing group of academics who see that the way decision-makers think and speak about America's exceptional identity has a major impact on US foreign policy (2003: pp.1-8). This point will become more salient when we consider it in the context of Johnson's rhetoric on Vietnam.

The background to America's exceptional identity can roughly be divided into two elements. On the one hand there is a political element, on the other a religious element. Some authors see these elements as myths (Walt, 2011), others as state-formed fantasies (Pease, 2009). The growth of these ideas is complex and may not be entirely separate from each other's development.

The first element is the belief in political exceptionalism. An important aspect of this is the belief that Americans have the best constitution in the world, which also describes the most important American values (Migranyan, 2013). Hilde Restad points to the importance of these enlightened values: 'Its Enlightenment principles, expressed through its famous documents, forged a nation out of ideas' (2012). In other words, a national identity was built from a shared ideology rather than from a shared history, as in the case of the European nation-states. It follows that American identity is not determined by a person's place of birth, but by the moral values that a person subscribes to (Lipset, 1996: pp.18-19). What is interesting to note, here, is that this sense of moral superiority takes precedence over any notion of power. Instead, it informs a sense of exemplary moral duty towards the rest of the world in the implicit assumption that American values are or ought to be universal values.

The second element is a religious myth. This myth is centred around the idea that America has a divinely appointed role in the world. Sacvan Bercovitch traced the widespread use of morality in American politics to the colonial era, when prominent Puritans were already preaching about the exemplary role of the fledgling New England (1979: pp.10-11). Here, it is again important to note that these early colonial fathers already thought they were exceptional, not because they had any power, but because they possessed a superior sense of morality. These Puritans saw their colony as a City on a Hill and considered themselves a community of the elect. To enforce their message, Puritan ministers often took a three-pronged approach, emphasising the successes of the faithful first, then highlighting in detail how the parish had recently fallen into moral decline. Finally, there was a hopeful call to once again hold on to the original Articles of Faith. Only then would the Puritan colony be preserved for all eternity.

Bercovitch compared this approach to the fire and brimstone sermons of the Biblical prophet Jeremiah and described this rhetorical strategy as the American Jeremiad. He also claimed that variations on this method were used in American politics well after the colonial period. For example, in March 1965, President Lyndon Johnson equated American interest with that of 'the fate of democracy' and, as though a priest leading prayer, asked his audience to join in the cause (1965a). Johnson's parish had gathered that day as a result of protests that got out of hand in Selma, Alabama, where local police had cracked down on peaceful protesters from Martin Luther King's Civil Rights Movement. From his pulpit in the House of Representatives, Johnson preached clear words: 'There is no cause for pride in what has happened in Selma' (1965a).'

Nonetheless, Johnson called for faith in American democracy. In his role as a secular pastor, he proclaimed the nation's unique mission: 'to right wrong, to do justice, to serve man.' And if the Americans once again adhered to those ideals, the United States would be able to leave the dark shadow of racism behind for good – a message summed up by the president in the pledge 'we shall overcome' (1965a).

President Johnson's so-called 'We Shall Overcome' speech can be seen as a secular twist on the Puritan jeremiad of old. Like his Puritan predecessors, the president praised the historic successes of American society and described how moral abuses had become part of social reality, threatening the American Mission. Finally, Johnson followed the example of seventeenth-century pastors by promising moral restoration if the core ideals of the community were once again put into practice. Here we are once again confronted with the precedence of morality over power and how the former informs the latter.

Johnson also explained the Great Society employing such moral convictions. The Great Society – which was officially launched at a campaign speech in Michigan in the spring of 1964 – was emphatically promoted by Johnson as a moral necessity, and consisted of numerous reforms aimed at poverty alleviation, social security, and environmental law (1964). The intended end result was nothing less than the beginning of a 'new world' in which moral and spiritual needs could be on an equal footing with the pursuit of material prosperity. In this way, the Great Society was not only sold as a package of policy measures, but Johnson presented his agenda as the starting point for a benign transformation of American society, after which the United States would once again be regarded as a morally exemplary City on a Hill (Johnson, 1964).

In addition, Johnson made use of the optimistic Zeitgeist during his tenure and proclaimed the generation of the 1960s to be an exceptional one in history. In his inaugural address of January 1965, he argued that 'For every generation there is a destiny' (1965b). While some generations were at the mercy of the unchanging course of

history, the generation of the 1960s had the unique opportunity to make its own choices. And during his 'Great Society' speech at the University of Michigan, the president claimed that 'for the first time in human history' a generation had the opportunity to shape its dream society: a society that would come about through of the moral ideals of the Great Society (1964).

Similar moralisms can be found in Johnson's foreign rhetoric. When the president was forced to publicly justify his slowly escalating Vietnam policies in March 1965, he fell back on moral issues. He referred to the prevailing poverty in Southeast Asia and stressed the American obligation to do something about it. The speech also contained a pacifist message. The clatter of guns was nothing more than a 'symbol of human failure'. By contrast, moral milestones – such as building dams, rural electrification, or enabling quality education – were impressive and would underpin Johnson's plans for Vietnam (Johnson, 1965c). In other words, the United States would deploy its military not only for geopolitical purposes, but also to promote the moral improvement of an international War on Poverty.

While his Great Society was to lead to a transformation of American society, Johnson suggested that his Vietnam policy was the basis for a substantial metamorphosis of international politics. He argued that his generation dreamed of a world in which conflicts were resolved solely by peaceful means and expressed his hope for a 'world without war' (1965c). In a speech at the United Nations, he further condemned the historic practices of discrimination and human rights violations and asked his foreign colleagues to follow the American example to end this permanently (1965d).

Johnson's claims bear a resemblance to the Puritan belief in the exceptionality and morally exemplary role of the American colony and how this moral exemplarity informs their role in the world. Like the Puritans aboard the Mayflower, the thirty-sixth president of the United States sketched utopian vistas of fault lines with the 'old" world', and like his Puritan predecessors, the president positioned the North American continent as the territory of the New World.

Throughout our discussion of American exceptionalism in Lyndon B. Johnson's rhetoric, we are compelled by a constructivist framework and confronted by how the identity actors ascribe to a state (in this case Johnson and the Puritans to America) in a given spatial-temporal context, informs the broader identity of a state and governs its domestic and foreign policy. The overarching morality and accompanying exceptionalism – both so characteristic of national and foreign discourse in the United States – are equally rooted in the traditions of colonial New England. Gathara, then, is right to trace the roots of American exceptionalism to colonial misconceptions (2019). He, however, reverses the order in which power and moral superiority manifest themselves in the American consciousness. Both the Puritan Fathers and Johnson stress that continued American flourishing hinges on continued moral excellence. America's perception of itself as morally exemplary and how its power is contingent on said moral excellence impels it to explore elements of its domestic projects in its foreign policy, not because, as Gathara's statement implies, America thinks its power justifies its self-image as morally superior and entitles it to project itself, but because, as the moral beacon of the world, it is their God-given duty to be powerful in order to ensure moral excellence in the rest of the world.

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