

THE RHETORIC OF EXCEPTIONALISM: ENDURING CULTURAL FRAMES OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

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“I, in my own mind, have thought of America as a place in the divine scheme of things that was set aside as a promised land. Any person with the courage, with the desire to tear up their roots, to strive for freedom, to attempt and dare to live in a strange and foreign place, was welcome here.” – Ronald Reagan, America the Beautiful: Commencement Address, June 2, 1952

Abstract

This literature review examines the cultural frames and perspectives of American exceptionalism used by American presidents, at home and abroad. First, it identifies key definitions and themes associated with historical and modern-day perspectives on American exceptionalism. Next, American presidential speeches and notable addresses are examined for their use of frames associated with this concept. This review then draws on framing theory and its application to the concept of American exceptionalism. Last, major domestic and foreign policy cultural frames are identified in relation to American exceptionalism. In sum, this literature review examines American exceptionalism, its accompanying cultural frames, why it continues to strategically influence foreign and domestic policy decisions by American leaders, and the challenges to its continued relevance in modern political rhetoric.

Introduction: The Story of American Exceptionalism

The concept of American exceptionalism has long been the framework for establishing the American nation. Scholars have only recently begun to study the effects it has had on American presidential discourse. At its core, American exceptionalism is the idea that the United States is a nation that is superior above all other nations and was chosen by God to be a favored nation (Lipset, 1996; Pease, 2009; Gilmore, 2018). Before America’s founding in 1776, European-born settlers helped to lay the foundation for these defining principles during the European experiment in the New World. The first acknowledgment of the uniquely American “experiment” came from John Winthrop, leader of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He described his colony as “a city on a hill,” and prophesied, “the eyes of all people are upon us” (Rodgers, 2018). Alexis de Tocqueville was the first to conceive the concept of an “exceptional nation,” grown out of America’s Puritan origins, geopolitical strength, and capitalist-centered version of democracy (Tocqueville, 1835). Extensive scholarship has sought to define American exceptionalism and its use in American rhetoric. It has continued to be a fluid concept based on necessity to explain or persuade American decisions both at the domestic and international level. At its core, scholars cite America’s superior status above other countries as its main indication of uniqueness, as well as a “God-favored” country, meaning God chose the United States to be a “blessed nation” (Lipset, 1996, p. 63). The most holistic take on American exceptionalism comes from Seymour Martin Lipset (1996), who identifies the unique attributes that defined America: politics, economics, religion, warfare, unionism, race relations and intellectualism. American exceptionalism has also been marked by notable “absences,” including a rejection of socialism, lack of class conflicts, no major labor and trade unionism, and others (Pease, 2009). While these absences are less acute today, the spirit of individualism continues to be deeply rooted in American life. American exceptionalism is also defined using “present” elements, including racial and ethnic diversity, religious diversity, an abundant and successful middle-class population, and tolerance for immigration (Pease, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2012).

American exceptionalism also encompasses the idea that America and Americans are markedly different from their roots in the Western world and have created a way of life that does not resemble Western monarchies that governed in the 18th century. The European settlers who came to the New World were primarily those who practiced persecuted religions, including Puritanism and Catholicism. British authorities gave these settlers little supplies to settle in the New World, and many took the chance to practice their religion freely even if it cost their lives (Reid & Peace, 2016). This fortitude fostered a unique independence and accountability towards one another

only seen in a community forged through hardship. While many of the new colonies differed in its religious affiliation and lifestyle, the social cohesion formed through the “American experiment” became the basis for the American mythology of exceptionalism (McCriskin, 2003, p. 2). In revolutionary times, America was the first and only country to have successfully broken from British colonial rule to form an independent nation, solidifying its exceptional status as seen by the world.

Gradually, the rhetoric of America as a “God-favored” nation has largely been dropped by modern presidents. This trend mirrors the overall American decline in personal religious affiliations, more Americans advocating for enforced separation of church and state, and the increase of non-Christian religions throughout the country (Pew Research Center, 2021). American presidents focus most heavily on America’s superiority above other nations. This has been a key justification for foreign policy narratives, especially in the 20th century, explained in detail later. Presidents and political leaders have used exceptionalism as a means for advancing political agendas, conducting foreign policy initiatives, policing the world, and cementing America’s position as leader on the world stage. Examining the enduring use of American exceptionalism and its accompanying cultural frames is important since it has been the fundamental argument behind major domestic and foreign policy decisions. Some of these decisions have had major global implications, including Manifest Destiny, the use of nuclear bombs in World War II, and the justification of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Gilmore & Rowling, 2021).

For over three decades, scholars have attempted to distill this concept into empirical studies that can prove whether American exceptionalism is indeed relevant and enduring to domestic and global understanding. In other words, defining American exceptionalism by a few key attributes may help scholars as well as other countries replicate the success of the United States by following a “guidebook” for a developing democracy (Pease, 2009). However, many scholars have cast doubt in the American exceptionalism narrative. These bodies of research have come to three conclusions. First, to consider oneself *superior* or *exceptional* simply requires self-selecting criteria that add to this goal, and therefore any one country can consider itself exceptional (Pease, 2009). The second conclusion is that the United States is exceptional in both positive and negative ways. (Lipset, 1996). The United States is positively exceptional through its military might but is negatively exceptional for factors like its lack of universal healthcare for all citizens (Lipset, 1996). Last, the third conclusion states that the United States has passed its time as a hegemon and will soon fade as the world’s greatest superpower (Gilmore & Rowling, 2018). However, these assertions overlook the mere principle that Americans believe themselves to be exceptional and have convinced the globe that it is so (Gilmore & Rowling, 2018).

Framing Theory & its Application to American Exceptionalism

American exceptionalism is a broad, overarching cultural frame, and is best explained through its implications on cultural understanding. Framing theory can help explain why American exceptionalism and its accompanying cultural frames have become a political norm. It is particularly useful for complicated or nuanced topics as it seeks to fit these topics into easily identifiable and understandable realities. Chong & Druckman (2007) summarize framing theory as, “The process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking on an issue” (p. 3). Through successful framing processes, a collective culture or shared orientation of life can arise (Hart, 2008). This, in turn, influences how an individual responds to and identifies with “the outside world” (Hart, 2008). Understanding of and solidarity with an overarching group identity can be used to create powerful rhetorical tools.

Early in American political life, the newly established government and its citizens embraced nationalism as a key identity. Americans call its founders “the Founding Fathers,” recite the Pledge of Allegiance in primary schools, and generally view themselves in a positive and unique light when compared with other nations (Pew Research Center, 2021). Much of this was intentional as its founders sought to create one national identity out of a conglomeration of colonies, religions, and backgrounds throughout the country. The broader cultural frame that America is a unique and superior nation above others simplified complex historical events and created a strong motivation to continue to assert this frame. These principles and behaviors were solidified in the American lexicon as the United States grew to be a global superpower out of the ashes of World War II.

In the decades since, new generations have begun to question these ideals as the thresholds of individual success have become less tangible; increased costs of education and living, flattened growth in wages, and

perceived weakness in foreign policy. Even still, American presidents continue to assert these historical perspectives of success in advocating for the continued belief in American exceptionalism.

Thematic Frames of American Exceptionalism

Through the lens of notable American presidential speeches, American exceptionalism has been used to advance three key frames. The first frame assumes that America is superior to the rest of the countries of the world, and therefore has a special role to play in global politics. The second frame highlights the notably different origins of America that are markedly different from the Old World. Third, America as a democracy is resistant to decline, unlike traditionally short-lived democratic governments. This section will break down each frame and discuss its enduring cultural relevance as used by American presidents.

Superiority:

The superiority frame is a particularly salient type of social and national comparison because it inherently accepts that the United States is seen in a positive light by its citizens as well as *compared to* all other countries (Gilmore, 2018). This framework of superiority was widely accepted after World War II, when Europe, the previous world leader, was in shambles following two wars spanning two generations. The United States stepped into the role of fixer following decades of isolationist policies. By emerging from the destruction of World War II without a single battle fought on mainland American soil and its economy fully equipped to prop up Europe, the United States both asserted itself as the hegemonic leader of the world and was openly accepted as so by the rest of the world, still largely to this day.

This cultural framework is important as it gave legitimacy in reconstructing major world regions and facilitating regime change primarily in the Middle East. American presidents have continued to assert this cultural framework, leading the United States to take on the role as fixer, enforcer, and police force of the world. Exemplifying this, President George H.W. Bush chose to invade Iraq as it threatened peace in the entire Middle East region:

As we enforce the demands of the world, we will also honor the deepest commitments of our country. And when the dictator has departed, they can set an example to all the Middle East of a vital and peaceful and self-governing nation. The United States, with other countries, will work to advance liberty and peace in that region. (Bush, 2003)

Americans as well as the rest of the world acknowledged and looked toward the United States for peace and restoration of a better world, and the United States has continued to use this frame in its policy decisions. As other countries continue to challenge the United States on the world stage, it has become prudent for American presidents to find ways to assert American hegemony in discourse and in action.

Difference from Old World:

Citizens across the globe traditionally find identity through community and a shared history. In Europe, the French have hundreds of years of class structure and cultural heritage to relate to one another, while the British have a common history rooted in an enduring monarchy. Americans, however, do not derive identity through centuries-old class structure. Rather, to be American is to accept the shared values we fought for: freedom, individuality, hard work, diversity and more. Lipset summarized this frame as, “Being an American is an ideological commitment. It is not a matter of birth. Those who reject American values are un-American” (Lipset, 1996, p. 31).

This difference from the Old World can also be seen in social and economic norms. Unlike most of America’s European counterparts, the United States never struggled with class warfare or major labor unionism that has historically hampered economic growth (Restadt, 2014). Instead, the United States has enjoyed economic freedoms through capitalism, so successful that it has helped dozens of other countries transition to democracy and introduced capitalism to many developing countries (Burns et al., 2002). When it comes to social norms, the United States has enjoyed relatively few class divisions in the traditional sense (Burns et al., 2002). In Old World Europe, there were clear divisions between serfs versus landowners and royals versus commoners (O’Rourke, 2017). There was no possibility for upward movement between the social classes (O’Rourke, 2017). On the other

hand, the United States became the first nation to introduce the concept of upward mobility and had no fixed class divisions that hampered an individual's potential success, which in turn introduced "The American Dream," a cultural frame that accompanies American exceptionalism (Jantti et al., 2006). President Ronald Reagan used this notion in implicit terms during his 1981 inaugural address when he said, "If we look to the answer as to why for so many years we achieved so much, prospered as no other people on Earth, it was because here in this land we unleashed the energy and individual genius of man to a greater extent than has ever been done before" (Reagan, 1981). In recent decades, trends in attitudes towards the possibility of social mobility have challenged American exceptionalism due to growing disparities between the ultra-wealthy and middle class (Pew Research Center, 2020).

Even with growing challenges to American exceptionalism, related concepts such as the American Dream have always been a powerful rhetorical tool used by American presidents. It was an idea that allowed for the largest flow of immigrants into the United States during the 19th century, catapulted economic growth, and leveled the playing field for those who did not have opportunities in their home countries but were willing to seek the great American experiment in search of a better life (Restadt, 2014). These sentiments and the American value system inspired great movements of people and great economic engines that could only have formed with these economic and social conditions present.

Resistant to Decline:

The very creation of America as a nation speaks to American exceptionalism. With a ragtag assembly of volunteer militia, the American colonies managed to defeat the most powerful army in the world (Burns et al., 2002). Soon after, the English and the French both recognized America's sovereignty, a step towards creating a nation after hard-fought freedom (Burns et al., 2002). The "American experiment" began, as the world watched the first democracy flourish. Manifest Destiny, a 19th-century doctrine stating that westward expansion was both justified and inevitable, soon led to America stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific (Joy, 2014). This expansion was justified further as Americans continued to defeat great empires, vanquishing the Spanish in Florida territory, ousting the Mexican Empire in parts of the Southwest, and brokering millions of acres of land from the French in the Louisiana Purchase (Restadt, 2014).

These great successes in the early decades of America gave justification to the greatness of this new democracy, an experiment that proved to be more than successful but exceptional. Nations across the world waited for an inevitable American collapse, which never materialized. This American permanency is unique as it evaded what Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico called *corsi i ricorsi*, or the rise and fall of empires that follow a cyclical pattern (Restadt, 2014, p. 6). These early Americans, made up of different ideological, racial, and religious groups, bought into the notion of America before oneself, which in turn created the rhetoric for the next two hundred years. 239 years after American independence, President Barack Obama alluded to these principles at a speech in Selma, Alabama:

What Selma does better than perhaps any other moment in our history is to vindicate the faith of our founders; to vindicate the idea that ordinary folks — not of high station, not born to wealth or privilege or certain religious belief — are able to shape the destiny of their nation. You can't get more American than that. This is the most American of ideas. The most American of moments. (Obama, 2015)

This idea of "the most American of moments" speaks to the enduring strength of the American exceptional narrative. American buy-in to this concept has dated back more than two centuries and continues to be the predominant frame for American leaders.

American Exceptionalism and its Foreign Policy Implications

Scholars as well as political leaders have long used frames of American exceptionalism for foreign policy decisions and justifications. Scholars have identified two main dichotomic arguments for its justification in foreign policy. The first is America acting as an exemplary nation by which others should follow, and the second is America as a missionary nation, which has a duty to spread the success of democracy to others across the globe (Tuveson, 1968; McCrisken, 2003; Edwards & Weiss, 2011). These arguments are in opposition to one another, and American discourse has followed based on policy initiatives.

Exemplary:

The exemplary model is well-known to historians of American history, as it was the basis for foreign policy decisions from the Revolutionary War to World War I and II. America's identity in the 19th century was firmly rooted in its difference from the Old World. It offered a haven for citizens from other countries facing religious and social persecution, as well as offered a chance for economic freedom and success (Lipset, 1996). It was simply up to the individual to take advantage of the American Dream. This exemplary model, in turn, was the argument used in justifying America remaining separate from Europe and disengaging from foreign policy (Lipset, 1996). In his first inaugural address, Thomas Jefferson exemplified this principle: "peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none" (Jefferson, 1801). During World War I, American presidents focused on the exemplary argument as a basis for isolationist policies, trying instead to stay out of war and support the effort only through providing limited economic resources to their closest allies (Restadt, 2012). America was content to allow others to emulate its success and not interfere with the choices of other nations.

After the end of World War II, the Marshall Plan ushered the United States into its first years as the world's global superpower (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021). By doing so, American presidents and the public recognized the necessity of involvement in global affairs, and a new cultural frame was introduced. Modern presidencies have used this to justify America's role as a model to other nations. In a 1991 speech, President George H.W. Bush said, "Long-term economic growth is central to the quality of decency for America's communities, and to the quality of leadership America can bring in its special role as the world's leading diplomatic, cultural, and economic power" (Bush, 1991).

Missionary:

Political communication scholars agree that the United States is currently exercising a missionary form of American exceptionalism (Burns et al., 2002). The United States' role as global missionary represents much more involvement than its past isolationist or exemplary policies and rhetoric. After World War II, America felt emboldened not only to act as a shining example of global success, but to help other nations achieve democracy and freedom (Eisenhower, 1953). This change in cultural framing can be seen both in foreign policy initiatives as well as in modern American presidential speeches. In his inaugural address, President Dwight Eisenhower said, "To produce this unity, to meet the challenge of our time, destiny has laid upon our country the responsibility of the free world's leadership" (Eisenhower, 1953). With this responsibility justified in the framing of American exceptionalism, Eisenhower set upon strengthening the world's democratic powers through nuclear proliferation against the Soviet threat, supported two military coups in Iran and Guatemala, and directed economic and military aid to countries threatened by Soviet influence (Barrett, 2007).

For the next seven decades and into present day, this missionary ideology has remained an important rhetorical framework for presidents in justifying foreign policy actions. After September 11, 2001, President Bush declared, "This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. [The world's leaders] understand that if this terror goes unpunished, their own cities, their own citizens may be next (Bush, 2001). Not only did President Bush allude to the strength of the United States and why it was specifically targeted by terrorists but called on other nations to respond with force as a threat to the United States was a threat to all of democracy. This rhetoric was especially powerful at a time when the United States was the most united it had been in decades (Pew Research Center, 2021). Since then, Americans' support for military intervention has waned and political divisions have grown even more divisive (Hartig & Doherty, 2021).

Conclusions & Further Research

Cultural frames of American exceptionalism have informed America's standing on the domestic and global stage since its founding days. American presidents have long used American exceptional-based narratives as explicit or implicit means to bolster support for policy decisions, justify foreign policy directives, and derive a powerful and patriotic campaign strategy. Throughout history, emphasizing American exceptionalism is more than often a winning frame, as Americans continue to see themselves in a positive light as well as view the United States as better than the rest (Pew Research Center, 2021). Moreover, American presidents use accompanying frames of American exceptionalism, such as America's missionary role, to explain foreign policy decisions and

gain popular support with its allies. This allows for certain frames to continue to be used without sounding self-aggrandizing. Instead, American presidents may offer ideas for other countries to strengthen democracy within their own country or justify military interventions for the sake of protecting democracy.

Studying cultural frames within American exceptionalism allows political communication scholars to understand the power of discourse in politics. Through concerted efforts to maintain America's image as superior, worthy of emulation, and necessary for the maintenance of democracy across the globe has allowed the United States to enjoy its presence as global superpower for the past two centuries. American buy-in to this concept continues to hold strong even after challenges to its position on the domestic and world stage. However, in the past several decades, social cohesion has declined, and economic disparity has increased. The once-solid belief in American exceptionalism may be reaching a pivotal moment.

There is no question that Donald Trump's presidency changed the traditional understanding of many political norms: campaign strategy, acceptable presidential rhetoric, social media, politics, and more. What stands out most is Donald Trump's novel use of American exceptionalism as a means for attack, rather than unity. Every president since Thomas Jefferson has alluded to the idea of American exceptionalism as the great unifier; one nation under God. Donald Trump, both on the campaign trail and later as president used American exceptionalism as a scare tactic. He argued that America is in decline, and only one person, Donald Trump, could save America from itself. Studying his rhetorical use of American exceptionalism compared with past presidents would be useful in understanding why two centuries of conceptual understanding could not explain why these tactics worked in Trump's favor. Whether American exceptionalism, and a broader belief in American hegemony, will endure is a question that presidents must face as polarization and divisions grow.

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