



WHITHER THE “CITY UPON A HILL”? DONALD TRUMP, AMERICA FIRST, AND AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

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In order to understand Donald Trump's "America First" agenda, we must examine the master narrative that underpins it. Trump breaks with all modern presidents not just because he challenges the postwar "liberal international order," but because he rejects its underlying master narrative — American exceptionalism. America First relies instead on the narrative of Jacksonian nationalism. What makes America great, according to this narrative, is not a diverse nation unified in its adherence to certain liberal ideals, but rather ethnocultural homogeneity, material wealth, and military prowess. In this view, the United States is unexceptional, and therefore has no mission to pursue abroad. By shedding light on this alternative master narrative, we can better understand Trump's presidency, his grand strategy, and why a return to the status quo ante after Trump is unlikely.

The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms. If we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world — and we shall surely endanger the welfare of our own nation.

— Harry Truman, 1947¹

We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs. Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength.

— Donald Trump, 2017²

I. Introduction

While there has been ample scholarly debate on the Trump administration's grand strategy, there is one factor that deserves far more attention than it has received: Donald Trump's rejection of American exceptionalism.³ Trump breaks with all U.S. presidents since 1945 not just because he challenges the postwar "liberal international order," as many scholars have argued,⁴ but because he rejects its underlying master narrative. A master narrative is the enduring narrative of a nation, which, according to Ronald Krebs, constitutes the discursive playing field upon which voters and policymakers debate more discrete national security

1 "President Harry S. Truman's Address before a Joint Session of Congress, March 12, 1947," The Avalon Project, Yale Law School, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp; also known as the "Truman Doctrine."

2 Donald J. Trump "The Inaugural Address," The White House, Jan. 20, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/>.

3 Peter Feaver, "What Is Grand Strategy and Why Do We Need It?" *Foreign Policy*, April 8, 2009, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/04/08/what-is-grand-strategy-and-why-do-we-need-it/>.

4 See, e.g., the special issue on the liberal order by *Foreign Affairs*: "Out of Order? The Future of the International System," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 1 (January/February 2017), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/issues/2017/96/1>; Doug Stokes, "Trump, American Hegemony, and the Future of the Liberal International Order," *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (January 2018): 133–50, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix238>; and Robert L. Jervis, Francis Gavin, Joshua Rovner, and Diane Labrosse, eds., *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

narratives.⁵ Whether it was to promote “the four freedoms,” to be “a shining city on a hill,” or to be an “indispensable nation,” presidents of both parties have based their arguments for U.S. leadership on a belief in American exceptionalism.⁶

Significantly, this master narrative has influenced not only presidential statements and rhetoric, but also actual foreign policy. Constructivist and liberal scholars of U.S. foreign policy argue that there exists a powerful national agreement on what role the United States is supposed to play in world history *because of what kind of nation the United States is believed to be*.⁷ This is not to say there has not been disagreement over U.S. foreign policy since 1945 — take, for example, the profound disagreement over the Vietnam War. But there has been a fundamental agreement that the United States should have a leading role in the international institutions it set up in the 1940s. One important reason for this was the powerful meta-narrative of American exceptionalism. Ironically, realist scholars have repeatedly confirmed

the importance of exceptionalism by lamenting its effect on American politics.⁸ Unlike the disagreement over *how* ideas of American exceptionalism influenced earlier U.S. foreign policy, then, scholars actually agree that, since World War II, the makers of U.S. foreign policy have operated under the assumption that the world needs U.S. leadership not just because of American military might or the dollar, but because the United States is exceptional.⁹ This elite agreement deepened, rather than weakened, after the end of the Cold War. In fact, Barack Obama invoked American exceptionalism in 31 percent more speeches than the average of all other presidents combined since 1945.¹⁰

The contrast with Obama's successor is stark. While Trump's attack on the “liberal world order” has received ample attention from scholars of U.S. foreign policy,¹¹ the analysis of Trump's puzzling rejection of American exceptionalism has only just begun.¹² Perhaps this is because Trump is often incoherent and self-contradictory and frequently tells lies and falsehoods,¹³ making an analysis of

5 See, Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 13–15.

6 Jason A. Edwards and David Weiss, eds., *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2011).

7 See, e.g., John Gerard Ruggie, “The Past as Prologue? Interests, Identity, and American Foreign Policy,” *International Security* 21, no. 4 (Spring 1997): 89–125, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.21.4.89>; G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Henry R. Nau, *At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Jeffrey W. Legro, *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Karl K. Schonberg, *Constructing 21st Century U.S. Foreign Policy: Identity, Ideology, and America's World Role in a New Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Michael C. Desch, “America's Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in U.S. Foreign Policy,” *International Security* 32 no. 3 (Winter 2007/08): 7–43, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30130517>; Krebs, *Narratives and the Making of US National Security*; and Hilde Eliassen Restad, *American Exceptionalism: An Idea that Made a Nation and Remade the World* (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2015).

8 See, for instance, Robert Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations* (Chicago: Phoenix Books, 1953/1964); Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2018); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

9 For the ongoing debate over the scope and nature of the “liberal international order,” see, for example, James Goldgeier, “The Misunderstood Roots of International Order — and Why They Matter Again,” *Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2018): 7–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01636660X.2018.1519339>; Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “Liberal World: The Resilient Order,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 4 (July/August 2018), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-06-14/liberal-world>; Patrick Porter, “A World Imagined: Nostalgia and Liberal Order,” *CATO Institute, Policy Analysis* No. 843, June 5, 2018, <https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/world-imagined-nostalgia-liberal-order>.

10 Jason Gilmore, Penelope Sheets, and Charles Rowling, “Make No Exception, Save One: American Exceptionalism, the American Presidency, and the Age of Obama,” *Communication Monographs* 83, no. 4 (2016): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2016.1182638>.

11 Walter Russell Mead, “The Jacksonian Revolt: American Populism and the Liberal Order,” *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 2 (March/April 2017), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-01-20/jacksonian-revolt>. For a counterargument, see, Elliot Abrams, “Trump the Traditionalist: A Surprisingly Standard Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 4 (July/August 2017), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-06-13/trump-traditionalist>.

12 Media attention has so far been more attuned to this than scholars have. Some journalists laud this development, such as Janan Ganesh, who argues Trump has merely dropped the “pretense” in favor of “interest-driven statecraft.” See, “Donald Trump Drops the Pretense on American Exceptionalism,” *Financial Times*, Nov. 28, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/e292150a-f270-11e8-ae55-d4bf40f9d0d>. Daniel Sargent, on the other hand, laments that Trump has ended American exceptionalism by suggesting it is no better than Russia. See, “RIP American Exceptionalism, 1776–2018,” *Foreign Policy*, July 23, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/23/rip-american-exceptionalism-1776-2018/>. Scholarship on how American exceptionalism, understood as a narrative, influences Trump's foreign policy approach has so far been scarce, but see, Stephen Wertheim, “Trump and American Exceptionalism: Why a Crippled America Is Something New,” *Foreign Affairs*, Jan. 3, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-01-03/trump-and-american-exceptionalism>; Stephen Wertheim “Policy Series: Donald Trump Versus American Exceptionalism: Toward the Sources of Trumpian Conduct,” *H-Diplo/ISSF Policy Series: America and the World – 2017 and Beyond*, Feb. 1, 2017, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5k-trump-exceptionalism>. For an early article, published before the presidential election, see, Anatol Lieven, “Clinton and Trump: Two Faces of American Nationalism,” *Survival* 58, no. 5 (2016): 7–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2016.1231526>. For scholarly work examining Trump's rhetoric on American exceptionalism, see, Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Doron Taussig, “Disruption, Demonization, Deliverance, and Norm Destruction: The Rhetorical Signature of Donald J. Trump,” *Political Science Quarterly* 132, no. 4 (Winter 2017–2018): 619–50; Jason A. Edwards, “Make America Great Again: Donald Trump and Redefining the U.S. Role in the World,” *Communication Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (2018): 176–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2018.1438485>.

13 Pete Vernon, “Lie? Falsehood? What to Call the President's Words,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, May 29, 2018, https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/trump-lie-falsehood.php.

his statements and policies challenging.¹⁴ Yet, as Charlie Laderman and Brandon Simms show, there are important consistencies in Trump’s worldview, such as his critiques of NATO and China, as well as the general critique of U.S. leaders as fools taken advantage of by “wily foreigners.”¹⁵ Another such consistency is the glaring absence of the narrative of American exceptionalism from his worldview. Indeed, Trump’s rate of invoking American exceptionalism in his first year as president was less than half of the overall average across all presidents since World War II.¹⁶

Of course, in arguing that putting “America First” would make America “great again,” one might think that Trump, in fact, is promoting American exceptionalism. The idea of American exceptionalism is certainly connected to “greatness.” Republican voters might think Trump is embracing exceptionalism — understood as American superiority and even a sense of national mission — because the “America First” agenda is, to some degree, reminiscent of the Republican Party’s foreign policy agenda.¹⁷

This article argues against this view. Trump’s grand strategy is different *in kind*, and not just *in degree*, from U.S. postwar foreign policy because it rejects the underlying master narrative of American exceptionalism.¹⁸ The competing narrative Trump has adopted underscores this: The United States is not morally or ideationally superior to other countries — it is *not* an “exemplar.”¹⁹ In fact, according to Trump’s worldview, it is remarkably similar to countries that define themselves by materialist national interests and an ethnic national identity. Specifically, Trump’s embrace of an “America First” foreign policy entails a rejection of the moral mission that has been central to modern U.S. foreign policy: promoting (in theory, anyway) liberal internationalism through democratization, free-market economics, and hu-

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man rights.²⁰ Trump’s master narrative views the world somewhat similarly to realists: as a competitive, anarchic place where it is every state for itself, where alliances are temporary, and only the fittest survive.²¹ In this worldview, making America “great” means making America economically wealthy, militarily powerful, and safeguarding the white, Christian cultural heritage of the United States. In other words, Trump’s America First foreign policy platform is grounded in a master narrative perhaps best thought of as what Walter Russell Mead calls “Jacksonian” nationalism.²²

At the heart of Trump’s rejection of the U.S. post-World War II grand strategy of international leadership, therefore, is a confrontation between two

14 Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly, “President Trump Has Made 10, 796 False or Misleading Claims Over 869 Days,” *Washington Post*, June 10, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/06/10/president-trump-has-made-false-or-misleading-claims-over-days/>.

15 Charlie Laderman and Brendan Simms, *Donald Trump: The Making of a World View*, rev. ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 98–99. See also, Colin Kahl and Hal Brands, “Trump’s Grand Strategic Train Wreck,” *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 31, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/31/trumps-grand-strategic-train-wreck/>.

16 See, Jason Gilmore and Charles M. Rowling, “Partisan Patriotism in the American Presidency: American Exceptionalism, Issue Ownership, and the Age of Trump,” *Mass Communication and Society* 22, no. 3 (2019): 389–416, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2018.1559334>.

17 I thank Reviewer 1 for pointing this out. General skepticism of international institutions and multilateralism is as American as apple pie in both parties, but has been more pronounced in the Republican party since Woodrow Wilson. However, economic protectionism has never before in the post-World War II era been promoted by a Republican president to the extent seen with Trump. See also, Part III of this article.

18 David Corn, “Donald Trump Says He Doesn’t Believe in ‘American Exceptionalism,’” *Mother Jones*, June 7, 2016, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/06/donald-trump-american-exceptionalism/>. For a different view, see, Edwards, “Make America Great Again,” 177.

19 See Part II for a discussion of what “exemplar” means in regard to U.S. foreign policy and American exceptionalism.

20 Donald Trump, “The Inaugural Address.”

21 I am indebted to Melvyn P. Leffler for discussing this with me.

22 See Mead, “The Jacksonian Revolt.” See also, Taesuh Cha, “The Return of Jacksonianism: The International Implications of the Trump Phenomenon,” *Washington Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2016): 83–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2016.1261562>.



master narratives: that of American exceptionalism and Jacksonian nationalism. American exceptionalism is an ideational master narrative. It is a story about an ethnically and religiously diverse nation united in adherence to liberal ideas and institutions both at home and abroad. In contrast, the Trump administration's story of America is *ascriptive*: It is the story of a white, Christian race with materialist interests to pursue abroad.²³ To be clear: In labeling the two narratives ideational and ascriptive (or even materialist), I am not making an ontological distinction between the world of ideas and the world of matter. Rather, I am analyzing two different narratives that stress different ideas. It is, as such, an analysis based in constructivist theory. Furthermore, I am *not* arguing that the exceptionalist narrative has only led to good foreign policy outcomes and that America therefore ought to return to the pre-Trump era. In fact, the sense of moral superiority inherent in the exceptionalist narrative has demonstrably led the United States astray numerous times.²⁴ Rather than endorse one narrative over the other, this article analyzes the current foreign policy debate as a conflict between two master narratives, and contributes to a better understanding of what is at stake at this pivotal moment in American history: the meaning of "America" in the world.²⁵

This article is structured as follows: In section two, I define American exceptionalism and discuss its influence throughout U.S. history. In section three, I examine the political history of America First and Jacksonian nationalism, and compare each to Trump's own version of America First. I argue that Trump's America First platform is closely related to its historical predecessors in the 1940s

and the 1990s, especially its focus on economic and cultural protectionism. However, Trump's America First breaks with the historic focus on non-interventionism as Trump's version is more militaristic and interventionist. In the final section, I conclude by posing two questions: Can the United States simply "snap back" after Trump, and, if not, have we finally arrived at the "end of American exceptionalism"?

II. American Exceptionalism and U.S. Foreign Policy: Superiority, Mission, and Resisting the Laws of History

American exceptionalism is a set of ideas, not a set of observable facts.²⁶ As Richard Hofstadter famously observed, the United States does not have an ideology, rather, it *is* one.²⁷ These ideas define the United States as "an extraordinary nation with a special role to play in human history; not only unique but also superior among nations."²⁸ The belief in American exceptionalism is an "enduring identity narrative" in the United States,²⁹ and sets the parameters for how political leaders can and will narrate the story of "America" and its place in the world.³⁰ It is a narrative with a long pedigree. In the colonial era, British ideas of exceptionalism, which included a religious as well as a racial component, contributed to what would later become American exceptionalism, with specific claims to political exceptionalism made during the founding era.³¹

Today, this narrative defines the United States not as a country like many others, built on a blood-and-soil identity, but rather as an exceptional Enlightenment invention built on liberal ideas and ideals.³² It is a narrative so strong and so pervasive

23 For a discussion of the ascriptive tradition, see, Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); and see also, Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*, rev. ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017).

24 Restad, *American Exceptionalism*.

25 A note on terminology: Any study of national identity in the United States has to deal with the issue of what to call the United States of America. Americans themselves often refer to their country as "America." This terminology is problematic, however, especially to inhabitants of other countries located in the Americas. When writing on American exceptionalism, however, the term "America" has specific meaning. It is an expression of the national tendency to elevate the United States above others (such as those neighboring countries in the Americas). I thank Trevor McCrisken for these insights.

26 See, Hilde Eliassen Restad, "American Exceptionalism," in, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Political Behavior*, ed. Fathali M. Moghaddam (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2017), 24–27. For a contrary view, see, Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).

27 Quoted in, Hans Kohn, *American Nationalism: An Interpretative Essay* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957), 13.

28 Trevor McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam: U.S. Foreign Policy Since 1974* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 1.

29 See, Krebs, *Narratives and the Making of US National Security*, 13–15.

30 Krebs, *Narratives and the Making of US National Security*. See also, Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); Deborah Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1998); and Nadim Khoury, "Plotting Stories After War: Toward a Methodology for Negotiating Identity," *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 2 (2018), 367–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1354066117711743>.

31 See, for instance, Jack P. Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity from 1492 to 1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

32 Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955).

it would be fitting to argue, as Anatol Lieven does, that "American exceptionalism" is just another way of saying American civic nationalism without using the word nationalism.³³ Significantly, historians as well as constructivist and liberal scholars of international relations see this narrative as not only influencing rhetoric, but also having played an important role in influencing U.S. foreign policy throughout U.S. history.³⁴

American exceptionalism, however, is a malleable concept and has been taken to mean different things throughout its history.³⁵ This is especially clear when considering the role race has played in the definitional struggle over the meaning of "America." There are three ideas that contribute to the master narrative of American exceptionalism.³⁶ The first is that the United States is superior to the rest of the world. The second is that, because of this superiority, the United States has a special role to play in world history — it has a moral mission to pursue abroad. The third is that where other great nations and indeed empires have risen to power only to fall, the United States will *not* — it will resist this law of history.

American Exceptionalism: Superiority and Mission

Below, I discuss how superiority and mission have manifested themselves throughout U.S. history. I will show, among other things, that American exceptionalism has been a rather malleable con-

cept, used to advocate for almost opposite foreign policy approaches.

Superiority

"America" has a long tradition of being seen as "superior" by its own people. This idea does not connote mere difference or uniqueness. Rather, the distinction is hierarchical: It classifies the United States as superior in both ideas and institutions and therefore it promotes an idea that America has a mission to fulfill.³⁷ This is different from patriotism,³⁸ as it implies more than just love of country. The belief that America is superior has had a first-order effect on how the United States views itself and its role in the world: Because it is superior, it has a mission to pursue, and in this mission, it shall not fail because its superiority enables the circumventing of the laws of history. The idea of superiority has also influenced the framing of American foreign policy.

U.S. presidents often use exceptionalist rhetoric in their speeches both at home and abroad, setting the country apart from or above its international counterparts.³⁹ This indicates a broad and deep acceptance of the idea of American exceptionalism among the American public.⁴⁰ A typical expression of this broad acceptance can be found in an article by commentators Richard Lowry and Ramesh Ponuru, who write that the United States "is freer, more individualistic, more democratic, and more open and dynamic than any other nation on earth."

33 Lieven, "Clinton and Trump," 11.

34 Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*; Madsen, *American Exceptionalism*; McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam*; Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997); Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1995); Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Restad, *American Exceptionalism*.

35 The Puritans are often credited with an early version of an exceptionalist narrative. See, for instance, Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*; and Sacvan Bercovitch, "The Typology of America's Mission," *American Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1978): 135–55, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2712320>. That is not to say they created a kind of homogeneous, constant national identity seamlessly kept through history. See, Richard M. Gamble, *In Search for the City on a Hill: The Making and Unmaking of an American Myth* (New York: Continuum Books, 2012). The exceptionalist narrative was, however, present throughout the 1800s. When Alexis de Tocqueville observed that, "[t]he position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one," he pointed back to their "strictly Puritanical origin," as the first factor explaining this exceptionalism. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, volume II, chapter IX, "The Example of the Americans Does Not Prove that A Democratic People Can Have No Aptitude and No Taste for Science, Literature, Or Art." Access at, http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/toc_idx.html. See also, Rahul Sharma, *American Civil Religion and the Puritan Antecedents of American Foreign Policy*, PhD Thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science (2019).

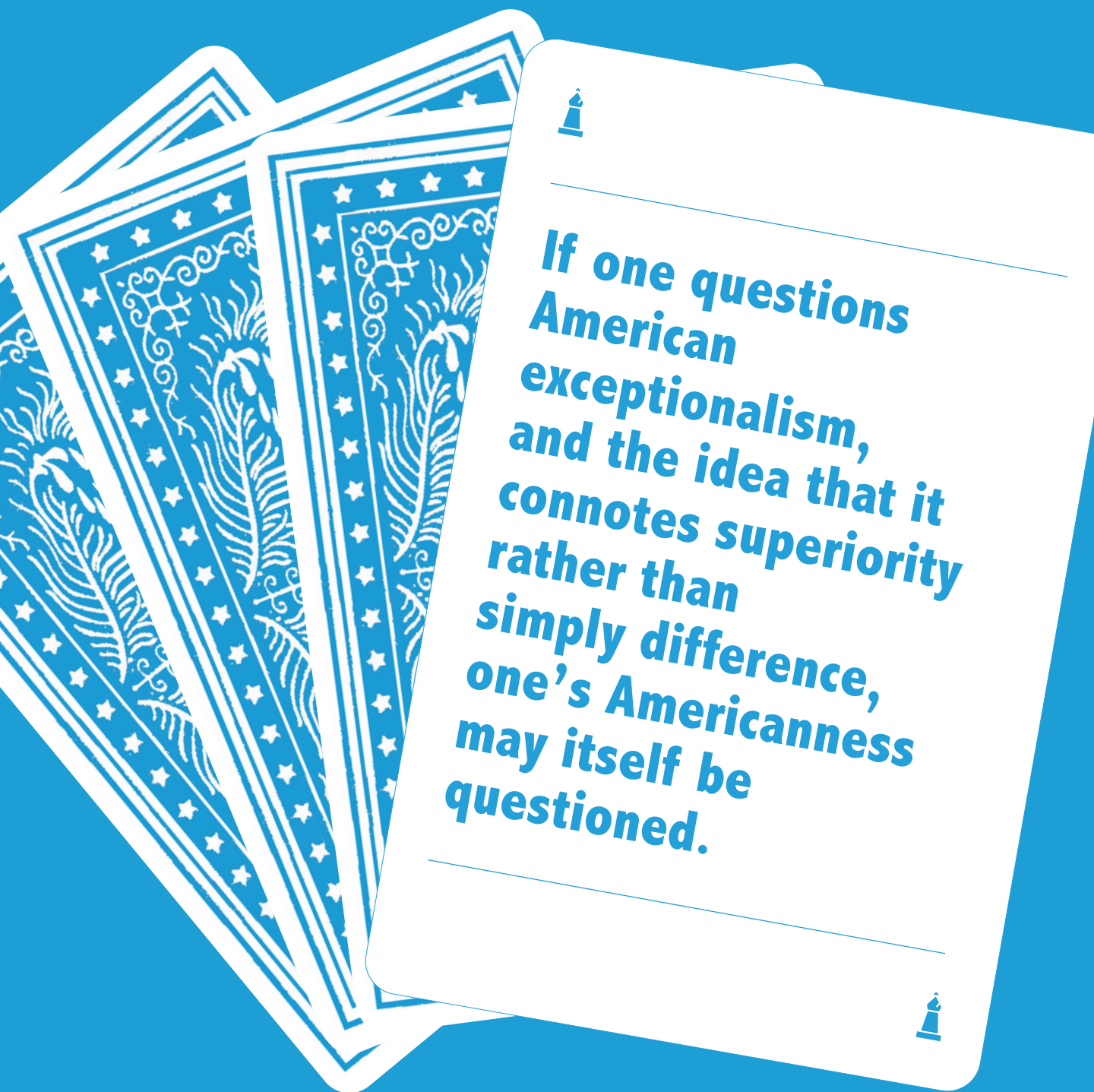
36 This definition builds on McCrisken, "Exceptionalism," in *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy Vol. 2*, 2nd ed., ed. Alexander DeConde et al. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2002), 64–65. I develop this more in detail in, Restad, *American Exceptionalism*.

37 McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam*; Daniel T. Rodgers, "American Exceptionalism Revisited," *Raritan Review* 24, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 21–47; Restad, *American Exceptionalism*.

38 See, Tom W. Smith and Seokho Kim, "National Pride in Comparative Perspective: 1995/96 and 2003/04," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 127–36, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edk007>.

39 Jason A. Edwards, *Navigating the Post-Cold War World: President Clinton's Foreign Policy Rhetoric* (Washington, DC: Lexington Books, 2008); Gilmore and Rowling, "Lighting the Beacon"; Rico Neumann and Kevin Coe, "The Rhetoric in Modern Presidency: A Quantitative Assessment," 11–31, in *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism*.

40 Jason Gilmore, "American Exceptionalism in the American Mind: Presidential Discourse, National Identity, and U.S. Public Opinion," *Communication Studies* 66, no. 3 (2015): 301–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2014.991044>.



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This they attribute to "our Founding and our cultural heritage."⁴¹ This is, of course, not something that one can ascertain objectively. If one tried to measure levels of freedom and dynamism, one might find that the United States did not, in fact, top these rankings.⁴² This is immaterial, however. What matters are not the rankings, but rather the *belief* Lowry and Ponnuru (and most Americans with them) hold. American exceptionalism is the *master narrative* of the United States, not a fact to be measured.

The belief that the United States is superior to the rest of the world because of its ideals and institutions has been powerful, persistent, and pervasive throughout U.S. history. In fact, this self-perception is so well established in U.S. political discourse that American polling firms such as Gallup and the Pew Research Center actually poll Americans on their belief in American exceptionalism. Defined in various manners in such polls, American exceptionalism can be operationalized as a belief that the United States is the "greatest country in the world because of its history and Constitution" or that "American culture is superior to others." In 2010, Gallup reported that a huge majority of Americans (80 percent) agreed with the statement, "The United States has a unique character because of its history and Constitution that sets it apart from other nations as the greatest in the world." The fact that U.S. polling bureaus regularly ask Americans such questions speaks volumes about the pervasive belief in American exceptionalism (and, relatedly, the persistent fear that it is dwindling).⁴³ While the poll numbers vary, the exceptionalist master narrative has held for over two centuries.⁴⁴

If one questions American exceptionalism, and the idea that it connotes *superiority* rather than simply *difference*, one's Americanness may itself be questioned. It means one does not sufficiently believe in the idea of "America," which is inherently suspicious. This became clear amid the harsh

criticism of Obama's answer to a question posed to him in Strasbourg, France in 2009 on whether he believed in American exceptionalism or not. Obama's answer seemed to convey an understanding of American exceptionalism as a relative phenomenon — a narrative, if you will. Contrasting American exceptionalism with narratives found in other nations such as Britain and Greece, Obama's answer — "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism" — was seen as rejecting the idea that American exceptionalism implies moral superiority. It set off a heated debate in the American media,⁴⁵ possibly because reports ignored the rest of Obama's answer. Obama, in the tradition of previous presidents, went on to say that he was enormously proud of his country "and its role and history in the world."⁴⁶

Research on social and national identity indicates why Obama's initial qualifier would upset many Americans. As Jason Gilmore and Charles M. Rowling argue, messages that enhance the "standing of one's own national group" feed citizens' self-esteem and pride "because their own personal identity is tied to the image of that national group."⁴⁷ Messages that counter this source of self-esteem naturally meet with resistance, as Obama's comments did.⁴⁸ Constantly invoking American exceptionalism is therefore not only a proven way that American presidents can bolster their community's feelings of self-esteem, but in fact is a vital part of nation-building in a country made up of many different ethnicities and religions.

Of course, the idea that America is exceptional because of its superior civic ideals rather than its ascriptive characteristics is not something there has been agreement about in American history. If seen as a battle between civic and ethnic nationalism, American exceptionalism has represented both at various times, again testifying to the malleability

41 Ramesh Ponnuru and Rich Lowry, "An Exceptional Debate: The Obama Administration's Assault on American Identity," *National Review*, March 8, 2010, <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2010/03/08/exceptional-debate/>.

42 See, for example, Ian Vásquez and Tania Porčnik, "The Human Freedom Index 2017: A Global Measurement of Personal, Civil, and Economic Freedom," Cato Institute, the Fraser Institute, and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, <https://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/human-freedom-index-files/2017-human-freedom-index-2.pdf>.

43 See, Restad, "Conclusion," in *American Exceptionalism*.

44 Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America*.

45 Monica Crowley, "American Exceptionalism..." *Washington Times*, July 1, 2009, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jul/1/american-exceptionalism/>.

46 Robert Schlesinger, "Obama Has Mentioned 'American Exceptionalism' More than Bush," *U.S. News and World Report*, Jan. 31, 2011, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/robert-schlesinger/2011/01/31/obama-has-mentioned-american-exceptionalism-more-than-bush>.

47 From, Gilmore and Rowling, "Lighting the Beacon," 275. Also see, Henri Tajfel, *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

48 Crowley, "American Exceptionalism"; Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, chap. 1.



of the concept itself.⁴⁹ Originally, American exceptionalism stemmed from British exceptionalism, which entailed the promotion of a white, Protestant civilizational mission against the Catholic colonialism of the Spanish empire, as they competed over territory and influence in the “New World.”⁵⁰ Up until the American Civil War and the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, it was not clear whether a racialized definition of American exceptionalism or a civic kind of nationalism would prevail. While the civic nationalism of the “last, best hope on earth” won the Civil War, what civic nationalism actually meant was still under development. Theodore Roosevelt, for instance, allowed for a kind of melting-pot definition of the nation, but one that only included “races” from Europe, entirely excluding black Americans.⁵¹

Liberal ideals have been an important — yet contested — part of modern, post-Civil War, U.S. nation-building, but they have not been the only ones.⁵² Rogers Smith divides American identity into three equal strands: a “liberal” strand composed of classical liberal rights and liberties; a “democratic republican” strand composed of civic-minded participation by citizens who are motivated by a defense of the common good; and an “ascriptive inegalitarian” strand composed of nativist, xenophobic, and racial hierarchies. The contestation between ascriptive and civic definitions of “America” is why the narrative of American exceptionalism has been useful in the ongoing effort to create a nation out of an ethnically and religiously diverse population.⁵³

The Mission

In addition to being viewed as a “superior” republic, the United States is also on a world historic “mission” according to the narrative of American exceptionalism. What this mission consists of has been the source of constant and fierce debate throughout U.S. history, and has evolved over time.⁵⁴ What is clear is that this belief in a mission has influenced not just the framing, but also the content of U.S. foreign policy. Throughout American history, prominent groups have used exceptionalism to argue for both an interventionist foreign policy (i.e., a “missionary” version of exceptionalism) and a non-interventionist foreign policy (i.e., an “exemplarist” version of exceptionalism), attesting to how ideas of exceptionalism can be used for different — indeed contravening — political purposes.⁵⁵ Proponents of an exemplarist worldview have often defined the United States’ role as “standing apart from the world and serving merely as a model of social and political possibility.”⁵⁶ Creating a “more perfect union” is the meaning of the United States, which is why “meddling in the affairs of other states could cause irreparable harm to the U.S. body politic.”⁵⁷ Summarizing the exemplarist sentiment, H. W. Brands warned, “in attempting to save the world, and probably failing, America could risk losing its democratic soul.”⁵⁸

For a long time, most historians of U.S. foreign policy argued that as American exceptionalism cycled between exemplarism and missionary expressions, U.S. foreign policy was concomitantly isolationist or internationalist.⁵⁹ But this view was

49 The seminal work here is Gerstle’s *American Crucible*.

50 Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America’s Foreign Policy from Its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the 20th Century* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 12.

51 Because of Roosevelt’s understanding of European nations as themselves mixed, and of (white) Americans as a result of this mix, Gerstle did not label Roosevelt’s view “ethnic nationalism,” because Gerstle defined this as a European-style ethnic nationalism viewing a *Volk* as “pure biological entities” as with the Ku Klux Klan. Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 14–43, 44–45.

52 See, Rogers Brubaker, “The Manichean Myth: Rethinking the Distinction Between ‘Civic’ and ‘Ethnic’ Nationalism,” in *Nation and National Identity: The European Experience in Perspective*, ed. Hanspeter Kriesl et al. (Zurich: Ruegger, 1999), 55–73.

53 Smith, *Civic Ideals*; Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 59.

54 For a detailed discussion of this debate in various eras in U.S. history, see, Restad, *American Exceptionalism*. For an overview of the debates at the turn of the century, when the United States is widely seen to have become a world power, see, Christopher McKnight Nichols, *Promise and Peril: America at the Dawn of a Global Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

55 Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, chap. 3.

56 Paul T. McCartney, “Power and Progress: American National Identity, the War of 1898, and the Rise of American Imperialism” *Communication Quarterly*, no. 191 (2006): 401, quoted in, Jason A. Edwards, “Make America Great Again: Donald Trump and Redefining the U.S. Role in the World,” *Communication Quarterly* 66, no. 2, (2018): 178, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2018.1438485>.

57 Edwards, “Make America Great Again,” 178.

58 H. W. Brands, *What America Owes the World: The Struggle for the Soul of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), viii, quoted in, Edwards, “Make America Great Again,” 178.

59 See, Dexter Perkins, *The American Approach to Foreign Policy*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962); Stanley Hoffmann, *Gulliver’s Troubles, Or the Setting of American Foreign Policy* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1968); Frank L. Klingberg, *Cyclical Trends in American Foreign Policy Moods* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983); Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994); Ruggie, “The Past as Prologue?”

highly problematic, as it required categorizing U.S. foreign policy before World War II — or at least up until 1898 — as isolationist.⁶⁰ Viewing early U.S. foreign policy up through the 1800s as an expression of exemplarism required categorizing “manifest destiny” as a form of domestic politics. The manifest destiny of the United States, as journalist John O’Sullivan wrote in 1845, was “to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.”⁶¹ Testifying to the strength of the American self-conception as superior to the Old World, historians did not begin to compare “westward expansion” to European colonialism until the early 20th century.⁶² And yet, much like European great powers, U.S. foreign policy in the 19th century often consisted of wars of aggression and “civilizing” “inferior” races. Indeed, a constant feature of the U.S. debate over expansion and territorial conquest — whether on the continent or across the seas — was marked by the problem of race: who could be part of “America” and whether non-whites could truly become Americans.⁶³ For example, Thomas Jefferson associated Native Americans with the “earliest stages of civilization” and expected them to civilize or perish. This was certainly a “self-serving logic” that “provided the ideological rationale for an expansive republican empire,” as Peter Onuf writes.⁶⁴ Later, Andrew Jackson engineered the forcible removal of Native Americans from their lands south-east of the Mississippi River in order to make way for white settlers. While the tensions leading up to the Civil War slowed down U.S. settlement of the

western part of the continent,⁶⁵ its potential as a civilizing power was finally reached when the United States entered the Spanish-American War in order to, in the words of President William McKinley, “uplift and civilize” the savages languishing in the Spanish empire in Cuba and the Philippines.”⁶⁶ William Jennings Bryan and Theodore Roosevelt made similar arguments for the superiority of the nation, encouraging it to take upon itself the “white man’s burden” of civilizing “backwards” peoples.⁶⁷ The mission in U.S. foreign policy — whether directed at Mexicans, Native Americans, the Spanish Empire, or Prussian militarism — historically mixed elements of ethno-nationalism with Enlightenment ideals of democracy and capitalism, executed with religious zeal. Various presidents as different as Jefferson, Jackson, James Polk, McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson have endeavored to teach the world what to do and how to do it — to execute the “white man’s burden.”⁶⁸

While it is correct to divide the narrative of American exceptionalism into two foreign policy *articulations* — one missionary and one exemplarist — it is wholly inaccurate to argue these two articulations have been reflected in actual U.S. foreign policy history. In fact, while the missionary foreign policy — which is active, international, and sometimes aggressive — appears throughout U.S. history, there is very little evidence of an exemplarist foreign policy being employed. This is a common misconception, and, one might add, a consequence of having bought into the manifest destiny narrative of U.S. expansion in the 19th century, which

60 Some scholars might ask why use the term at all in this article. I agree that it is an unfortunate term that serves to confuse rather than enlighten debates over U.S. foreign policy. Because it is still — despite much scholarly effort — ubiquitous in popular and scholarly works on U.S. foreign policy, and has been used specifically about Trump, however, I use it in this article. Substituting it for other terms like “nationalism” does not quite work, since nationalism is an ideology and isolationism is a (mythical) foreign policy tradition. I thank Reviewer 1 for asking me to address this. Michael Hunt, “Isolationism: Behind the Myth, a Usable Past,” *UNC Press Blog*, June 29, 2011, <https://uncpressblog.com/2011/06/29/michael-hunt-isolationism-behind-the-myth-a-usable-past/>. But see also, Nichols, *Promise and Peril*.

61 Albert Katz Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny. A Study in Nationalist Expansionism in American History*, 6th ed. (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1935), 122.

62 William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland, Ohio: World Pub. Co., 1959); Alexander DeConde, *Entangling Alliance: Politics and Diplomacy Under George Washington* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1958). For more recent works, see, Peter Onuf and Nicholas G. Onuf, *Federal Union, Modern World: The Law of Nations in an Age of Revolutions, 1776-1814* (Indianapolis, IN: Madison House, 1993); McDougall, *Promised land, Crusader State*; Manfred Jonas, “Isolationism,” in *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*, Vol. II, 2nd ed., ed. Alexander DeConde et al. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2002).

63 See, for example, Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); and, Matthew Karp, *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

64 Peter S. Onuf, *Jefferson’s Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 13–14, also chap. 1.

65 Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: American Exceptionalism and Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Ernest N. Paolino, *The Foundations of the American Empire: William Henry Seward and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973); William Earl Weeks, *John Quincy Adams and American Global Empire* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1992); and William Earl Weeks, *Building the Continental Empire: American Expansion from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996).

66 Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People* (New York: F. S. Crofts and Co., 1950), 520, cited in, Edward McNall Burns, *America’s Idea of Mission: Concepts of National Purpose and Destiny* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1957), 8.

67 “The White Man’s Burden” was a poem written by Rudyard Kipling originally published in the popular magazine *McClure’s* in 1899, with the subtitle “The United States and the Philippine Islands.”

68 See, Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny*, esp. chaps. 1, 2, and 4.

argues that the United States was simply taking control of territory God always meant for them.⁶⁹ Arguing that the United States was exemplarist during its first century because it was “geographically isolated,”⁷⁰ when it competed with European imperial powers for territory, ethnically cleansed Native Americans, and indeed fought a war of aggression against Mexico, renders the term “isolationist” meaningless.⁷¹

In fact, as revisionist historians of the Wisconsin School, led by William Appleman Williams, began arguing in the mid-20th century, rather than a cyclical U.S. foreign policy (where U.S. foreign policy was seen as “cycling” between internationalism and isolationism), the United States has *always* been interventionist.⁷² The territories not already owned by the United States in 1783 were not some mythical region waiting to be “civilized” by the United States. Rather, “westward expansion” was itself a settler colonial project.⁷³ Indeed, how could a supposedly isolationist country go from 13 colonies to controlling an entire continent *without* an interventionist foreign policy? Unfortunately, the isolationist thesis is still argued today.⁷⁴

As the United States grew in size and diversity, its impending great power status led to fierce debates over the white, Christian emphasis of its foreign policy mission. The racial aspect of “America” was toned down. Following World War II, U.S. presidents focused on the liberal ideas of exceptionalism, rather than the civilizational aspect of the “white man’s burden,” as the source of America’s uniqueness and the reason for its mission in the world. Thus, American exceptionalism separated out its earlier racial components. Obama’s understanding of American exceptionalism can be seen as the culmination of this evolving civic version of the concept: “Obama offered an inclusive vision of patriotism,” writes Greg Gardin, “using

his own success to celebrate the country’s meritocracy and as proof that racial division could be overcome through the gradual extension of liberal political equality.”⁷⁵ As Obama said in 2007 as a presidential candidate, “Our exceptionalism must be based on our Constitution, our principles, our values, and our ideals.”⁷⁶ It is with this modern, post-World War II master narrative that Trump has broken.

Resisting the Laws of History: Exceptionalism and Modern Foreign Policy from 1945 to 2015

With each historical era, the United States has proven itself resistant to the laws of history. Rather than rise and fall, it has only risen — vanquishing powerful enemies along the way.⁷⁷ After conquering an entire continent, the United States went about conquering the seas, and ultimately defeated two iterations of the worst the Old World had to offer: German militarism and fascism. Significantly, upon defining itself in contravention to Soviet Communism, the promotion of American exceptionalism became an important tool for U.S. presidents, especially in the era of what Jeffrey Tulis has labeled the “rhetorical presidency.”⁷⁸ Against these ideologies American exceptionalism, understood as the adherence to liberal ideals, flourished. In foreign policy, the narrative of American exceptionalism has been used by presidents to communicate the purpose of U.S. foreign policy and therein garner support for their preferred policies, because what “America” means conditions what it can and should do in the world. In fact, argue Gilmore and Rowling, “The concept of American exceptionalism has become one of the most common features in U.S. political discourse.”⁷⁹

The assumption that the United States has a “uniquely moral national mission has shaped de-

69 Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*.

70 Charles A. Kupchan, “The Clash of Exceptionalisms: A New Fight Over an Old Idea,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (March/April 2018), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2018-02-13/clash-exceptionalisms>.

71 Bear F. Braumoeller, “The Myth of American Isolationism,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 6, no. 4 (October 2010): 349–71, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2010.00117.x>; Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, chap. 3.

72 Williams, *The Tragedy of American Foreign Policy*; DeConde, *Entangling Alliance*.

73 In addition to the classic revisionist historians, see also, Richard W. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965); Paolino, *The Foundations of the American Empire*; Hietala, *Manifest Design*.

74 See, for example, Charles Kupchan, who argues that the only exception to the isolationism of the 1800s was 1898, when the United States “did experiment” with “broader imperialism,” which then supposedly caused an isolationist backlash. Kupchan, “The Clash of Exceptionalisms.”

75 Greg Grandin, “The Strange Career of American Exceptionalism,” *The Nation*, Dec. 6, 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/the-strange-career-of-american-exceptionalism/>.

76 Roger Cohen, “Obama’s American Idea,” *New York Times*, Dec. 10, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/10/opinion/10cohen.html>.

77 Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, 6.

78 Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Rob P. Saldin, “William McKinley and the Rhetorical Presidency,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (March 2011): 119–34, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2010.03833.x>.

79 Gilmore and Rowling, “Lighting the Beacon,” 273.



bates over foreign affairs since the nation’s founding.”⁸⁰ The narratives American presidents communicate about foreign policy exist on different levels: Any discrete national security narrative — such as that of “primacy” in the 1990s or the “Global War on Terror” in the 2000s — must operate within and adhere to the discursive landscape of the master narrative of exceptionalism.⁸¹ Over the years, presidents and political parties have disagreed on discrete national security narratives but not on the exceptionalist master narrative that has underpinned U.S. foreign policy since 1945, and which builds on a story about an exceptional America that dates to before the founding. Until Trump became president, this story constrained not only how U.S. presidential candidates and presidents framed the discourse on the United States and its role in the world, but policies themselves.

All U.S. presidents since Franklin D. Roosevelt have taken pains to narrate foreign policy as a moral

mission based in American exceptionalism, understood as an adherence to “superior” liberal ideals.⁸² Since then, the United States has presented itself as a beacon to the world, standing for “a vibrant, forward-looking Americanism that presented itself as the highest expression of liberal universalism.”⁸³ Many studies show how and why the idea of American exceptionalism has come to be so prominent in American politics, whether from the field of communications,⁸⁴ presidential studies,⁸⁵ or, more recently, international relations.⁸⁶ By promoting the idea of American exceptionalism, U.S. presidents have justified why the United States should play such an active role in international politics: because the world needs this exceptional nation and its benevolent influence. From this perspective, it was quite natural to conclude that what was right for America was right for the world.

An eloquent example of how presidents have framed U.S. foreign policy as a moral mission

80 Krebs, *Narratives and the Making of US National Security*, 14.

81 Krebs, *Narratives and the Making of US National Security*.

82 Neumann and Coe, “The Rhetoric in Modern Presidency,” 18.

83 Gardin, “The Strange Career of American Exceptionalism.”

84 Edwards, *Navigating the Post-Cold War World*; Edwards and Weiss, *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism*; Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*; Megan D. McFarlane, “Visualizing the Rhetorical Presidency: Barack Obama in the Situation Room,” *Visual Communication Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (2016): 3–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15551393.2015.1105105>; Gilmore and Rowling, “Lighting the Beacon.”

85 James W. Ceaser, Glen E. Thurow, Jeffrey K. Tulis, and Joseph M. Bessette, “The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1981): 158–71; Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*; Saldin, “William McKinley and the Rhetorical Presidency.”

86 McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*; Nau, *At Home Abroad*; Legro, *Rethinking the World*; Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*; Restad, *American Exceptionalism*.



comes from John F. Kennedy, whose rhetoric frequently played on American exceptionalism. Indeed, as president-elect he gave a speech simply referred to as the “city upon a hill” speech:

I have been guided by the standard John Winthrop set before his shipmates on the flagship *Arbella* three hundred and thirty-one years ago, as they, too, faced the task of building a new government on a perilous frontier. “We must always consider,” he said, “that we shall be as a city upon a hill — the eyes of all people are upon us.” Today the eyes of all people are truly upon us — and our governments, in every branch, at every level, national, state and local, must be as a city upon a hill — constructed and inhabited by men aware of their great trust and their great responsibilities.⁸⁷

Using American exceptionalism to frame U.S. grand strategy has not been a partisan phenomenon, even though the Republican Party associates itself more with overt statements of patriotic sentiment.⁸⁸ In fact, Gilmore and Rowling find that Democratic presidents have been more fervent in their invocation of American exceptionalism in global contexts (44 percent of speeches given by Democrats versus 17 percent given by Republicans).⁸⁹

This is not to say that presidents have agreed on *how* the United States should best advance its moral mission, but there has been a post-World War II consensus on *whether* the United States is so obligated. There has also been bipartisan agreement on the reason why — namely that the United States has a special role to play in world history.⁹⁰ As scholars have shown, U.S. presidents since 1945 have repeatedly turned to the reliable rhetorical strategy of emphasizing American exceptionalism to “reinforce mythic notions of America as the un-

questioned leader of a stable world order.”⁹¹ Indeed, the superiority of the United States and the special role it is supposed to play as a leader of other nations has been ubiquitous in modern presidential rhetoric. A quantitative content analysis of State of the Union addresses from 1934 to 2008 found only *three* mentions of other countries as worthy of serving as examples for the United States to follow.⁹² The United States has always been the shining city on the hill, as no other country can be.

Post-Cold War Triumphalism

The influence of American exceptionalism on the framing and content of U.S. foreign policy took on a new force after the Cold War ended.⁹³ Indeed, Americans interpreted the Cold War’s end as a re-affirmation of American exceptionalism: “By the grace of *God*,” President George H. W. Bush said in his State of the Union speech in 1992, “we have *won* the Cold War.”⁹⁴ Whatever the questions had been — what were the best political systems, economic theories, or civic ideals? — the only answer left in international politics was the United States and its example to the world. The end of ideological history was here, comfortably parked in an oversized American driveway.⁹⁵ This exceptionalist interpretation of why the Cold War had ended set the stage for a triumphalist decade, or a “holiday from history,” as George Will called it.⁹⁶ In arguing for why the United States should continue its deep involvement in world affairs even without a clear enemy, President Bill Clinton and his secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, looked inward to the peculiar genius of the American body politic for the answer. The United States was “the indispensable nation,” Clinton stated in 1996 while defending the U.S. intervention in Bosnia.⁹⁷ That became the Clinton administration’s go-to phrase for conveying American exceptionalism in an age of primacy. In making the case for a

87 “The City Upon a Hill Speech,” Address of President-Elect John F. Kennedy Delivered to a Joint Convention of the General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, The State House, Boston, Jan. 9, 1961, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/OYhUZE2Qo0-ogdV7ok900A.aspx>.

88 Neumann and Coe, “The Rhetoric in Modern Presidency,” 18.

89 Gilmore and Rowling, “Lighting the Beacon,” 288.

90 Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, 14.

91 Neumann and Coe, “The Rhetoric in Modern Presidency,” 26.

92 Neumann and Coe, “The Rhetoric in Modern Presidency,” 23.

93 See, for example, Heather Hulbert, “More Diplomacy, Less Intervention, But for What? Making Sense of the Grand Strategy Debate,” *Lawfare*, June 7, 2019, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/more-diplomacy-less-intervention-what-making-sense-grand-strategy-debate>.

94 George H.W. Bush, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” Jan. 28, 1992, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-0>, emphasis mine.

95 Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *National Interest*, no. 16 (Summer 1989): 3–18, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184>.

96 George F. Will, “The End of Our Holiday from History,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 12, 2001, <https://wapo.st/2BkTVIb>.

97 Uri Friedman, “Democratic Platform Swaps ‘American Exceptionalism’ for ‘Indispensable Nation,’” Sept. 4, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/04/democratic-platform-swaps-american-exceptionalism-for-indispensable-nation/>.

possible strike against Saddam Hussein in 1998 on “The Today Show” Albright said,

[I]f we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us. I know that the American men and women in uniform are always prepared to sacrifice for freedom, democracy and the American way of life.⁹⁸

And yet, Republicans viewed Clinton’s vision as too timid. In 2000, future George W. Bush speechwriter Marc Thiessen wrote in the *Weekly Standard* that there were two competing visions of internationalism in the 21st century: the “‘global multilateralism’ of the Clinton-Gore Democrats” versus the “‘American exceptionalism’ of the Reagan-Bush Republicans.”⁹⁹ Nevertheless, this disagreement belied a fundamental foreign policy *agreement*: All post-Cold War presidents have promoted a strategy of primacy, which essentially argued that the United States should seek world hegemony because of its exceptional mission.¹⁰⁰ Although they all used the rhetoric of American exceptionalism, this was not merely a discursive tactic. There was strong bipartisan belief in American exceptionalism and America’s mission: to convince the rest of the world to join in the “end of history” with the one nation that had already reached history’s destination. The Republican and Democratic views on the international order in the 1990s — and America’s role in it — were more similar than perhaps many recognized at the time. Indeed, Hans Morgenthau’s description of Wilsonian liberals at the beginning of the 20th century applies equally to neoconservatives and liberal internationalists at its end — they all believed that a new world order of peace would eventually “end” history once all countries adopted liberal democracy.¹⁰¹

After 9/11, President George W. Bush’s communication of a clear, black-and-white story of good versus evil was a natural extension of the triumphalism of the 1990s and fit perfectly within the

master narrative of American exceptionalism. This became what Krebs calls “the national security narrative” of the post-9/11 era — the “Global War on Terror.”¹⁰² This narrative organized how

The influence of American exceptionalism on the framing and content of U.S. foreign policy took on a new force after the Cold War ended. Indeed, Americans interpreted the Cold War’s end as a reaffirmation of American exceptionalism.

the administration promoted its policies, how the media framed these policies, and how the American public thought about the new “war” they were now in.¹⁰³ As Krebs writes, “The War on Terror was more than a slogan: it was shorthand for a post-9/11 narrative that not only placed that day’s horrific events in a meaningful context, but also set the terms of national security debate in the United States for the next decade.”¹⁰⁴ This narrative would not have resonated or received such widespread bipartisan acceptance from the American public had it not overlapped with the master narrative of U.S. foreign policy: that the United States is an exceptional nation with moral intentions, bound to make the world a better place. The Bush administration’s story of what had happened and why cast the United States as the innocent victim, attacked out of the blue not for its policies in the Middle East, but for its very exceptional nature: “Why do they hate us? They hate us because of what they see in this very Chamber,” Bush told Congress on Sept. 20,

98 Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, “Interview on NBC-TV ‘The Today Show’ with Matt Lauer, Columbus, Ohio,” U.S. Department of State, Feb. 19, 1998, <https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/1998/980219a.html>.

99 Quoted in, Uri Friedman, “American Exceptionalism: A Short History,” *Foreign Policy*, June 18, 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/06/18/american_exceptionalism.

100 Hal Brands, “Choosing Primacy: U.S. Strategy and Global Order at the Dawn of the Post-Cold War Era,” *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 2 (February 2018): 8–33, <http://hdl.handle.net/2152/63941>; Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, chap. 7.

101 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), cited in, Lloyd E. Ambrosius, *Wilsonianism: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy in American Foreign Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 16.

102 Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, 13.

103 Goddard and Krebs, “Rhetoric, Legitimation, and Grand Strategy.”

104 Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, 3.



2001. "They hate our freedoms, our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other."¹⁰⁵ In his second inaugural, Bush essentially argued that fighting the "war on terror" was a continuation of the eternal American mission:

From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth. Across the generations we have proclaimed the imperative of self-government, because no one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave. *Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation.*¹⁰⁶

Returning to the question of whether Obama rejected American exceptionalism, as his critics charged, this article builds on the theoretical assumption that there is a meaningful and important distinction between a nation's master narrative and its various foreign policies. One can have a variety of grand strategies all based in the exceptionalist master narrative, but one must distinguish, as Krebs does, between master narratives and discrete national security narratives. One could argue about whether Obama's counter-terrorism policies diverged more in rhetoric than in practice from his predecessor, or about whether Obama actually moved in a non-interventionist direction. However, his discrete national security narrative of modest retrenchment did not reject the master narrative of American exceptionalism. Indeed, at Strasbourg, Obama said,

If you think about the site of this summit [Strasbourg] and what it means, I don't think America should be embarrassed to see evidence of the sacrifices of our troops, the enormous amount of resources that were put into Europe postwar, and our leadership

in crafting an alliance that ultimately led to the unification of Europe. We should take great pride in that... . And I think that we have a core set of values that are enshrined in our Constitution, in our body of law, in our democratic practices, in our belief in free speech and equality that, though imperfect, *are exceptional.*¹⁰⁷

Lest one think this was pandering to the press, this was a belief Obama had long held. As he said in his speech to the Democratic national convention in 2004,

I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that, *in no other country on earth, is my story even possible.*¹⁰⁸

III. Donald Trump, American Exceptionalism, and America First

Prior to Trump winning the Republican presidential nomination, the Republican Party promoted a grand strategy of leading the liberal international order, grounded in the master narrative of American exceptionalism. This had been the case since Dwight D. Eisenhower won the foreign policy battle inside the Republican Party in 1952, defeating non-interventionist proponent Robert Taft. With Eisenhower, the GOP embraced the view "that America had a moral obligation as well as a national interest in transforming the victory of World War II into a lasting global peace by building strong alliances and expanding military readiness around the world to counter the Communist threat."¹⁰⁹ It was, in David Farber's words, the "Willkie-Dewey-Eisenhower — and then Goldwater-Reagan-Bush-Bush — wing of the Republican Party" that won out in the GOP in the post-World War II era.¹¹⁰

The American exceptionalist narrative constitut-

105 "President George W. Bush Addressed a Joint Session of Congress on the Subject of the War on Terrorism," History, Art, and Archives of the United States House of Representatives, Sept. 20, 2001, <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/2000-/President-George-W-Bush-addressed-a-Joint-Session-of-Congress-on-the-subject-of-the-war-on-terrorism/>.

106 "President George W. Bush's Second Inaugural Address," Jan. 20, 2005, emphasis added, quoted in, Daniel W. Drezner, "The Realist Tradition in American Public Opinion," *Perspectives on Politics* 6, no. 1 (March 2008): 53, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592708080067>.

107 Quoted in, Schlesinger, "Obama Has Mentioned 'American Exceptionalism' More than Bush." See, for example, Trevor McCrisken, "Obama's Drone War," *Survival* 55, no. 2 (2013): 97–122, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2013.784469>.

108 "Barack Obama's Remarks to the Democratic National Convention," *New York Times*, July 27, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/27/politics/campaign/barack-obamas-remarks-to-the-democratic-national.html>, emphasis mine.

109 William I. Hitchcock, "How the GOP Embraced the World — and then Turned Away," *Politico Magazine*, July 13, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/07/13/gop-isolationism-trump-eisenhower-219003>; David Farber, "America First and International Trade Policy in the Cold War Era," in "America First: The Past and Future of an Idea," ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and William Hitchcock, *Passport* (September 2018): 39–41, <https://shafr.org/sites/default/files/passport-09-2018-america-first-essays.pdf>.

110 Farber, "America First and International Trade Policy in the Cold War Era," 40.

ed the foundation of U.S. foreign policy debate in both political parties, influencing their views on foreign policy and constraining presidential candidates’ rhetorical choices.¹¹¹ The 2012 presidential campaign of Mitt Romney arguably built its foreign policy platform on this very idea.¹¹² That same year, the Republican Party included the concept in its party platform, stating that American exceptionalism is “the conviction that our country holds a unique place in human history.”¹¹³ In 2016, all Republican presidential candidates save one took pains to use exceptionalist rhetoric.¹¹⁴

In April 2015, two months before he announced his candidacy for president, Trump broke with the Republican Party and stated that he did “not like” the term American exceptionalism.¹¹⁵ He ironically said this at an event called “Celebrating the American Dream,” hosted in Houston by the Texas Patriots PAC. At the event, Trump was asked to define American exceptionalism, whether it still existed, and what should be done to help grow it. Trump answered,

Look, if I’m a Russian, or I’m a German, or I’m a person we do business with, why, you know, I don’t think it’s a very nice term. We’re exceptional; you’re not. First of all, Germany is eating our lunch. So they say, ‘Why are you exceptional. We’re doing a lot better than you.’¹¹⁶

Trump stated that those who refer to American exceptionalism were “insulting the world” and offending people in other countries, such as Russia, China, Germany, and Japan. Contravening common talking points for any presidential candidate regardless of party, Trump said, rather, that it is

“not a nice term,” showing unusual foreign policy flair. He did suggest that were he to become president, he would make the United States exceptional, but even then Trump said he would not use the term because he would not want to “rub it in.”¹¹⁷

But Trump has not only rejected American exceptionalism in his rhetoric — that is, when he talks about it at all — he has also rejected it in his policies.¹¹⁸ His America First platform shows that he rejects American exceptionalism on two fronts: He does not view the United States as morally superior to other countries and, therefore, he does not view the United States as having a mission to pursue abroad. Trump’s definition of American “greatness” is ascriptive and material, rather than ideational and aspirational.

In this section, I examine Trump’s views on American exceptionalism along with his grand strategy in order to show how Trump rejects both the American exceptionalism master narrative and its policy implications. In so doing, I argue that Trump relies on a competing master narrative, Jacksonian nationalism. Trump’s grounding in Jacksonian nationalism leads him to embrace parts of the traditional America First platform, which in its two previous iterations has promoted ethnic nationalism and economic protectionism. However, Trump rejects non-interventionism, opting instead for unilateral militarism abroad. Here, Trump is more in line with original Jacksonianism than with America First.

America First in U.S. History

What does “America First” mean? Is it a concept, a slogan, or a foreign policy agenda? Or perhaps just a refreshingly honest brand of realism?¹¹⁹

111 I would like to thank Reviewer 1 for pointing this out.

112 See, Mitt Romney, *No Apology: The Case for American Greatness* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2010); Ashley Parker, “Romney Makes His Pitch to Social Conservatives and Attacks Obama,” *New York Times*, March 31, 2012, <https://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/31/romney-makes-his-pitch-to-social-conservatives-and-attacks-obama/>.

113 “2012 Republican Party Platform,” Aug. 27, 2012, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/2012-republican-party-platform#american>.

114 For more on this, and how Trump diverges, see, Gilmore and Rowling, “Partisan Patriotism in the American Presidency.”

115 Corn, “Donald Trump Says He Doesn’t Believe in ‘American Exceptionalism.’”

116 Corn, “Donald Trump Says He Doesn’t Believe in ‘American Exceptionalism.’”

117 Corn, “Donald Trump Says He Doesn’t Believe in ‘American Exceptionalism.’”

118 According to Stewart M. Patrick, Trump “has undermined Western solidarity with repeated assaults on NATO and the G-7 and repudiation of the international agreement limiting Iran’s nuclear weapons program. He has threatened to leave the World Trade Organization and blocked judicial appointments to its appellate body. He has repudiated the Trans-Pacific Partnership, forced the renegotiation of NAFTA into a more closed deal, slapped aluminum and steel tariffs on U.S. allies on dubious national security grounds, and launched an all-out trade war with China. . . . Most disconcerting, the president himself has embraced a rogues’ gallery of authoritarian thugs, from Kim Jong Un to Xi Jinping, Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Rodrigo Duterte.” In other words, by going much further than previous presidents in his critiques of NATO (not simply stating that allies must raise their defense budgets, but embracing NATO’s main adversary — Putin’s Russia — while aggressively attacking NATO allies such as Germany) and by embracing authoritarian leaders instead of liberal democratic allies, Trump has rejected the values underpinning the liberal world order. See, Patrick, “The Liberal World Order Is Dying. What Comes Next?” *World Politics Review*, Jan. 15, 2019, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/27192/the-liberal-world-order-is-dying-what-comes-next>.

119 Thanks to my colleague Chris White for this phrase.



“America First” is in fact several things. It was most famously the name of an organization founded in 1940 in order to lobby against U.S. intervention in World War II. As historian Melvyn P. Leffler writes, “For me, America First was associated with the insularity, isolationism, unilateralism, nativism, anti-Semitism, and appeasement policies that President Franklin D. Roosevelt struggled to overcome in 1940 and 1941.”¹²⁰ It was also a slogan used by Pat Buchanan in the 1990s to argue against free trade, immigration, military alliances, and interventions.¹²¹ Today, it is the shorthand for Trump’s foreign policy platform. Let us examine each in turn, their connections, and the master narrative on which they all rely.

students at Yale at the time, founded the “Committee to Defend America First.” Its establishment in 1940 was “in direct opposition to progressive journalist William Allen White’s Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies.”¹²³ It grew quickly from a group started by anti-war students to a large movement with hundreds of chapters and almost a million members. Some notable members were Walt Disney, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Gore Vidal. The committee would come to be associated with fascists and anti-Semites, and most famously, Charles Lindbergh. Lindbergh argued in 1940, during the blitzkrieg in Europe, that the United States should not interfere because “the white race” was not under threat.¹²⁴ Lindbergh joined America First

in April 1941, drawing big crowds at its rallies. Despite the varied membership and commendable aim of avoiding yet another war, the committee’s main historical legacy has been that of a disgraced organization that was on the wrong side of history both in terms of advocating against intervention

With the attack on Pearl Harbor and eventual Allied victory in World War II, “America First” became synonymous with having been on the wrong side of history.

America First Before World War II

The phrase “America First” is most strongly associated with its use during World War II. According to Susan Dunn, America First was the name of the “isolationist, defeatist, anti-Semitic national organization that urged the United States to appease Adolf Hitler.”¹²² This summary is somewhat unfair to the organization’s varied membership. The interwar America First was composed of all kinds of people who were skeptical of America entering into another European war. They included future president Gerald Ford, future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stewart Potter, and Sargent Shriver, who would go on to lead the U.S. Peace Corps. Ford and Potter,

in World War II and in terms of anti-Semitism.

The phrase “America First” predates 1940, however. It was a Republican campaign slogan in the 1880s.¹²⁵ As Christopher McKnight Nichols writes, “the cry of America First emerged in the nineteenth century’s era of rapid industrialization, modernization, and urbanization,” and its foreign policy agenda was “non-entanglement, nonintervention, neutrality, and unilateralism.”¹²⁶ It was the latest discussion in a historic debate on why, how much, and in what ways the United States should be involved outside its borders.¹²⁷

The slogan did not quite catch on until Wilson popularized it in a speech in 1915, however, declaring, “Our whole duty for the present, at any rate,

120 Leffler, “America First: Introduction,” in “America First: The Past and Future of an Idea,” ed. Leffler and Hitchcock, 33.

121 See, Nicole Hemmer, “America First, a Second Time,” in “America First: The Past and Future of an Idea,” ed. Leffler and Hitchcock, 47.

122 Susan Dunn, “Trump’s ‘America First’ Has Ugly Echoes from American History,” *CNN*, April 28, 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/04/27/opinions/trump-america-first-ugly-echoes-dunn/>.

123 Christopher Nichols, “America First, American Isolationism, and the Coming of World War II,” in “America First: The Past and Future of an Idea,” ed. Leffler and Hitchcock, 35.

124 Sarah Churchwell, *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 258.

125 Sean Illing, “How ‘America First’ Ruined the ‘American Dream,’” *Vox*, Oct. 22, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/10/22/17940964/america-first-trump-sarah-churchwell-american-dream>.

126 Nichols, “America First, American Isolationism, and the Coming of World War II,” 35.

127 Nichols, *Promise and Peril*, chap. 1. See also, Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, chap. 3.

is summed up in the motto: America First.”¹²⁸ Although he was arguing for U.S. *neutrality* in the Great War, not *isolationism*, the phrase nonetheless became the motto of those who wanted the United States to stay out of European politics and indeed stay isolated from it. Wilson’s goal was to keep a diverse nation with people whose heritage stemmed from all over the world firmly pro-American. This topic would become tense as the patriotism of “hyphenated” Americans of Irish, German, and Italian descent became increasingly questioned. Indeed, at this time, the U.S. Bureau of Education was mounting an America First campaign in order to promote the assimilation of immigrants. The purpose was to encourage immigrants to put America first, before their old countries, all the while signaling that immigrants did not need to reject their culture, language, or history of origin.¹²⁹

After Wilson, the motto caught on. As presidential candidates in 1916, both Wilson and Charles Evans Hughes used America First as part of their election slogans.¹³⁰ After the debate over the League of Nations and the future role of the United States in the world, Warren G. Harding, the Republican presidential nominee of 1920, similarly thought it useful to employ America First as part of his campaign:

Call it the selfishness of nationality if you will, I think it an inspiration to patriotic devotion — To safeguard America first, to stabilize America first, to prosper America first, to think of America first, to exalt America first, to live for and revere America first.¹³¹

The second iteration of the Ku Klux Klan, which reasserted itself in the early 20th century, taking aim at Catholics and Jews in addition to African-Americans, also used “America First” as a motto.¹³² In evidence submitted to Congress, at a hearing on the activities on the Klan in 1921, the Klan’s “Imperial Proclamation” was entered into

the record. Here, it said: “[The Klan] stands for America first – first in thought, first in affections, and first in the galaxy of nations.”¹³³

With the attack on Pearl Harbor and eventual Allied victory in World War II, “America First” became synonymous with having been on the wrong side of history. The disbandment of the Committee to Defend America First four days after Pearl Harbor conceded the point.

The 1990s: Pat Buchanan’s Revival of “America First”

When Pat Buchanan resurrected the motto “America First” in the 1990s, the *New York Times* labeled his agenda “fearful isolationism, nativism and protectionism.”¹³⁴ His version of America First was focused on the economy and culture. In the post-Cold War era, this meant making “America first again in manufacturing,” including proposing deep tax cuts in order to prevent U.S. industries from moving abroad.¹³⁵ Buchanan’s economic platform was nationalist and protectionist, as was his cultural platform: He wanted to keep the United States a white, Christian country. Arguing against the effects of globalization, Buchanan said that “our Western heritage is going to be handed down to future generations, not dumped onto some landfill called multiculturalism.” He argued for “a new patriotism, where Americans begin to put the needs of Americans first.”¹³⁶

This was “a new nationalism” meant to divide and conquer.¹³⁷ Campaigning in Georgia in 1992, Buchanan argued that the Voting Rights Act was “an act of regional discrimination against the South,” and told unemployed (presumably white) Georgians that, “anti-discrimination laws caused their jobs to be given to blacks.”¹³⁸ In his famous “culture war” speech at the 1992 Republican National Convention, Buchanan said, “There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is

128 Churchwell, *Behold, America*, 43.

129 Churchwell, *Behold, America*, 45.

130 Churchwell, *Behold, America*, 48.

131 Quoted in, Churchwell, *Behold, America*, 84. See also, Laderman and Simms, *Donald Trump: The Making of a World View*, 10–11.

132 Churchwell, *Behold, America*, 91.

133 “The Ku-Klux Klan,” Committee on Rules, House of Representatives, Oct. 11, 1921, 120, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hj1i8v>. See also, Churchwell, *Behold, America*, 288–89.

134 “Bush, Buchanan, and No One at All,” *New York Times*, March 4, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/04/opinion/bush-buchanan-and-no-one-at-all.html>

135 “Pat Buchanan in 1992: Make America First Again,” *Face the Nation* (1992), available on YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBm7SZ_WjYY. The appearance on *Face the Nation* was prior to the New Hampshire primary.

136 Jeff Greenfield, “Trump Is Pat Buchanan with Better Timing,” *Politico Magazine* (September/October 2016), <https://politi.co/2S7NFx1>.

137 Greenfield, “Trump Is Pat Buchanan with Better Timing.”

138 Greenfield, “Trump Is Pat Buchanan with Better Timing.”



a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself.” He labeled Bill Clinton’s agenda “radical feminism,” and accused the Democratic Party of not respecting the “Judeo-Christian values” the country was founded upon.¹³⁹ His speech ended by recounting his visit to the Army compound in south Los Angeles, from which law enforcement had been dispatched to quell the riots. “And as they took back the streets of LA, block by block, so we must take back our cities, and take back our culture, and take back our country.”¹⁴⁰

Buchanan ran for the Republican nomination again in 1996, this time against Bob Dole, then for the Reform Party nomination in 2000. In 2000, he revived “America First” as a campaign slogan. Interestingly, Trump, who was also seeking the Reform Party nomination at the time, called Buchanan “a Hitler lover,” alluding to the controversy about Buchanan’s view that Adolf Hitler had initially presented no serious threat to the United States, a view that was consistent with the original America First Committee’s stance in 1940.¹⁴¹

Jacksonian Nationalism

“America First” is a slogan that would resonate with what Walter Russell Mead calls the “Jacksonian tradition” in U.S. foreign policy. This populist tradition is one of four traditions found in U.S. history, according to Mead: the “American realist” or Hamiltonian tradition; the exemplary Jeffersonian tradition; and missionary Wilsonianism.¹⁴²

Named after President Andrew Jackson (1829–1837) the Jacksonian tradition refers to a populist foreign policy outlook originating in the era of white, male mass politics that Jackson brought forth. Prior to the era of Jackson, politics — wheth-

er foreign or domestic — belonged to “silk stocking”-wearing statesmen like Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson.¹⁴³ Jackson, however, was a Revolutionary War veteran and the heroic victor of the Battle of New Orleans in the War of 1812.¹⁴⁴ When the “elite establishment” — in the form of John Quincy Adams, son of second president John Adams — entered into a “corrupt bargain” and stole the election from Jackson in 1824, Jackson’s persona as a man of the people standing up to the entitled elite was cemented.¹⁴⁵ His *revanche* over Adams in the 1828 presidential election inaugurated the era of “the people’s president” where Jackson “spoke in plain and powerful language to the people at large.”¹⁴⁶

Jacksonian political philosophy is an instinct, rather than an ideology.¹⁴⁷ Because it is “less an intellectual movement than it is an expression of the social, cultural, and religious values of a large portion of the American public,” Mead argues Jacksonianism is “obscure” to academics and the media.¹⁴⁸ In other words: In true populist fashion, Jacksonians and the elite have mutual disregard for one another.¹⁴⁹ Jacksonians are suspicious of what the elites might do with their tax money both at home and abroad. They worry about “untrammeled federal power” and are “skeptical about the prospects of domestic and foreign do-gooding.”¹⁵⁰ When it comes to the military, though, Jacksonians are looser with the purse strings and are more trusting of the military establishment. “For Jacksonians, spending money on the military is one of the best things government can do,” Mead argues.¹⁵¹

So far, Jacksonians and America Firsters can agree — elites should not be trusted with one’s tax dollars, but military preparedness is important and is worth paying for. Were Jacksonians an early

139 Patrick J. Buchanan, “1992 Republican National Convention Speech,” Patrick J. Buchanan Official Website, Aug. 17, 1992, <http://buchanan.org/blog/1992-republican-national-convention-speech-148>.

140 Buchanan, “1992 Republican National Convention Speech.”

141 Krishnadev Calamur, “A Short History of ‘America First,’” *The Atlantic*, Jan. 21, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/trump-america-first/514037/>.

142 Mead, *Special Providence*.

143 Mead, *Special Providence*, 223.

144 The battle of New Orleans took place after the war was formally over, but the participants in New Orleans were unaware. The battle nevertheless cemented the image of Jackson as a heroic warrior. From the Jackson presidential library: “Jackson’s string of military success, despite the obstacles he faced, the poor results of other military leaders during the War of 1812 and his stunning victory at New Orleans made him a celebrated national hero, revered above all others except George Washington.” See, “War Hero,” Andrew Jackson’s Hermitage, <https://thehermitage.com/learn/andrew-jackson/general/war-hero/>.

145 Daniel Fellner, “Andrew Jackson: Campaigns and Elections,” Miller Center, <https://millercenter.org/president/jackson/campaigns-and-elections>.

146 Daniel Fellner, “Andrew Jackson: Impact and Legacy,” Miller Center, <https://millercenter.org/president/jackson/impact-and-legacy>.

147 Mead, *Special Providence*, 244.

148 Mead, *Special Providence*, 226.

149 Rogers Brubaker, “Populism and Nationalism,” *Nations and Nationalism*, April 29, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12522>.

150 Brubaker, “Populism and Nationalism,” 224.

151 Mead, *Special Providence*, 240.

expression of the non-interventionism of America First, then? Not at all, according to Mead. Indeed, Jacksonians were consistently the most *hawkish* during the Cold War. Mead argues the Jacksonian tradition does *not* embrace isolationism. Rather, it is an interest-based foreign policy.¹⁵² Jacksonians are not eager to sit at home if there is a worthy fight to be fought. But for what cause are Jacksonians willing to go abroad and fight? According to Mead, Jacksonians are not that concerned with defending American values across the globe, but rather are focused on “national honor” on behalf of their community:

Jacksonians see American exceptionalism not as a function of the universal appeal of American ideas, or even as a function of a unique American vocation to transform the world, but rather as rooted in the country’s singular commitment to the equality and dignity of individual American citizens.¹⁵³

How does the Jacksonian tradition define the American community, on whose behalf it conducts foreign policy? Is it defined by adherence to liberal ideals, or by ethno-cultural boundaries? In fact, the answer to the question, “who counts as an American citizen” in the quote above unites Jacksonians, traditional America Firsters, and Trump. Jacksonians are historically associated with “white Protestant males of the lower and middle classes”¹⁵⁴ whom Mead refers to as making up a “folk community.” This is a “folk” that is “Christian in religious background, if not always in practice. They are European in origin — but largely without strong ties to a specific country other than the United States — and self-identify with American society from the colonial era until today.”¹⁵⁵ Mead contrasts this group with “believers in a multicultural United States” who define the United States as a “nation based on ideology

rather than ethnicity.”¹⁵⁶ These are two very different things: Jacksonianism is based on the community values and sense of identity that stem from the British colonizers, specifically a subgroup whom historian David Hackett Fischer defined as the Scotch-Irish settlers.¹⁵⁷ The Scotch-Irish Americans were “formed by centuries of bitter warfare before they came to the United States,” an experience that informed their warrior ethos and non-isolationist attitudes in foreign policy.¹⁵⁸ This ethno-cultural definition of the American nation is distinctly different from the other three foreign policy traditions Mead identifies — Hamiltonian, Jeffersonian, and Wilsonian — as they all identify the United States as built on an idea, not a people.¹⁵⁹ Thus, ethnic nationalism is where Jacksonianism diverges fundamentally from the other three foreign policy traditions.

Jackson was the first populist president, commencing a tradition carried on by presidential candidates in both political parties such as William Jennings Bryan and Theodore Roosevelt.¹⁶⁰ Mead identifies Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan as modern presidents who managed to connect with Jacksonian voters. He also lists George Wallace, Ross Perot, Jesse Ventura, Pat Buchanan, and John McCain as political figures that have successfully tapped into this populist energy.¹⁶¹ Of course, these politicians advocated quite different grand strategies, with Buchanan overtly promoting non-interventionism. Further complicating the picture, the Jacksonian “folk community” is no longer ethnically homogeneous. Rather, Jacksonianism is a tradition with a long, bipartisan pedigree in U.S. history that attracts those Americans who feel unrepresented by the “elites.”

Because Jacksonianism is more of an “instinct” than a political ideology, and no longer exclusively represents a specific ethno-cultural group in U.S. society, general arguments and comparisons — such as the one I am making in this article — are

152 Mead, *Special Providence*, 246.

153 Mead, “The Jacksonian Revolt.”

154 Mead, *Special Providence*, 244.

155 Mead, *Special Providence*, 226.

156 Mead, *Special Providence*, 227.

157 Mead, *Special Providence*, 227. See, David Hackett Fischer, *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

158 Michael Clarke and Anthony Ricketts, “Donald Trump and American Foreign Policy: The Return of the Jacksonian Tradition,” *Comparative Strategy* 36, no. 4 (2017): 368, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2017.1361210>.

159 Mead, *Special Providence*, 226–27.

160 Terri Bimes and Quinn Mulroy, “The Rise and Decline of Presidential Populism,” *Studies in American Political Development* 18, no. 2 (October 2004): 136–59, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X04000082>.

161 Mead, *Special Providence*, 230.



inherently imperfect.¹⁶² The point is not to argue that Trump is a perfect replica of Andrew Jackson the president, but rather that there are important similarities between the Jacksonian tradition and Trump's worldview.

Donald Trump's America First

That Trump would choose "America First" as his foreign policy slogan was quite a shock, at least to historians familiar with its historical connotations.¹⁶³ Of course, it is possible that Trump was not aware of the term's historical significance and instead borrowed the phrase directly from Buchanan. Regardless, all of the versions of America First have promoted economic protectionism, ethnic nationalism, and anti-interventionism. It is concerning this final feature that Trump breaks with previous iterations of the term, hewing instead to the Jacksonian tradition. I will examine each in turn.

Economic Protectionism

In Trump's first inaugural speech, he accused the world of having swindled the United States: "We've made other countries rich while the wealth, strength and confidence of our country has dissipated over the horizon."¹⁶⁴ Trump added, "We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs. Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength."¹⁶⁵ The speech was, as Jim Goldgeier has noted, "a far cry from Morgenthau's articulation of the purpose of Bretton Woods."¹⁶⁶

Upon entering office, Trump pulled out of the

Trans-Pacific Partnership, a trade agreement that had taken seven years to negotiate, in favor of bilateral deals that he argued would "promote American industry, protect American workers, and raise American wages."¹⁶⁷ He also renegotiated the North America Free Trade Agreement with Mexico and Canada, an agreement he had repeatedly criticized on the campaign trail.¹⁶⁸ The hallmark of Trump's protectionist agenda, however, has been commencing a trade war with China. Many economic experts share his complaints — that China engages in unfair trade practices and theft of intellectual property.¹⁶⁹ Trump's remedy is highly controversial, however: Trump has increased tariffs on Chinese exports to the United States in several rounds since 2018.¹⁷⁰ Former Bank of England governor Mervyn King has argued that the trade war with China threatens to undermine global economic growth, causing a "great stagnation."¹⁷¹

In wanting to "protect" American consumers, Trump is echoing one of the most familiar aspects of the nationalism of the 1920s and 1930s (on which America First relied) — economic protectionism.¹⁷² This motto resonated with the protectionist Republicans in Congress after the Great War, who in the 1920s passed "two of the most protectionist tariff bills in history," the Fordney-McCumber Tariff of 1922 and the Smoot-Hawley Tariff in 1930. Although, as Thomas W. Zeiler writes, the United States should have learned from the "Smoot-Hawley debacle" in the 1930s what "America First demagoguery" can lead to,¹⁷³ Trump has revived economic protectionism. During the presidential campaign of 2016, he presented trade as a zero-sum game. Trump, argues Zeiler, "went Hoover."¹⁷⁴ Here, Trump is in line with the original America First

162 Mark R. Cheatham, "Donald Trump Is Not a Twenty-First Century Andrew Jackson," *The American Historian* (2017), <https://www.oah.org/tah/issues/2017/february/donald-trump-is-not-a-twenty-first-century-andrew-jackson/>.

163 John Torpey, "The End of the World as We Know It? American Exceptionalism in an Age of Disruption," *Sociological Forum* 32, no. 4 (December 2017): 25, <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12372>.

164 Trump, "Inaugural Address."

165 Trump, "Inaugural Address."

166 Goldgeier, "The Misunderstood Roots of International Order," 11.

167 Hasan Dudar and Deirdre Shesgreen, "Trump's Long List of Global Trade Deals, Agreements Exited or Renegotiated," *USA Today*, Nov. 21, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2018/11/21/donald-trump-foreign-policy-iran-nafta-russia-mexico-canada-trade/1732952002/>.

168 Patrick Gillespie, "Trump Hammers 'America's Worst Trade Deal,'" *CNN Money*, Sept. 27, 2016, <https://money.cnn.com/2016/09/27/news/economy/donald-trump-nafta-hillary-clinton-debate/>.

169 Ryan Hass, "Trump's Focus on China Trade: Right Target, Wrong Approach," *Order from Chaos Blog*, June 14, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/06/14/trumps-focus-on-china-trade-right-target-wrong-approach/>.

170 Martha C. White, "Top Economists Blame Trump's Protectionist Policies for Global 'Stagnation,'" *NBC News*, Oct. 22, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/top-economists-blame-trump-s-protectionist-policies-global-stagnation-n1070036>.

171 White, "Top Economists Blame Trump's Protectionist Policies."

172 Indeed, as Frank Ninkovich points out, it is similar to President William McKinley's 1896 campaign slogan, "Patriotism, protection, and prosperity." Ninkovich, "Trumpism, History, and the Future of US Foreign Relations," in *Chaos in the Liberal Order*, ed. Jervis et al., 396.

173 Zeiler, "This Is What Nationalism Looks Like," in *Chaos in the Liberal Order*, ed. Jervis et al., 143.

174 Zeiler, "This Is What Nationalism Looks Like," 143.

Committee, which also questioned whether foreign trade was all that important to the United States.¹⁷⁵

Since World War II, both the Republican and Democratic parties have argued that being a responsible leader of the liberal world order involves not only enforcing the rules of an open international economy but also participating fully in it.¹⁷⁶ Trump essentially rejects the economic pillar of the “liberal world order” and has repeatedly argued for a much more conditional role for America, insisting that the United States is being taken advantage of by other countries.¹⁷⁷ This assumes that being the leader of the liberal international order is not currently economically beneficial to the United States, and leaves out entirely the ideational aspect. Returning to Trump’s discussion of what makes America exceptional, the United States is not exceptional as long as it is losing money to trading competitors such as China and Germany. It can only regain its exceptional status by renegotiating its trade deals to give the United States a higher return.¹⁷⁸ In other words, there is nothing about the United States that is inherently exceptional, rather, exceptionalism is a function of being the richest country in the world. In 2015, according to Trump, the United States was less exceptional than other countries because other countries were “eating” its “lunch.”¹⁷⁹

To be sure, past presidents have communicated the idea of American exceptionalism in different ways, sometimes taking pains to be sensitive to the interests and identities of foreign actors. Indeed, American presidents face a dilemma when speaking to foreign audiences. According to Gilmore and Rowling, “[T]hey must be ever mindful of a domestic audience that expects its leaders to champion American exceptionalism on the world stage but also sensitive to the interests and identities of other global actors.”¹⁸⁰ As a result, some presi-

dents have framed American exceptionalism in a more diplomatic manner when speaking in different foreign contexts. Perhaps this is what Obama was attempting to do in Strasbourg in 2009, and what Trump has been doing — taking pains not to insult foreign leaders, as he hinted at in his 2015 interview. However, Trump’s comments were not made on foreign soil or directed at a foreign audience. Rather, they were made in a domestic, even local, context.

The absence of a values-based definition of American exceptionalism in Trump’s rhetoric is as striking as it is unprecedented.¹⁸¹ To be clear, Trump does believe in some kind of American superiority — that is what his slogan “Make America Great Again” seems to be all about. However, he does not define greatness in terms of exceptional ideals and values, but in terms of economic wealth, military strength, and cultural identity. Echoing Buchanan, who started his 2000 presidential run for the Reform Party by championing West Virginia steel workers, Trump’s economic definition of what would make America great entails a revival of the U.S. industrial economy: “buy American; hire American.”¹⁸²

Ethnic Nationalism

The second important component of Trump’s America First platform is ethnic nationalism. This worldview builds on the tradition Smith and Gerstle have documented extensively in their work.¹⁸³ This kind of ethnic nationalism represents a commonality between the Jacksonian tradition and the America First Committee, as well as Buchanan’s revival of the America First political brand.

Ethnic nationalism is foundational to Trump’s worldview, and that of his administration. Trump has called for fewer immigrants from “shithole coun-

175 Zeiler, “This Is What Nationalism Looks Like,” 146.

176 Robert C. Hilderbrand, *Dumbarton Oaks: The Origins of the United Nations and the Search for Postwar Security* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

177 Indeed, his protectionism has been one of his most consistently held policy positions. See, Laderman and Simms, *Donald Trump: The Making of a World View*.

178 In a campaign speech on trade in Pennsylvania on June 28, 2016, Trump said, “Today, we import nearly \$800 billion more in goods than we export. We can’t continue to do that. This is not some natural disaster, it’s a political and politician-made disaster. . . . It is the consequence of a leadership class that worships globalism over Americanism. This is a direct affront to our founding fathers, who — America wanted to be strong. They wanted this country to be strong. They wanted to be independent and they wanted it to be free.” “Read Donald Trump’s Speech on Trade,” *Time*, June 28, 2016, <https://time.com/4386335/donald-trump-trade-speech-transcript/>. See also, Dudar and Shesgreen, “Trump’s Long List of Global Trade Deals.”

179 Corn, “Donald Trump Says He Doesn’t Believe in ‘American Exceptionalism.’”

180 Gilmore and Rowling, “Lighting the Beacon,” 272.

181 Barry R. Posen, “The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony: Trump’s Surprising Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (March/April, 2018), <https://fam.ag/2FYj1QY>.

182 I thank Melvyn P. Leffler for pointing this out.

183 See Smith, *Civic Ideals*; and Gerstle, *American Crucible*.



tries¹⁸⁴ and a ban on Muslims entering the United States¹⁸⁵ in order to preserve its white, Christian cul-

der to bring on board more voters.¹⁹⁰ Rather than broaden his appeal in an increasingly diverse country, Trump has continued to promote his ascriptive vision of the United States.¹⁹¹ The first prominent policy example of this was the “travel ban” (called the “Muslim Ban” by political op-

This kind of ethnic nationalism represents a commonality between the Jacksonian tradition and the America First Committee, as well as Buchanan’s revival of the America First political brand.

ture. From promoting the “birther” conspiracy theory (which accused the first black president of not being American partly because he was accused of not being Christian),¹⁸⁶ to launching his presidential campaign by accusing Mexican immigrants of being rapists and drug-dealers,¹⁸⁷ to telling members of the House of Representatives to “go back” to their supposed homelands,¹⁸⁸ the list of exclusionary rhetoric based on race, ethnicity, and religion is long.

Implicitly endorsing the thesis that Trump’s campaign was built on ethnic nationalism, some observers argued in 2016 that his appeal to non-white voters would be historically low, thereby dooming his chances at the ballot box.¹⁸⁹ When Trump did win, some assumed his presidency would pivot to more inclusive rhetoric (and perhaps even policies) in or-

ponents), the third iteration of which was found legal by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2018.¹⁹² It excludes immigrants from seven countries, five of them Muslim-majority countries.¹⁹³ The second notable signal was when the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the federal agency responsible for issuing visas and green cards and for naturalizing immigrants as U.S. citizens, released its new mission statement. As of February 2018 that statement no longer contains references to immigrants themselves — including taking out a line that called the United States a “nation of immigrants.”¹⁹⁴

In fact, the Trump administration has racialized the issue of immigration.¹⁹⁵ Kenneth T. Cuccinelli II, the acting director of USCIS, has argued that the famous Emma Lazarus poem “The New Colos-

184 Josh Dawsey, “Trump Derides Protections for Immigrants from ‘Shithole Countries,’” *Washington Post*, Jan. 12, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-attacks-protections-for-immigrants-from-shithole-countries-in-oval-office-meeting/2018/01/11/bfc0725c-f711-11e7-91af-31ac729add94_story.html.

185 In December 2015, Trump issued a statement saying, “Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country’s representatives can figure out what is going on.” Jenna Johnson and Abigail Hauslohner, “I Think Islam Hates Us: A Timeline of Trump’s Comments About Islam and Muslims,” *Washington Post*, May 20, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/05/20/i-think-islam-hates-us-a-timeline-of-trumps-comments-about-islam-and-muslims/>.

186 Chris Moody and Kristen Holmes, “Donald Trump’s History of Suggesting Obama Is a Muslim,” *CNN*, Sept. 19, 2015, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/18/politics/trump-obama-muslim-birther/index.html>.

187 “Donald Trump Presidential Announcement,” *C-Span*, June 16, 2015, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?326473-1/donald-trump-presidential-campaign-announcement>.

188 Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), “Why don’t they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came.” Twitter, June 14, 2019, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1150381394234941448?s=20>.

189 Stuart Rothenberg, “Will There Be Enough White Voters to Elect Donald Trump?” *Washington Post*, July 7, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2016/06/07/will-there-be-enough-white-voters-to-elect-donald-trump/>.

190 Mike Allen, “Trump’s Next Move: Stick It to Immigration Hardliners,” *Axios*, Sept. 8, 2017, <https://www.axios.com/trumps-next-move-stick-it-to-immigration-hardliners-1513305364-d0631aae-f7bc-4cef-880a-62db9fe42091.html>

191 Despite a few exceptions, such as his first inaugural address containing the phrase, “whether we are black or brown or white, we all bleed the same red blood of patriots,” Trump has largely continued his exclusionary rhetoric while in office. See, Trump, “Inaugural Address,” (2017).

192 Tucker Higgins, “Supreme Court Rules that Trump’s Travel Ban Is Constitutional,” *CNBC*, June 26, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/06/26/supreme-court-rules-in-trump-muslim-travel-ban-case.html>.

193 The countries are Iran, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Somalia, along with North Korea and Venezuela. Vahid Niayesh, “Trump’s Travel Ban Really Was a Muslim Ban, Data Suggests,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 26, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/09/26/trumps-muslim-ban-really-was-muslim-ban-thats-what-data-suggest/>.

194 Dara Lind, “America’s Immigration Agency Removes ‘Nation of Immigrants’ from Its Mission Statement,” *Vox*, Feb. 22, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/2/22/17041862/uscis-removes-nation-of-immigrants-from-mission-statement>.

195 Jayashri Srikantiah and Shirin Sinnar, “White Nationalism as Immigration Policy,” *Stanford Law Review*, no. 71 (March 2019), <https://www.stanfordlawreview.org/online/white-nationalism-as-immigration-policy/>.

sus," which appears on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, refers to "people coming from Europe,"¹⁹⁶ while Trump himself has expressed hope of more immigrants from countries like Norway.¹⁹⁷ Trump's comment, which included the "shithole" remark, prompted U.N. High Commissioner on Human Rights, Rupert Colville, to call Trump's remarks "racist."¹⁹⁸ Most prominently, however, might be the symbolism — presumably intended — of wanting to build a physical wall along the southern border of the United States, but not along its northern border.¹⁹⁹ The public announcement by Trump in the fall of 2018 — just before the midterm elections — that he would seek to end birthright citizenship (as defined in the 14th amendment) showed that rather than pivot toward inclusion, Trump would embrace ethnic nationalism, which was indeed an important part of his political platform.

This is why it is not quite right when Abram van Engen writes,

Trump never talks about Americans as descendants from those who came here long ago. He offers no story. There is no rise from immigration, no fleeing from oppression in the American past, no historical movement from one land to another. There is only the present day, only sovereignty and self-interest here and now.²⁰⁰

On the contrary, Trump does offer a narrative of the United States, but it is not the familiar story of a "nation of immigrants." Rather, it is that of white, Christian America, a narrative compatible with Gerstle's "racial nationalism," Smith's ascriptive tradition, and Mead's Jacksonian nationalism.²⁰¹ It explicitly rejects the inclusive narrative of a diverse nation unified by civic ideals. It builds, as this article has

shown, on an important competing strand in American political history in which Americans have identified membership in their political community not with adherence to a set of classically liberal ideas and ideals, but rather with ethno-cultural origins and customs "strongly linked to North European ancestry, Protestantism, belief in the superiority of the 'white race,' and patriarchal familial leadership."²⁰²

Mead, writing in 2002, acknowledged the "deeply regrettable Jacksonian record of racism," but argued that Jacksonian America was evolving rapidly.²⁰³ Here, Mead might have been mistaken. In November 2019, the Southern Poverty Law Center published leaked emails from Stephen Miller, one of Trump's most important advisers on immigration, showing his support for and utilization of white nationalist literature and websites.²⁰⁴

Non-Intervention Abroad?

Does Trump's "America First" imply a resurrection of an older U.S. foreign policy tradition labeled non-interventionism, exemplarism, or even "isolationism"? Or, is he simply a more extreme version of previous Republican presidents, many of whom were strong critics of the constraints emanating from international alliances, institutions, and traditions? I argue that when it comes to military intervention abroad, Trump differs from both historic America First positions as well as Republican presidents since World War II.

Previous America Firsters argued for non-intervention on exceptionalist grounds. Trump, however, rejects the non-interventionist view that the United States is too special to get involved in the "corrupt old world." Rather, Trump's grand strategy is more similar to the classical realist tradition in international relations, in sharp contrast to the ideational

196 Michael Luo, "America's Exclusionary Past and Present and the Judgment of History," *New Yorker*, Aug. 17, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/americas-exclusionary-past-and-present-and-the-judgment-of-history>.

197 Norway is generally viewed as a white, Christian country. This is largely correct, although the demographics are changing. As of 2018, Norway consisted of 85.9 percent native Norwegians (this includes a small Sami population as well as 3.2 percent born to non-native parents). The largest immigrant community in Norway is Polish. See, "Fjorten prosent av befolkningen er innvandrere," Statistics Norway (SSB), March 5, 2018, <https://www.ssb.no/befolkning/artikler-og-publikasjoner/14-prosent-av-befolkningen-er-innvandrere>.

198 Robin Wright, "The 'Shithole Countries' — and the Rest of the World — Respond to President Trump," *New Yorker*, Jan. 12, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-shithole-countries-and-the-rest-of-the-world-respond-to-president-trump>.

199 Susannah Crockford, "Why Building a Wall on the US-Mexico Border Is a Symbolic Monument, not Sensible Immigration Policy," *London School of Economics US Centre Blog*, Feb. 21, 2017, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2017/02/21/why-building-a-wall-on-the-us-mexico-border-is-a-symbolic-monument-not-sensible-immigration-policy/h>.

200 Abram Van Engen, "American Exceptionalism and America First," *Religion and Politics*, Jan. 9, 2018, <http://religionandpolitics.org/2018/01/09/american-exceptionalism-and-america-first>.

201 See, Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 418–26.

202 Clarke and Ricketts, "Donald Trump and American Foreign Policy," 368.

203 Mead, *Special Providence*, 260–61.

204 Michael Edison Hayden, "Stephen Miller's Affinity for White Nationalism Revealed in Leaked Emails," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, Nov. 12, 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2019/11/12/stephen-millers-affinity-white-nationalism-revealed-leaked-emails>.

tradition of exceptionalism.²⁰⁵ Indeed, in the 2017 *National Security Strategy*, the administration labels its strategy one “of principled realism that is guided by outcomes, not ideology.”²⁰⁶ Trump’s version of America First strips out all the focus on ideals and norms, something realists often argue U.S. foreign policy focuses too much on.

Nor is Trump simply a more extreme version of existing Republican foreign policy. Previous Republican presidents such as Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush argued that the United States was *too exceptional* to be constrained by the rules of the liberal world order.²⁰⁷ Rather than principled exemplarism (America First) or exceptional unilateralism (Reagan and George W. Bush), then, Trump’s grand strategy is a “contradictory combination of hawkish militarism and strategic retrenchment,”²⁰⁸ relying on unilateralism, militarism, aggressive threats, and the strategic support from authoritarian leaders abroad.

Trump’s record is evidence that he is an interventionist.²⁰⁹ After promising to end the war in Afghanistan on the campaign trail, Trump increased the number of U.S. troops on the ground as president.²¹⁰ President Trump dramatically increased the number of lethal drone strikes compared to the number launched during the Obama administration.²¹¹ He also sanctioned cruise missile strikes against targets controlled by President Bashar al-Assad in Syria in April 2017 as a response to a chemical weapons attack against the inhabitants of Idlib province earlier that month.²¹² Similarly, in April 2017, Trump declared he

had ordered an aircraft carrier into the Sea of Japan to serve as a deterrent to North Korean aggression. “We’re sending an armada,” Trump told Fox News.²¹³ A year later, the United States, in cooperation with Great Britain and France, again carried out strikes against Syrian government targets in response to a chemical weapons attack in Douma.²¹⁴ Former Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, Brett McGurk, sees Trump’s national security policy as not one of retrenchment, but rather as “revisionist and interventionist” because it seeks regime change in Syria, Iran, and Venezuela.²¹⁵

Scholars such as Charles A. Kupchan and Graham Allison therefore gravely misunderstand not just the history of U.S. foreign relations but Trump’s foreign policy when they assert that Trump’s America First is a revival of isolationism. Prior to World War II, Kupchan argues,

American exceptionalism meant insulating the American experiment from foreign threats, shunning international entanglements, spreading democracy through example rather than intrusion, embracing protectionism and fair (not free) trade, and preserving a relatively homogeneous citizenry through racist and anti-immigrant policies. In short, it was about America first.²¹⁶

Not only is Kupchan wrong that Trump is embracing isolationism, he is also mistaken in thinking that

205 Robert Kagan argues that Trump’s grand strategy is classically realist. Personal conversation, April 26, 2018. Robert Jervis argues Trump’s foreign policy does not quite square with realism, whereas Randall Schweller argues that it does. See, Jervis, “President Trump and International Relations Theory,” in *Chaos in the Liberal Order*, ed. Jervis et al., 5; Schweller, “Why Trump Now,” in *Chaos in the Liberal Order*, ed. Jervis et al., 23, 35.

206 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House (December 2017), 1, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>. To be sure, it is not clear that the *National Security Strategy* reflects Trump’s personal foreign policy vision. Mostly, it reads like the national security strategy of any Republican administration, or, as Barry R. Posen calls it, “a word salad of a document.” One might even question whether Trump has read it. This is why this article mostly focuses on Trump’s own statements and foreign policy actions. See, Posen, “The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony.”

207 See, Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, chaps. 7 and 8.

208 Micah Zenko, “Trump Is America’s First Contradiction-in-Chief,” *Foreign Policy*, Feb. 12, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/12/trump-is-americas-first-narcissist-in-chief/>.

209 Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, “Trump Didn’t Shrink U.S. Military Commitments Abroad—He Expanded Them,” *Foreign Affairs*, Dec. 3, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-12-03/trump-didnt-shrink-us-military-commitments-abroad-he-expanded-them>.

210 Daniel Byman and Steve Simon, “Trump’s Surge in Afghanistan: Why We Can’t Seem to End the War,” *Foreign Affairs*, Sept. 18, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2017-09-18/trumps-surge-afghanistan>.

211 Micah Zenko, “The (Not-So) Peaceful Transition of Power: Trump’s Drone Strikes Outpace Obama,” Council on Foreign Relations, March 2, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/not-so-peaceful-transition-power-trumps-drone-strikes-outpace-obama>.

212 Michael R. Gordon, Helene Cooper, and Michael D. Shear, “Dozens of U.S. Missiles Hit Air Base in Syria,” *New York Times*, April 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/world/middleeast/us-said-to-weigh-military-responses-to-syrian-chemical-attack.html>.

213 This later turned out to be incorrect, as the aircraft carrier was sailing in the opposite direction to take part in joint exercises with the Australian navy. Of course, the original diplomatic signal sent by this statement by the U.S. president was still significant. Mark Landler and Eric Schmitt, “Aircraft Carrier Wasn’t Sailing to Deter North Korea, as U.S. Suggested,” *New York Times*, April 18, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/18/world/asia/aircraft-carrier-north-korea-carl-vinson.html>.

214 W. J. Hennigan, “Trump Orders Strikes on Syria Over Chemical Weapons,” *Time Magazine*, April 13, 2018, <https://time.com/5240164/syria-missile-strikes-donald-trump-chemical-weapons/>.

215 Brett McGurk, “American Foreign Policy Adrift,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 5, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/untied-states/2019-06-05/american-foreign-policy-adrift>.

216 Kupchan, “The Clash of Exceptionalisms.”

America has a history of isolationism to revive.²¹⁷ As this article has shown, isolationism as a 19th century U.S. foreign policy tradition is a myth.²¹⁸ It certainly does not have anything in common with Mead's Jacksonianism, as seen earlier.

Historical accuracy aside, Kupchan's argument also gets Trump's contemporary policies wrong when he argues that, "Trump has cloaked himself in isolationist garb, repeatedly questioning the value of core U.S. alliances in Europe and Asia."²¹⁹ Trump did seemingly promise retrenchment — if not isolationism — on the campaign trail.²²⁰ Rather than retrench however, President Trump has increased troop deployments in Afghanistan, threatened war with North Korea, supported the Saudi-led war in Yemen, threatened war with Iran, and consistently promoted a military power build-up including the modernization of the U.S. nuclear arsenal and the launching of a "Space Force."²²¹ While Trump's strategy for the use of U.S. military power is *unilateral* — e.g., his strike against Syria in 2017 and his general approach to North Korea and Iran — it is not *isolationist* nor a strategy of retrenchment.²²²

What separates Trump from those in U.S. history who are often labeled isolationists is the same thing that separates him from the foreign policy establishment in general: his material, as opposed to ideational, definition of "American exceptionalism."²²³ As Trump put it on Twitter, "I will make our Military so big, powerful & strong that no one will mess with us."²²⁴ Trump's foreign policy represents the Jacksonian skepticism "about the United States' policy of global engagement and liberal order building," a skepticism that comes "more from a lack of trust in the people shaping foreign policy than from a desire for a specific alternative vision."²²⁵ It is not principled non-interventionism,

rather it is a rejection of the liberal part of the world order. It is a materialist, militarist, unilateral kind of internationalism, not isolationism.

IV. Conclusion: "The End of American Exceptionalism"?

Trump's foreign policy approach raises important questions about the future of American exceptionalism as a national narrative and its role in U.S. foreign policy. First, regarding foreign policy: Does the Trump era really matter all that much, if the next president can simply reverse course? In other words, is it possible for the next U.S. administration to snap back to a pre-Trump era when there was bipartisan consensus that the United States should play a leadership role in the liberal international order, even if there were disagreements about what that leadership style should look like? Second, regarding the American national narrative: If a snap-back is not possible, does that mean we have finally arrived at the "end of American exceptionalism"?²²⁶ I argue that a snap-back is unlikely because it is increasingly unwanted by important voices in both parties. Ultimately, the future of U.S. foreign policy depends on how thoughtfully American politicians approach this fork in the road. Rethinking U.S. grand strategy in the post-Trump era will require a more nuanced reflection about what American exceptionalism means than has been the norm in American political history up until this point.

Trump and the Liberal International Order: Can the United States Snap Back?

Is it possible for the first post-Trump president

217 Diplomatic historians realized this was an outdated paradigm long before political scientists. See, Emily S. Rosenberg, "A Call to Revolution: A Roundtable on Early U.S. Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History* 22, no. 1 (January 1998): 63–70, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0145-2096.00101>.

218 Braumoeller, "The Myth of American Isolationism"; Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, chap. 3.

219 Kupchan, "The Clash of Exceptionalisms."

220 Yochi Dreazen, "Candidate Trump Promised to Stay Out of Foreign Wars. President Trump Is Escalating Them," *Vox*, Aug. 25, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/8/25/16185936/trump-america-first-afghanistan-war-troops-iraq-generals>.

221 MacDonald and Parent, "Trump Didn't Shrink U.S. Military Commitments Abroad"; Scot Paltrow, "Special Report: In Modernizing Nuclear Arsenal, U.S. Stokes New Arms Race," *Reuters*, Nov. 21, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-nuclear-modernize-specialreport/special-report-in-modernizing-nuclear-arsenal-u-s-stokes-new-arms-race-idUSKBN1DL1AH>; Lara Seligman, "One Small Step for Trump's Space Force," *Foreign Policy*, Aug. 29, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/29/one-small-step-for-trump-space-force-space-command/h>.

222 On this, see, Braumoeller, "The Myth of American Isolationism"; Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, chap. 3. John A. Thompson, "The Appeal of 'America First,'" in *Chaos in the Liberal Order*, ed. Jervis et al., 153. Frank Ninkovich disagrees, labeling it isolationist. See, Ninkovich, "Trumpism, History, and the Future of US Foreign Relations," 396.

223 On Trump's non-isolationism, see also, Wertheim, "Donald Trump Versus American Exceptionalism."

224 Quoted in, Posen, "The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony."

225 Mead, "The Jacksonian Revolt."

226 Daniel Bell, "The End of American Exceptionalism," *National Affairs*, 41 (Fall 1975): 197, https://www.nationalaffairs.com/public_interest/detail/the-end-of-american-exceptionalism.

to “snap back” to the status quo ante” and pretend that the Trump presidency never happened?²²⁷ Given all of the benefits the United States has accrued from its hegemonic position in the world, it would be natural to assume American elites in both parties will try. In terms of the Republican Party, I argue that Trump’s wholesale rejection of the master narrative underlying the U.S. commitment to the liberal international order makes this a difficult task. Having embraced America First — despite some important policy disagreements on issues such as Syria²²⁸ — any attempt at a snap back from the Trump presidency by the GOP faces the risk of being seen as non-credible by both domestic and foreign audiences.²²⁹ Furthermore, because of the growing dissatisfaction in *both* parties with the prior foreign policy consensus,²³⁰ it is entirely possible that another populist nationalist — perhaps next time from the left — will win an election in the future and further remove the United States from its leadership role abroad. For allies, therefore, the United States is a less reliable partner, and will continue to be so unless it produces a new and credible internationalist foreign policy alternative to Trumpism that appeals to important actors in both parties.²³¹ This alternative must be rooted in a credible and unifying national narrative.

Trump vs. American Exceptionalism: A Republican Walk-Over?

According to Leffler, America First means

minimizing obligations to allies, treating everyone as a competitor, freeing the Unit-

ed States from the restrictions imposed by multilateral institutions, seeking trade advantages through bilateral negotiations, building up military power, befriending dictators if they support him, and acting unilaterally in a zero-sum framework of international politics.²³²

The goal is to get ahead, and getting ahead means leaving others behind. This means America First is, in important respects, a significant departure from neoconservatism, the heretofore paradigmatic Republican ideals-based foreign policy as defined in the post-Cold War years, particularly those of George W. Bush. More than anything else, the America First agenda and its rejection of American exceptionalism was why neoconservatives rebelled against the Trump candidacy and formed the NeverTrump movement.²³³ Given what we know of Bush’s faith and his strong belief in American exceptionalism, his view of the missionary role the United States could and should play in world history arguably influenced how he viewed Iraq and the “Global War on Terror.”²³⁴ As the invasion of Iraq was underway, in a televised address, Bush said, “To all the men and women of the United States armed forces now in the Middle East, the peace of a troubled world and the hopes of an oppressed people now depend on you.”²³⁵ That is not to say that material factors such as oil have not been an important goal of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East since before World War II, or that such concerns have not eclipsed liberal democratic goals on many occasions. But, allowing for a complex interplay of material interests and liberal ideals guiding

227 Doug Stokes, “Trump, American Hegemony and the Future of the Liberal International Order,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (January 2018): 134, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix238>.

228 Patricia Zengerle and Makini Brice, “Breaking with Trump, U.S. Republicans Press for Response to Turkey Over Syria,” *Reuters*, Oct. 9, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey-usa-graham/breaking-with-trump-u-s-republicans-press-for-response-to-turkey-over-syria-idUSKBN1WO1ZK>.

229 Not to say there have not been internal disagreements, for instance, over Trump’s policy toward Kurdish allies in Syria. See, Catie Edmondson, “In Bipartisan Rebuke, House Majority Condemns Trump for Syria Withdrawal,” *New York Times*, Oct. 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/16/us/politics/house-vote-trump-syria.html>.

230 Van Jackson, Heather Hurlburt, Adam Mount, Loren DeJonge Schulman, and Thomas Wright, “Policy Roundtable: The Future of Progressive Foreign Policy,” *Texas National Security Review*, Dec. 4, 2018, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-future-of-progressive-foreign-policy/>.

231 Megan Trimble, “America Perceived Less Trustworthy in Trump Era,” *U.S. News and World Report*, Jan. 23, 2019, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2019-01-23/america-falls-in-trustworthy-countries-ranking-under-trump>.

232 Melvyn P. Leffler, “The Strategic Thinking that Made America Great,” *Foreign Affairs*, Aug. 10, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-08-10/strategic-thinking-made-america-great>.

233 Which is, admittedly, not a movement so much as a few political advisers and writers (a group that has dwindled in numbers since Trump’s election). Contrast the special edition of the *National Review* — “Conservatives Against Trump,” *National Review*, Jan. 22, 2016, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2016/01/donald-trump-conservatives-oppose-nomination/> — with where its contributors are today on the president. See, Jeremy W. Peters, “The ‘Never Trump’ Coalition that Decided Eh, Never Mind, He’s Fine,” *New York Times*, Oct. 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/05/us/politics/never-trumper-republicans.html>.

234 I am not arguing that Bush’s highly ideological approach to counter-terrorism was an example to follow. I am merely pointing out the radical differences between neoconservatism and Trump’s America First.

235 George W. Bush, “President Bush Addresses the Nation,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, March 19, 2003, <https://georgew-bush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030319-17.html>.

U.S. foreign policy, there is still quite a distance between the rhetoric and policy of Bush, and Trump's statement that "we want to keep the oil" in Iraq "to reimburse ourselves."²³⁶

Rex Tillerson made explicit the divorcing of ideals from interests in his second speech as secretary of state: "I think it is really important that all of us understand the difference between policy and values... Our values around freedom, human dignity, the way people are treated — those are our values. Those are not our policies."²³⁷ The late Sen. John McCain immediately criticized the speech in an op-ed, defending the traditional bipartisan consensus on U.S. foreign policy: "Our values are our strength and greatest treasure. We are distinguished from other countries because we are not made from a land or tribe or particular race or creed, but from an ideal that liberty is the inalienable right of mankind and in accord with nature and nature's Creator."²³⁸

Allies appreciated McCain's efforts.²³⁹ Indeed, McCain seemed at times to serve as "shadow secretary of state" when he disagreed with the president's foreign policies.²⁴⁰ Yet although there are Republican Party members who disagree with Trump's foreign policy,²⁴¹ McCain's vocal opposition to Trump was rather unique in his party. Those Republican lawmakers who disagree with Trumpism either stay quiet and vote with the party, or find

themselves retiring — whether willingly or not.²⁴² Thus, despite a few internationalist voices, allies are having a hard time recognizing the Republican Party they thought they knew.²⁴³

The explanation for all this might be that the Republican Party itself has changed. Indeed, despite many Republicans disagreeing with Trump, he has still managed to successfully take over the party: First, by attaining its nomination, and second by winning over many important conservatives who initially were skeptical.²⁴⁴ The Republican journey from condemning Buchanan's radical rhetoric in the 1990s to first, tacitly accepting and then, mainstreaming Trump is an important part of this development. "Over the last two and a half decades," write Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, "the GOP has mutated from a traditional conservative party into an insurgent force that threatens the norms and institutions of American democracy."²⁴⁵ Trump did not cause this populist, nationalist moment as much as reap the benefits of the long-term trajectory of the GOP and its narrowing voter base. As Lilliana Mason shows, the Republican Party has increasingly come to represent "the white, Christian, male and rural elements of the U.S. electorate."²⁴⁶

Trump's version of "America First" is devoid of historic mission or religious election, but it is not "primacy without a purpose," as Barry Posen has

236 James G. Stewart, "Trump Keeps Talking About 'Keeping' Middle East Oil. That Would Be Illegal," *Washington Post*, Nov. 5, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/11/05/trump-keeps-talking-about-keeping-middle-east-oil-that-would-be-illegal/>.

237 Julian Borger, "Rex Tillerson: 'America First' Means Divorcing Our Policies from Our Values," *The Guardian*, May 3, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/may/03/rex-tillerson-america-first-speech-trump-policy>.

238 John McCain, "John McCain: Why We Must Support Human Rights," *New York Times* May 8, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/08/opinion/john-mccain-rex-tillerson-human-rights.html>. For more on this, see also the leaked memo Tillerson's adviser Brian Hook wrote on Trump's "realist" foreign policy: "Balancing Interests and Values," *Politico*, May 17, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/f/?id=00000160-6c37-da3c-a371-ec3f13380001>.

239 Indeed, after McCain's passing, NATO reportedly considered naming its new headquarters after him. Amanda Macias, "NATO Is Considering Naming Its Headquarters After Sen. John McCain," *CNBC*, Aug. 29, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/29/nato-considers-naming-headquarters-after-sen-john-mccain.html>.

240 Tina Nguyen, "John McCain Takes Over as Shadow Secretary of State," *Vanity Fair*, Feb. 2, 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/02/donald-trump-australia-call-john-mccain>.

241 Peter Baker, "A Growing Chorus of Republican Critics for Trump's Foreign Policy," *New York Times*, Jan. 29, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/29/us/politics/trump-foreign-policy.html>. Sen. Mitt Romney (R-UT) has stated that Trump's requests to Ukraine and China to investigate Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. are "wrong and appalling." This issue could be seen as both a domestic and a foreign policy issue. See, Carl Hulse, "For Once, Republicans Break with Trump, but Not on Impeachment," *New York Times*, Oct. 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/08/us/politics/republicans-trump-syria.html>.

242 Rachael Bade, "Trump's Takeover of GOP Forces Many House Republicans to Head for the Exits," *Washington Post*, Sept. 22, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumps-takeover-of-gop-forces-many-house-republicans-to-head-for-the-exits/2019/09/22/d89f99fc-d4bd-11e9-ab26-e6dbbec45d3_story.html.

243 Henry Farrell, "Thanks to Trump, Germany Says It Can't Rely on the United States. What Does that Mean?" *Washington Post*, May 28, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/05/28/thanks-to-trump-germany-says-it-cant-rely-on-america-what-does-that-mean/>; Steven Erlanger, "Macron Says NATO Is Experiencing 'Brain Death' Because of Trump," *New York Times*, Nov. 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/07/world/europe/macron-nato-brain-death.html>.

244 Rich Lowry, "The Fantasy of Republicans Ditching Trump," *Politico Magazine*, Oct. 24, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/10/24/the-fantasy-of-republicans-ditching-trump-229879>.

245 Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, "The Republican Devolution: Partisanship and the Decline of American Governance," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 4 (July/August 2019), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-06-11/republican-devolution>.

246 "Both the Democrats and Republicans Were Once White Majority Parties. Now, Race Divides Them," *Washington Post*, Dec. 2, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/12/02/both-democrats-republicans-were-once-white-majority-parties-now-race-divides-them/>.

labeled it.²⁴⁷ Rather, it has a nationalist, protectionist, and populist purpose, rooted in an ascriptive master narrative. Future paeans to American exceptionalism of the sort that Marco Rubio made in the 2016 campaign would ironically be a rebuke of Trump's presidency.²⁴⁸ At best, the current Republican Party is unsure of what "America" should mean at home and abroad. At worst, it has changed its mind entirely. In short, while the GOP may try to return to the status quo ante in a post-Trump future, they still have to fill a significant credibility gap in order to do so successfully.

Bipartisan Re-evaluation of "The Blob"

Significantly, both political parties are rethinking what the United States' role in the world should be, which is why it is unlikely that there will be a wholesale return to the previous bipartisan consensus regarding U.S. primacy and leadership in the international order, no matter who wins the next presidential election.²⁴⁹ Trump is not the only person who is severely dissatisfied with America's post-Cold War foreign policy.²⁵⁰ Nor is he the only one who thinks "exceptionalism is not a nice term."²⁵¹ Obama's answer to the Strasbourg question in 2009 was a clear rebuke of his predecessor's moralistic exceptionalism. Trump's less eloquent response in April 2015 was, in a way, communicating the same idea as Obama: It is offensive to say to the world, "we are superior to you."

Obama's struggle with American power and ideals was an early sign of the re-evaluation and recalibration of U.S. grand strategy that was underway. Obama consciously distanced himself from the D.C. foreign-policy elites his adviser Ben Rhodes derisively nicknamed "the Blob."²⁵² In the end,

many liberals were disappointed in the limited amount of "change," but the Obama era was a sign of a dissolving foreign policy consensus.²⁵³ This was especially evident in the complex and tragic case of Syria, where reasonable people could disagree on whether and how much the United States should have intervened. After Syrian President Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons on the people of Ghouta in August 2013, Obama stated,

America is not the world's policeman. Terrible things happen across the globe, and it is beyond our means to right every wrong, but when with modest effort and risk we can stop children from being gassed to death and thereby make our own children safer in the long run, I believe we should act. That's what makes America different. That's what makes us exceptional.²⁵⁴

To many European allies, this was refreshingly different from the perceived moralism and arrogance of the George W. Bush administration. Obama's more constrained view of what the United States should represent in the world signaled a growing internal debate in the Democratic Party that somewhat mirrors the one found in the Republican Party.²⁵⁵ Does American exceptionalism entail endless U.S. military engagement around the world? Americans — and many others — are understandably skeptical about such a proposition. According to a national survey by the Eurasia Group Foundation,

A plurality of Republicans and Independents believe America's focus should be on building a healthy democracy at home and

247 Posen, "The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony."

248 Benjamin Hardy, "In Little Rock, Marco Rubio Sells American Exceptionalism," *Arkansas Times*, Feb. 22, 2016, <https://arktimes.com/arkansas-blog/2016/02/22/in-little-rock-marco-rubio-sells-american-exceptionalism>. For an analysis of what Republican rhetoric on American exceptionalism looked like right before Trump, see, Jason A. Edwards, "Contemporary Conservative Constructions of American Exceptionalism," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1, no. 2 (2011): 40–54, http://contemporaryrhetoric.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/edwards1_5.pdf.

249 Chris Murphy, "How to Make a Progressive Foreign Policy Actually Work," *The Atlantic*, Oct. 7, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/10/senator-chris-murphy-progressive-foreign-policy/599470/>.

250 A rather remarkable sign of the times is that the conservative Charles Koch Foundation has teamed up with the liberal Open Society Foundation in order to fund a bipartisan foreign policy think tank aiming to end the "forever wars" called the Quincy Institute. See, Bryan Bender, "George Soros and Charles Koch Take On the 'Endless Wars,'" *Politico*, Dec. 2, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/news/2019/12/02/george-soros-and-charles-koch-take-on-the-endless-wars-074737>.

251 Corn, "Donald Trump Says He Doesn't Believe in 'American Exceptionalism.'"

252 David Samuels, "The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama's Foreign Policy Guru," *New York Times*, May 5, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/magazine/the-aspiring-novelist-who-became-obamas-foreign-policy-guru.html>; Trevor McCrisken, "Ten Years On: Obama's War on Terrorism in Rhetoric and Practice," *International Affairs* 87, no. 4 (July 2011): 781–801, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2011.01004.x>.

253 Nicholas Kitchen, "Ending 'Permanent War': Security and Economy Under Obama," in *The Obama Doctrine: A Legacy of Continuity in US Foreign Policy?* ed. Michelle Bentley and Jack Holland (Oxon: Routledge 2016), 9–25.

254 "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Syria," White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Sept. 10, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/10/remarks-president-address-nation-syria>.

255 For the current debate in the Democratic party, see, for example, Thomas Wright, "The Problem at the Core of Progressive Foreign Policy," *The Atlantic*, Sept. 12, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/09/progressives-foreign-policy-dilemma/597823/>.

avoiding foreign conflicts. Democrats believe peace is best achieved through economic integration and free trade. “Peace through military strength,” associated with neoconservative hawks, and the “democracy promotion” approach associated with liberal interventionism received significantly less support.²⁵⁶

There is an important generational profile to this debate. In the 2017 Chicago Council Survey on generational attitudes toward U.S. foreign policy, Millennials were less inclined than Generation X-ers, Boomers, and the Silent Generation to embrace the idea that the United States is “the greatest country in the world.” Only one-quarter of Millennials saw the need for the United States to be “the dominant world leader.”²⁵⁷ In other words, no matter who wins the presidency in 2020, an attempt at a snap-back might be unwanted by significant groups of voters in *both* parties.

Does This Mean the End of American Exceptionalism?

When Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell argued for the “end” of American exceptionalism after the Watergate scandal and Vietnam War in 1975, he did so because he found that the “belief in American exceptionalism has vanished with the end of empire, the weakening of power, the loss of faith in the nation’s future.”²⁵⁸ As it happens, this sentiment is strikingly similar to the disillusionment Peter Beinart finds when reviewing the memoirs of three Obama-era foreign policy officials. Indeed, writes Beinart, “it’s possible to read their books not only as tales of tempered idealism but also as chronicles of America’s declining exceptionalism.”²⁵⁹ Could it be that after several exaggerated reports of its death, the end of American exceptionalism is here? Let us look at what happened last time: Bell failed to predict the rise of Reagan and the strong comeback of American exceptionalism. If history is any guide, perhaps the next president will restore America’s sense of exceptionalism and purpose in the world like Reagan did in the 1980s.

The counterpoint is that this time it might actually be different — and that it *should* be different. Jimmy Carter — the president Reagan was reacting to — never *negated* American exceptionalism. He instead rebuked previous American for-

In short, while the GOP may try to return to the status quo ante in a post-Trump future, they still have to fill a significant credibility gap in order to do so successfully.

eign policy from the viewpoint of exceptionalism itself: “we can be better, if we try.” It was a familiar American rhetorical tradition — the lament of having fallen short of American exceptional ideals. No president or presidential candidate between 1945 and 2012 argued that the United States is unexceptional and has no role to play in the fight for liberal values around the globe. That powerful national agreement on what role the United States is supposed to play in world history *because of what kind of nation the United States is believed to be held*, in the end, for a rather short American century.

The United States has thus arrived at a fork in the road. There is still strong support for continued international engagement among Amer-

256 Mark Hannah and Caroline Gray, “Indispensable No More? How the American Public Sees U.S. Foreign Policy,” Eurasia Group Foundation (November 2019), <https://egfound.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Indispensable-no-more.pdf>.

257 Bruce Jentleson, “Millennials Are So Over U.S. Domination of World Affairs,” *The Conversation*, July 26, 2018, <http://theconversation.com/millennials-are-so-over-us-domination-of-world-affairs-99167>.


258 Daniel Bell, “The End of American Exceptionalism,” 197.

259 Peter Beinart, “Obama’s Idealists: American Power in Theory and Practice,” *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 6 (November/December 2019), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2019-10-07/obamas-idealists>.

icans,²⁶⁰ but there is also an undeniable weakening of the U.S. foreign policy consensus. This dissolving consensus “reflects a failure to adjust effectively to changes at home and abroad, with resulting confusion and dismay about the nation’s direction and role.”²⁶¹

At the heart of this moment of confusion and dismay is the confrontation between two master narratives: that of American exceptionalism and Jacksonian nationalism. American exceptionalism is an ideational master narrative. It is a story about an ethnically and religiously diverse nation united in adherence to liberal ideas and institutions both at home and abroad. In contrast, the Trump administration’s story of America is *ascriptive*: It is the story of a white, Christian folk community with materialist interests to pursue abroad. Yet, Trump did not create this moment. Before Trump’s presidential campaign, in 2014, the American National Election Study found that only 45 percent of Millennials “consider their American identity as extremely important.”²⁶² The narrative contestation currently underway must be addressed properly because the United States — and its foreign policy — needs a master narrative. Americans need a story about who they are, where they come from, and where they are going. American exceptionalism has proven to be a very useful civic narrative for a nation that cannot unite around shared ethnicity or religion. Indeed, it might be the only possible narrative going forward for a country whose ethnic and cultural identities are increasingly diverse, yet increasingly divided along party lines.²⁶³

Leadership based on liberal ideals and institutions — rather than ascriptive characteristics — is also still the most attractive vision any great power in history has had to offer. According to Bell, American exceptionalism in foreign policy was supposed to be about the belief that the United States would be different from previous world empires in the exercise of power because it was

democratic.²⁶⁴ Given the imperfect execution of the liberal part of the order in the past,²⁶⁵ however, if the United States wants to reclaim the leadership position Trump is currently forfeiting, it will need more than formulaic invocations of America as a “city upon a hill” or nostalgic paeans to a liberal world order that never quite was.²⁶⁶ It will need an updated story of “America” in the world, a story that acknowledges the problems with the “liberal world order” to address the concerns of the next generation of Americans, allies, and adversaries.²⁶⁷ A fresh discussion of what the United States can contribute to the world would entail leaving behind exceptionalist ideas of U.S. superiority and rather focus on securing a future that global advocates of liberal democracy can work together to achieve.²⁶⁸ After Trump comes a moment of opportunity: not to simply put the U.S. ship in reverse, but rather, to plot out a new course. 

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Photo: Patrick Kelley

260 Dina Smeltz, et al., “Rejecting Retreat,” The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Sept. 6, 2019, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/rejecting-retreat>.

261 Kathleen Hicks, “Now What? The American Citizen, World Order, and Building a New Foreign Policy Consensus,” *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 1 (November 2017): 109, <http://hdl.handle.net/2152/63936>.

262 See Jentleson, “Millennials Are So Over U.S. Domination of World Affairs.”

263 Michael Tesler, *Post-Racial or Most-Racial? Race and Politics in the Obama Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

264 Bell, “The End of American Exceptionalism.”

265 Paul Staniland, “Misreading the ‘Liberal Order’: Why We Need New Thinking in American Foreign Policy,” *Lawfare*, July 29, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/misreading-liberal-order-why-we-need-new-thinking-american-foreign-policy>.

266 Porter, “A World Imagined. Nostalgia and the Liberal Order.”

267 Jentleson, “Millennials Are So Over U.S. Domination of World Affairs.”

268 Rebecca Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper, “The Day After Trump: American Strategy for a New International Order,” *Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2018): 7–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2018.1445353>.

