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American Exceptionalism

An idea that made a nation and remade the world

Hilde Eliassen Restad

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2015
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Restad, Hilde.
American exceptionalism: an idea that made a nation and remade the world / Hilde Restad.
pages cm. – (Routledge studies in US foreign policy)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Exceptionalism–United States. 2. National characteristics, American. 3. United States–Exceptionalism. 4. United States–Foreign relations–20th century. 5. United States–Foreign relations–21st century. I. Title.
E169.1.R475 2014
973–dc23 2014024840

ISBN: 978-0-415-81751-6 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-203-48543-9 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Wearset Ltd, Boldon, Tyne and Wear

MIX
Paper from responsible sources
FSC
www.fsc.org
FSC® C013056

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

American Exceptionalism

How does American exceptionalism shape American foreign policy? Conventional wisdom states that American exceptionalism comes in two varieties – the exemplary version and the missionary version.

Being exceptional, experts in U.S. foreign policy argue, means that you either withdraw from the world like an isolated but inspiring "city upon a hill," or that you are called upon to actively lead the rest of the world to a better future. In her book, Hilde Eliassen Restad challenges this assumption, arguing that U.S. history has displayed a remarkably constant foreign policy tradition, which she labels unilateral internationalism. The United States, Restad argues, has not vacillated between an "exemplary" and a "missionary" identity. Instead, the United States developed an exceptionalist identity that, while idealizing the United States as an exemplary "city upon a hill," more often than not errs on the side of the missionary crusade in its foreign policy. Utilizing the latest historiography in the study of U.S. foreign relations, the book updates political science scholarship and sheds new light on the role American exceptionalism has played – and continues to play – in shaping America's role in the world.

This work will be of great interest to students and scholars of U.S. foreign policy, security studies, and American politics.

Hilde Eliassen Restad is Associate Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies at Bjørknes College in Oslo, Norway. A Fulbright alumna, she has a Ph.D. in Foreign Affairs from the University of Virginia, and is frequently used as a commentator on U.S. politics in Norway.

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To my mother Mette, my father Jan, and my brother Jon-Magnus.

Preface

This book is the result of work that my dear adviser at the University of Virginia, Michael J. Smith, would refer to as a "big think" project. I do not think he meant by this that my thoughts were particularly grandiose or my ideas particularly impressive. Instead, he meant to say that it was different from the majority of political science work, where the questions and puzzles become ever narrower, and the willingness to communicate across disciplinary boundaries more rare. In spite of the disciplinary trend, this book asks a rather big question, addressed to historians as well as political scientists: How has American exceptionalism influenced U.S. foreign policy traditions?

As a foreigner studying in the United States, it was rather obvious to me that American exceptionalism was a real and significant phenomenon. Americans are very proud of their country, and they have a particular understanding of how their country should act on the world stage. Of course, this is true of many countries. The ability to compare countries is important, because it is through others we learn about ourselves. American identity can really only be understood in its international context, especially the one it grew out of – the European great power system of the eighteenth century.

Americans believe their country to be unique, but, in a sense, every country is unique. By using the phrase "exceptional," however, Americans seem to mean that their country is *more* unique than others. This opens the door to a dangerous nationalism while closing the door on cultural understanding and comparative – and perhaps humbling – perspectives. Indeed, while Alexis de Tocqueville greatly admired the United States, he noticed something he did not like about these newly minted Americans. "In their relations with foreigners," he wrote,

> All free nations are vainglorious, but national pride is not displayed by all in the same manner. The Americans, in their intercourse with strangers, appear impatient of the smallest censure and insatiable of praise. The most slender eulogy is acceptable to them, the most exalted seldom contents them; they unceasingly harass you to extort praise, and if you resist their entreaties, they fall to praising themselves. It would seem as if, doubting their own merit, they wished to have it constantly exhibited before their eyes. Their vanity is not only greedy, but restless and jealous; it will grant nothing,

> while it demands everything, but is ready to beg and to quarrel at the same time.[1]

Yet Tocqueville is well known as the first author to use the term "exceptional" about the United States. Lord Bryce noted that perhaps this was because Tocqueville was French, and was doing that French thing whereby all things non-French are somehow "exceptional" and in need of explaining.

In no way do I pretend to be an heir to Tocqueville or Lord Bryce. Their interest in, admiration for, and criticism of the United States is, however, a carefully calibrated approach to the study of the United States that I hope I have emulated.

Note

1 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835). Volume II, Part III, Chapter XVI: "Why the national vanity of the Americans is more restless and captious than that of the English." Access at: http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/detoc/ch3_16.htm.

Acknowledgments

This book has grown out of my dissertation. The question I asked in my dissertation, and in this book, is: How has the powerful, persistent and popular idea of American exceptionalism affected U.S. foreign policy? My heartfelt thanks go to my dissertation committee at the University of Virginia, who encouraged me to ask this question just the way I wanted to: Michael J. Smith, Melvyn P. Leffler, John M. Owen, and Allen P. Lynch. Michael and Melvyn also deserve gratitude for their vigilance in language, teaching me more about how to write English correctly than my previous years combined. I also wish to thank the outstanding faculty at the UVa Department of Politics – Jeffrey Legro, Sidney Milkis, Dale Copeland, Herman Schwartz, and James Ceaser – for their invaluable classes and conversations. I hope this book makes you proud.

While at UVa, I was fortunate enough to make friends that I am grateful for every day. Emily Charnock, Kyle Lascurettes, Molly Scudder, Kate Sanger, and Brandon Yoder (among many wonderful co-grads) continue to cheer me – and this book project – on. Thank you for making graduate school so unforgettably fun.

While at the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs (NUPI), I received advice and comments on chapter drafts from helpful colleagues, including Morten Skumsrud Andersen, Benjamin de Carvalho, Nina Græger, Kristin Haugevik, Halvard Leira, Iver Neumann, and Walter Carlsnaes, as well as assistance from the excellent librarian Tore Gustavsson. I was also able to publish a working paper on the war on terror, presidential powers, and human rights, some parts of which are to be found in the penultimate chapter. While there I also published parts of my dissertation in truncated form, as part of the *Defence and Security Studies* series published by the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies. I am grateful to their editor, Anna Therese Klingstedt, for her assistance. Finally, I published an article in *American Political Thought* on old and new paradigms in the study of American exceptionalism and U.S. foreign policy, and thank the anonymous reviewers as well as editor Michael Zuckert for their assistance. Parts of these publications are to be found in re-worked form throughout the book.

I wish to thank my current employer, Bjørknes University College, for giving me the flexibility needed to finally finish the book manuscript. My wonderful

colleagues Torstein Dale-Åkerlund, Tomas Røen, Chris White, Øystein Nedrebø, and Cecilie Stubberud Næss have not only been very understanding about my writing days away from the office, they also make me look forward to coming to work every day. I also wish to thank the students at Bjørknes for being so dedicated to our Peace and Conflict Studies program. I especially thank Haakon Aasness Sørvald for help with my bibliography.

Finally, I wish to thank my wicked smart husband, Nadim Khoury. This book took a lot longer to write because Nadim decided to become my unofficial editor and boss me around for a year. The book is so much better for it, as I am a better person for having Nadim as my husband. Although I really look forward to being the boss again.

All these inspiring, encouraging, interesting people are a part of this book. Any and all mistakes are mine only.

Contents

1 How to be an American

> It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies, but to be one.
>
> (Richard Hofstadter)[1]

Prelude

In 2007, Barack H. Obama announced that he was running for president. His announcement set off a rather unusual series of events in the history of U.S. presidential elections. At first, Obama was accused of not being born in the United States.[2] Next, Obama was accused, in various and often not too subtle ways, of being anti-American. During television appearances on Fox News and NBC in June 2008, political commentator Dick Morris argued that "[T]he question that plagues Obama is ... Is he pro-American?" and stated that "[T]his whole debate about what kind of president [Sen. Barack] Obama would make has swirled around almost an existential level. Is he sort of a Manchurian candidate? A sleeper agent? Or is he the great hope of the future?"[3]

Democratic pollster Mark Penn advised Hillary Clinton to target Obama's "lack of American roots" in the primary by "explicitly own[ing] 'American'" in her campaign.[4] After Obama's election to the White House, a third and subtler way of arguing that the president was not truly American emerged. Specifically, President Obama was accused of not believing in "American exceptionalism." In an influential cover story for the *National Review Online*, Richard Lowry and Ramesh Ponnuru wrote:

> It is madness to consider President Obama a foreigner. But it is blindness to ignore that American exceptionalism has homegrown enemies – people who misunderstand the sources of American greatness or think them outdated. If they succeed, we will be less free, less innovative, less rich, less self-governing, and less secure. We will be less.[5]

President Obama's answer to a question of whether he believed in American exceptionalism at a G20 press conference in Strasbourg in 2009 seemed to give credence to this suspicion. Obama responded by saying that he did believe in

American exceptionalism, but then added another sentence that seemed to qualify its very nature: "just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism."[6] His reported answer set off a hectic debate in the American media,[7] most of which ignored the rest of Obama's answer. Obama, in the tradition of all U.S. presidents, of course went on to say that he was enormously proud of his country "and its role and history in the world." In fact, he 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*.[8]

But the suspicion that the United States would be "less" under a president who ostensibly did not believe in American exceptionalism had taken root. Further evidence of this, Obama's critics thought, was to be found in the president's handling of the Arab Spring from December 2010 onward. Aiming to lighten the U.S. military footprint in the Middle East after the Bush administration's controversial "war on terror," the Obama administration's initial approach to the Arab awakening was perceived as somewhat hesitant. From the administration's perspective, being involved in two wars in the Middle East while also being widely distrusted throughout the region necessitated a cautious strategy. This "wait-and-see" approach in the spring of 2011 amounted to the "unpatriotic acceptance of fading national glory," as *The New Yorker* argued that critics were thinking.[9] In the specific case of a possible, and controversial, intervention in Libya, the strategy was labeled "leading from behind" by a White House official.[10] Republican presidential hopeful at the time Mitt Romney latched onto the phrase, declaring: "God did not create this country to be a nation of followers. America must lead the world, or someone else will."[11]

The argument

This book is about the connection between American exceptionalism and U.S. foreign policy, but aims to challenge the conventional manner in which the two have been coupled.

Most writers on U.S. foreign policy agree that domestic ideas about what kind of country the United States is affect its foreign policy.[12] Whether in the study of U.S. commitment to multilateralism,[13] post-cold war policy,[14] or the historic U.S. foreign policy traditions,[15] scholars write extensively about the importance of an American identity for its foreign policy.

In this book, I argue first, that American exceptionalism is a meaningful and helpful way of defining the elusive category of American identity. This

means, as we shall see, treating it not as objective truth, but as subjective self-understanding.

Second, I argue that the belief in exceptionalism has had a deep and lasting effect on how the United States relates to the world. Specifically, American exceptionalism has contributed to a more constant foreign policy tradition than commonly argued. I call this tradition unilateral internationalism, meaning that the United States has always been internationalist (engaging with the world politically, economically, and militarily) but has preferred to conduct its foreign policy in a unilateral, rather than multilateral, manner. As we saw from the reactions to President Obama's multilateral strategy in Libya in 2011, engaging in substantive multilateralism is in fact seen as being "un-American." The United States does not play by any other rules than its own, and will certainly not be seen as being led by others.

My argument differs from conventional literature, which argues either that the United States historically has vacillated between cycles of intervention and isolation, or that the early period of U.S. foreign policy was isolationist or at least non-interventionist, but that the United States became – with the harrowing experience of World War II – a committed multilateral internationalist. I will refute both the cyclical and the periodic theses of U.S. foreign policy.

In short, I will argue first, that the *belief in the idea* of American exceptionalism is a useful definition of American identity, and second that it has contributed to a more constant unilateral internationalist foreign policy than most other scholars recognize.

A definition to start with

What is American exceptionalism? Definitions abound, often because authors confuse the objective and subjective definitions of it. Looking at American exceptionalism as a national identity, I argue that it is made up of three important ideas. Each idea represents a different aspect of the perceived historic significance of the United States and inspires a certain kind of foreign policy, all of which are internationalist in orientation. First is the idea that the United States is distinct from the Old World; second, that it has a special and unique role to play in world history; and third, that the United States will resist the laws of history (meaning that it will rise to great power status yet it will not fall, as all previous republics have).[16] These three aspects have important consequences for how the United States relates to the rest of the world. Let us briefly examine them.

I The distinction

The significance of seeing "America" as "distinct" is not that it denotes the United States as *different* from the rest of the world; it is that it invokes a normative hierarchy of nations on which the United States sits atop. In other words, American exceptionalism entails viewing the United States as *better* than all

other nations. This is different from patriotism.[17] "Our country has always been exceptional," writes the *National Review Online*:

> It is freer, more individualistic, more democratic, and more open and dynamic than any other nation on earth. These qualities are the bequest of our Founding and of our cultural heritage. They have always marked America as special, with a unique role and mission in the world: as a model of ordered liberty and self-government and as an exemplar of freedom and a vindicator of it, through persuasion when possible and force of arms when absolutely necessary.[18]

If one does not believe that American exceptionalism means *better* rather than *different*, one's Americanness is open to questioning. This is the significance of the criticism Obama encountered after his answer to the question posed to him in France in 2009. Obama's answer seemed to convey an understanding of American exceptionalism as a subjective idea, not as an objective fact. Contrasting a belief in American exceptionalism with self-understandings found in other nations such as Britain and Greece, meant the negation of the – seemingly – objective nature of American exceptionalism.

The identity-affirming power of seeing the United States as *better* rather than different is something that can be traced back throughout American history. In an editorial in the *United States Journal* on October 18, 1845, one finds this optimistic assessment: "we, the American people, are the most independent, intelligent, moral and happy people on the face of the earth." In 1935, surveying the power of American nationalism in the nineteenth century, historian Albert K. Weinberg wrote that the "philosophy of American nationalism developed a belief incongruous with the equalitarianism of democracy – the belief that, however equal men might be at birth, Americans had become subsequently a super-people."[19] Weinberg was studying "manifest destiny," an idea that provided the ideational fuel for the vast continental empire that the United States claimed for itself from 1787 to 1867. Manifest destiny, in fact, constituted the nineteenth century version of seventeenth and eighteenth century American exceptionalism, as the next chapter chronicles.[20] The debate over manifest destiny and continental expansion seen in the 1830s would also foreshadow later debates and rhetoric on why the United States must first obtain a commercial empire on the sea, and later, world power status.

Initially, the distinction of "America" was its relative superiority to *Europe*. The animating idea of the first part of the definition of American exceptionalism is that the New World superseded the Old. Indeed, Thomas Jefferson had thought that there was, in effect, *a different code of natural law* governing the two worlds, Old and New:

> I strongly suspect that our geographical peculiarities may call for a different code of natural law to govern relations with other nations from that which the conditions of Europe have given rise to there.[21]