

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE LEGACY OF VIETNAM

US Foreign Policy since 1974

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Trevor B. McCrisken



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University of Warwick



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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
1 American Exceptionalism: An Introduction	1
2 The End of American Exceptionalism? The Cold War and Vietnam	20
3 Gerald Ford and the Time for Healing	40
4 Jimmy Carter – Morality and the Crisis of Confidence	56
5 Ronald Reagan – ‘America is Back’	85
6 George Bush – the ‘Vision Thing’ and the New World Order	131
7 Bill Clinton and the ‘Indispensable Nation’	159
8 Conclusions: American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam	183
<i>Notes</i>	194
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	224
<i>Index</i>	227

1

American Exceptionalism: An Introduction

On September 11, 2001, following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, United States President George W. Bush declared that: 'America was targeted for the attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining.' Americans would never forget this day but, Bush assured them, the US was 'a great nation' that would 'go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world'.¹ In the midst of a horrific tragedy, the president was drawing upon a long tradition in American public rhetoric that is informed by a belief in American exceptionalism.²

The term American exceptionalism describes the belief that the United States is an extraordinary nation with a special role to play in human history; not only unique but also superior among nations. Alexis de Tocqueville was the first to use the term 'exceptional' to describe the US and the American people in his classic work *Democracy in America* (1835–40), but the idea of America as an exceptional entity can be traced back to the earliest colonial times.³ The belief in American exceptionalism forms a core element of American national identity and American nationalism. As a central part of the American belief system it contributes to what Benedict Anderson would call America's 'imagined community'.⁴

The ways in which US foreign policy is made and conducted are influenced by the underlying assumptions Americans hold about themselves and the rest of the world. Like most nations, the United States has a distinctive pattern of policy making that is determined by unique aspects of its national culture. Each country's historical and cultural heritage, its montage of national beliefs and experience – its national identity – has an influence, whether consciously or not, upon the way it practices politics. US foreign policy is driven by a variety of causal factors including strategic, economic, political, and bureaucratic interests; international and domestic pressures; the personalities and agendas of policy makers; and the actions of other nations. However, the belief in exceptionalism, since it is a core element of

American national identity, has an important underlying influence on foreign policy activity. This belief is one of the main ideas that, according to Michael Hunt, has 'performed for generations of Americans that essential function of giving order to their vision of the world and defining their place in it'.⁵ The belief in American exceptionalism provides an essential element of the cultural and intellectual framework for the making and conduct of US foreign policy.

Two main strands of exceptionalist thought have influenced US foreign policy. One is that of the United States as an exemplar nation, as reflected in ideas such as the 'city upon a hill', 'nonentangling alliances', 'anti-imperialism', 'isolationism', and 'Fortress America'. The other, often more dominant strand is that of the missionary nation, as represented by the ideas of 'manifest destiny', 'imperialism', 'internationalism', 'leader of the free world', 'modernization theory', and the 'new world order'. Both strands have been present throughout the history of US foreign relations and are analysed in this book.

The concept of the exceptional nature of the United States, however, has been a matter of much debate since sociologist Daniel Bell declared the end of American exceptionalism in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and Watergate. Scholars continue to dispute whether or not the US is exceptional in some measurable way and whether the concept of American exceptionalism can be used in ways which are theoretically fruitful. This debate, however, is missing a more crucial and indeed more interesting point – that regardless of whether or not the US is actually exceptional, the *belief* in American exceptionalism persists. A large number of US citizens, including public officials, believe that their country is exceptional and this informs the way American society functions; indeed, the idea continues to be a central element of American national identity. This book shows how the notion of American exceptionalism forms part of the American belief system, the nation's cultural reality, and more importantly how this belief has informed and continues to inform US foreign policy making. It is argued that the belief in American exceptionalism was severely shaken by the American defeat in Vietnam, but that the belief survived and has remained a major influence on post-Vietnam US foreign policy.

American exceptionalism: the scholarly debate

In 1975, Daniel Bell declared the demise of American exceptionalism: 'Today, 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.' Quite simply, Bell concluded, the US had become 'a nation like all other nations'. The only remaining vestige of the exceptional nature of the United States was its constitutional system, but any sense of destiny or specialness had been shattered.⁶ Fourteen years later, however, Bell reopened the scholarly debate by arguing that in the US 'there has always been a strong

belief in American exceptionalism. From the start, Americans have believed that destiny has marked their country as different from all others – that the United States is, in Lincoln's marvelous phrase, "an almost chosen nation". Despite his earlier conclusions, Bell now suggested several social and political areas in which the question of American exceptionalism continued to be prevalent and thus deserved further academic exploration.⁷

According to Byron Shafer, there are three main ways to approach the question of American exceptionalism. The first concerns the 'simple distinctiveness' of the United States, but as Shafer suggests 'all societies, observed closely enough, are distinctive'. The second contends that the US does not fit a 'general model of societal progression for the developed nations of the world'. But such a normative model of societal development does not, and never has, existed. Certainly some countries have developed in similar ways but each society has its differences in outcomes, methods, timescales and other elements determined by various factors unique to national, regional and local environments. This returns us to the first point that all nations are different, so why should American exceptionalism be of any interest or importance? Where Shafer finds his answer is in 'an effort to highlight distinctively American *clusters* of characteristics, even distinctively American ways of organising the major *realms* of social life'. Thus, the essays collected by Shafer reveal 'peculiarly American approaches to major social sectors' such as politics, economics, religion, culture, education and public policy.⁸ This approach has been taken up by several scholars in recent years focusing on a wide variety of topics ranging from American political exceptionalism to the exceptional nature of American sports culture.⁹ Most comprehensively, Seymour Martin Lipset has considered unique American aspects of ideology, politics, economics, religion, welfare, unionism, race relations and intellectualism. Lipset sees American exceptionalism as a 'double-edged sword' since there are many negative as well as positive traits in American society that are exceptional in comparison with other countries. Exceptionally high crime rates, levels of violence, prison populations, divorce rates, teenage pregnancies, income inequality, and exceptionally low levels of electoral participation, along with a lack of social welfare programmes, mean the US can be considered 'the worst as well as the best, depending on which quality is being addressed'.¹⁰

Judging particular exceptions to determine whether the US is the best or worst nation in that realm reveals another of the major problems with American exceptionalism. As Bell observes, the 'idea of "exceptionalism," as it has been used to describe American history and institutions, assumes not only that the US has been unlike other nations, but that it is exceptional in the sense of being *exemplary*'.¹¹ As the work of Lipset and others has shown, American differences can be identified and even evaluated but any declarations of superiority over alternative ways of approaching social realms can only be based on subjective criteria. For example, it is difficult, if not

impossible, to determine objectively whether the US political system is better than any alternative forms of government. The same can be said of any other identifiable American exception. To attempt to prove that the US is indeed an exceptional nation, in the sense of being not only unique but also superior, is a highly problematic exercise. Rather than debate the truth of whether the US is actually exceptional, or indeed superior, in any measurable way, it is more important and interesting to focus on the fact that Americans generally believe in the myth or rhetoric of American exceptionalism and act on those beliefs.

American exceptionalism and US foreign policy

The focus in this book, then, is on the *belief* in American exceptionalism and its influence on US foreign policy rather than directly addressing the question of whether US foreign policy itself can be measured as exceptional. Indeed, Joseph Lepgold and Timothy McKeown have found little empirical evidence for claims that American foreign policy behaviour is exceptional.¹² Faults and blemishes riddle American history as much as that of any other nation and in foreign policy the US has a far from untarnished record. The colonization and expansion of the new nation were accompanied by the displacement or destruction of the indigenous population. Times of war have been plentiful, with the US imposing its will on peoples in countries as distant as the Philippines and Vietnam, ordering the internment of large numbers of its own citizens, and committing wartime atrocities like any other nation. Yet despite the abundance of evidence to the contrary, there has remained throughout American history a strong *belief* that the United States is an exceptional nation, not only unique but also superior among nations.

Lepgold and McKeown observe that American leaders make 'unusual internal justifications' for their actions abroad, using 'idiosyncratic symbols and metaphors ... based on national self-image and values'. It is typical in all societies for governments to garner support for their policies 'by linking them to general societal norms, usually through political symbols that have reference to deeply shared values'. For Americans these symbols are 'unusually linked to domestic rather than external values'. American society is held together by shared ideas and values more than shared culture or heritage. Lepgold and McKeown argue, therefore, that:

American mass society has had little use for the symbols of competitive nationalism in the Old World sense or the geopolitical concepts that went with it. Lacking the shared cognitive maps that other peoples develop to deal with tangible disputes over territory and resources, Americans typically do not grasp the politics, history, and social forces out of which foreign policy is typically made elsewhere. US foreign behavior abroad is thus justified through general formulas and slogans.¹³

Lepgold and McKeown do not go on to discuss what symbols and metaphors are used by Americans in this context. The argument here, though, is that the belief in American exceptionalism most commonly provides these symbols and metaphors.

The majority of the academic works on the history and practice of US foreign relations neglect or discount the influence of exceptionalist beliefs. Nevertheless, a growing body of scholarship does recognize that the belief in American exceptionalism has been a persistent and major underlying influence on US foreign policy. These works recognize that despite the inherent contradictions and frequent circularity of exceptionalist thought, the 'recurring rhetoric' of the belief in American exceptionalism reveals it to be 'a cultural reality and potent force'.¹⁴ Michael Hunt, for example, attempts to identify an 'American foreign-policy ideology inspired by the cultural approach'. Such an ideology would consist of 'a relatively coherent, emotionally charged, and conceptually interlocking set of ideas [that] would have to reflect the self-image of those who espoused them and to define a relationship with the world consonant with that self-image'. Hunt argues that the 'capstone idea' that has underscored US foreign policy from its beginnings is that of American greatness, an idea that reveals Americans as 'a special people with a unique destiny'.¹⁵

This 'self-image of uniqueness', together with a 'secular fundamentalism' and a 'strident moralism', are among the core traditions that according to Roger Whitcomb constitute the 'collective set of values that energize [Americans]' and form a national style of foreign policy.¹⁶ Americans 'came to the view early in their experience that they were an exceptional people... From the days of Manifest Destiny to the era of the American Century, the foreign policy of the nation would be evocative of this sense of uniqueness'. Whitcomb suggests that 'Morality became the reference point of uniqueness; Americans were simply "better" than the common run-of-the-mill peoples of the world'. US foreign policy would often be underpinned by 'the belief that there is a fundamental difference between right and wrong; that right must be supported, that wrong must be suppressed, and that error and evil can have no place when compared with the "truth"'. The US was, therefore, 'uniquely qualified to lead the forces of freedom' in the world.¹⁷ H. W. Brands agrees that: 'If a single theme pervades the history of American thinking about the world, it is that the United States has a peculiar obligation to better the lot of humanity.' He argues that 'Americans have commonly spoken and acted as though the salvation of the world depended on them'. This 'persistent theme in American thought, speech and writing about the world' could be called a 'manifestation of American exceptionalism'. Brands recognizes that the major protagonists of such thinking can be divided into two groups – the 'exemplarists' and the 'vindicators'.¹⁸ These groupings correspond to the two main strands of exceptionalist thought examined here: the exemplary and the missionary.

Other authors have recently addressed the impact of the belief in American exceptionalism on specific periods in US foreign policy. John Fousek has explored the cultural roots of the Cold War and argues that US policy and the broad consensus that supported it were enveloped within a discursive 'framework of American greatness'. He concludes that American Cold War policy was underpinned by a discourse of 'American nationalist globalism' that combined 'traditional nationalist ideologies of American chosenness, mission, and destiny with the emerging notion that the entire world was now the proper sphere of concern for US foreign policy'.¹⁹ The influence of the belief in American exceptionalism on US public diplomacy at the end of the Cold War has also been analysed. Siobhán McEvoy-Levy has found that during this period of 'consensus- and paradigm-shattering transition', Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton both utilized the 'common institution' of traditional exceptionalist rhetoric to overcome the 'cognitive dissonance' among American elites and the public concerning the appropriate post-Cold War role for the US.²⁰

This growing body of work on the belief in American exceptionalism and its influence on US foreign policy shows that it should not be dismissed as 'mere rhetoric'. In fact, it should be acknowledged as an important and influential idea that contributes to the framework of discourse in which 'policymakers deal with specific issues and in which the attentive public understands those issues'.²¹ This is not to say that the belief in exceptionalism is the root cause of all foreign policy. Although the analysis in this book reveals the prevalence of the belief in foreign policy discourse, it should be remembered that at every turn policy was shaped and driven by more tangible determinants such as the preservation of national security, the demand for overseas markets, or, indeed, the personal ambitions of policymakers. As Anders Stephanson makes clear in his study of manifest destiny, the destinarian discourse he identifies did not 'cause' policy as such. It was, however, 'of signal importance in the way the United States came to understand itself in the world and still does'. The same is true about the broader idea of American exceptionalism – it is not 'a mere rationalization' but often appears 'in the guise of common sense'.²² The argument in this book is that throughout American history, exceptionalist beliefs have framed the discourse of foreign policy making by providing the underlying assumptions and terms of reference for foreign policy debate and conduct. While others have acknowledged the importance of exceptionalist beliefs, no previous work has focused specifically on the post-Vietnam era and the legacy of that conflict for the belief in exceptionalism and the course of US foreign policy.

National identity and the belief in American exceptionalism

Scholars disagree over whether exceptionalism amounts to an ideology as such. Hunt contends that the belief in 'national greatness' is a central

element of the ideology behind US foreign policy. Alternatively, it has been suggested that exceptionalism amounts to a 'para-ideology' because its influence underwrites much of US foreign policy but it does not have the coherence of a traditional ideology. It has also been argued that American democratic liberalism is the ideology underpinning US foreign policy but that a belief in American exceptionalism is a central element of that ideology.²³

It was Richard Hofstadter who observed, 'It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one.' In the US, as in other countries, 'ideology helps to form the basis of the national identity, through which individuals find motivation to translate ideas into action'.²⁴ American nationalism is not built on the usual elements of nationhood such as shared language, culture, common descent or historical territory, but on 'an idea which singled out the new nation among the nations of the earth'. This idea is a 'universal message' that American values and principles will benefit the whole of humankind.²⁵ Being an American, or rather a US citizen, is not simply a birthright but the acceptance of a general set of principles and values that Samuel Huntington has described as the American Creed. These core values, he claims, are: liberty, equality, individualism, democracy, and the rule of law under a constitution. To be an American is to make an ideological commitment to these political values.²⁶ It is perhaps one of the unique aspects of American society that any person from anywhere in the world can be accepted as a true American *if* they will adhere to these values. Abraham Lincoln once declared that no matter where immigrants may have come from in Europe, by accepting the 'moral sentiment' of the Declaration of Independence they were as much Americans 'as though they were blood of the blood and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration'.²⁷

Challenging or rejecting these core values can leave a person branded 'un-American', another concept peculiar to the United States – there is no such thing, for instance, as an 'un-British' or 'un-German' belief or person.²⁸ In times of trial in American history even people whose families have been American for several generations have had to face loyalty tests, most famously during the Truman administration and the McCarthy 'witch-hunt' of the 1950s, or to similarly proclaim their unwavering dedication to American values and principles. Those who would not were ostracized or even imprisoned. Various rituals are built into everyday American life to reinforce each citizen's belief in those values and principles. These rituals are examples of what Eric Hobsbawm calls 'invented tradition' which provides the foundations of national identity and nationalism. Hobsbawm suggests that 'Americanism' is 'notably ill-defined' but that the practices that symbolize it are 'virtually compulsory'. These rituals were 'invented' as 'emotionally and symbolically charged signs of club membership'.²⁹ The Pledge of Allegiance; the Fourth of July; Thanksgiving; the 'Star Spangled Banner' as both flag and anthem; the Declaration of Independence and the

Constitution, both reverentially displayed at the temple-like National Archives building; the national monuments in Washington, DC; the Statue of Liberty in New York; the carved faces of presidents on Mount Rushmore – these are all invented traditions that symbolize American national identity and amount to what Robert Bellah has called a ‘civil religion’.³⁰ They fulfil each of the three purposes of invented tradition: they help to establish and symbolize social cohesion; they help to legitimize the relationship between citizens and government; and they inculcate certain ‘beliefs, value systems and conventions of behaviour’.³¹

The conception of the nation as invented or imagined is particularly useful in understanding the construction of American national identity. Without the same sense of shared heritage, religion, ethnicity, culture and history that are important in the formation of many other nations, ‘Americans had to invent what Europeans inherited: a sense of solidarity, a repertoire of national symbols, a quickening of political passions.’³² Nations embody shared memories, myths, symbols and values. Newly formed nation states, especially those without a common ethnic root like the US, must ‘forge a cultural unity and identity of myth, symbol, value, and memory that can match that of nations built on pre-existing ethnic ties if they are to survive and flourish as nations’.³³

For Americans, in the ‘absence of a shared past, the search for identity produced narratives of difference and exception’.³⁴ As Roger Whitcomb argues: ‘A national myth of separateness, exclusivity, and superiority was integral to America’s national formation and development.’³⁵ The belief in the exceptionalism of the United States is, therefore, a ‘core theme of American nationalism’ that has been expressed most commonly in the ‘long-standing tradition of thought about American chosenness, mission, and destiny’.³⁶ It has been central to the formation of American national identity, and thus can be seen to have provided a significant part of the cultural and intellectual framework within which foreign policy has been made.

The belief in American exceptionalism

Exceptionalism is a fluid and adaptive idea that can be interpreted in different ways. Therefore it is necessary not only to identify its major assumptions but also to consider its two main strands – the exemplary and the missionary – and the outcomes these different views have for foreign policy.³⁷ Three main elements of exceptionalist belief have remained relatively consistent throughout American history: that the US is a special nation with a special destiny; that it is separate and different from the rest of the world, especially Europe; and that it will avoid the laws of history that determine the rise and fall of all great nations.

First and foremost is the belief that the United States is a special nation with a special role to play in human history. Throughout American history

there have been repeated claims that the US is the 'promised land' and its citizens are the 'chosen people', divinely ordained to lead the world to betterment.³⁸ This notion goes back to the very beginnings of colonization. Most famously, in 1630, Puritan settler John Winthrop pronounced that the Massachusetts Bay colonists 'must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us'.³⁹ Winthrop's words were circulated in manuscript form and have since become one of the main formative texts of American self-identity and meaning. Inherent in this notion of the city on a hill is the belief that the American colonists, and those who have followed them, were uniquely blessed by God to pursue His work on Earth and to establish a society that would provide this beacon for the betterment of all humankind. Americans have been charged by God with the task of reforming themselves and the world – they are a redeemer nation. As George Washington declared: 'Every step by which [the United States] have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency.'⁴⁰ This and other such public expressions helped forge a permanent place in the American beliefs system for the idea that the US was chosen by God to assume its special place in history. In a country where religious belief remains higher than in any other major industrialized nation, such a claim continues to have a peculiar resonance.⁴¹ At the same time, though, the chosen people are exposed to temptation and corruption, most often from abroad or from subversives within. Americans are thus constantly being tested and must undergo continual self-inspection.⁴² When they do seem to fail or commit wrongdoing, it is because the forces of evil are working against them. But even in such circumstances, the belief in exceptionalism enables Americans to maintain their purity because their intentions are good and they will strive on with their national experiment.

The second main element of exceptionalist belief is the New World's separateness and difference from the Old World of Europe. In Europe, Americans believed, self-interested monarchies exploited the majority of their own people, then sought imperial expansion abroad to increase their treasures, boost their reputations, and increase their power relative to other monarchies. The political systems were invariably corrupt, and pandered to the needs and desires of the traditional elites, leaving little or no means for commoners to improve their lot in life. Many early Americans hoped they could escape such ills by establishing new forms of society on the American continent. Most seventeenth and eighteenth century settlers, particularly in New England, brought with them novel ideas and convictions about how a society should organize itself. In contrast to Europe, the New World would be committed to freedom, morality, and the betterment of humankind. The Americans were in a unique position. As Thomas Paine suggested in his influential revolutionary pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776): 'We have it in our power to begin the world over again.'⁴³ The American continent was

regarded as a virgin land upon which the peoples of the world could gather to create a New World based upon ideas, values and principles untried elsewhere. As Crèvecoeur observed in his influential *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782): 'The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions.'⁴⁴ In 1787, the US Constitution was written as the basis for an ambitious experiment in governing a modern civilization. Although they were relatively pessimistic about its chances, the greatest hope of the Founding Fathers was that the constitutional framework would allow the US to develop over time into the most perfect republican society in the world.⁴⁵

This leads to the third main element of exceptionalism which is the belief that the United States, unlike other great nations, is not destined to rise and fall. If their political experiment was a success, the Founding Fathers hoped to escape the 'laws of history' which eventually cause the decay and downfall of all great nations and empires. The geographic isolation of the American continent from Europe seemed to offer hope that the US could protect itself from falling prey to the degenerative nature of the Old World. As Washington declared: 'Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course.'⁴⁶ The United States, Thomas Jefferson observed, was 'Kindly separated by nature and a wide ocean from the exterminating havoc of one quarter of the globe; too high-minded to endure the degradations of others.'⁴⁷ Such leaders did not suggest that Americans would be immune from temptation but they did indicate that, with eternal vigilance, the US could be prevented from succumbing to the same vices that had destroyed other great nations. Such attitudes have led Americans to believe their nation is the leader of progress in the world. Practically everything that the US does as a nation is regarded as pushing forward the boundaries of human achievement, be it in politics, industry, technology, sports, the arts, even warfare. Certainly there are some mistakes made, but they are few, they are learned from, and they are improved upon at the next attempt. No matter how many setbacks they may face along the way, Americans believe they will continue forward resolutely, striving for progress toward forming an ever more perfect union. Americans think of themselves as exceptional, then, not necessarily in what they are but in what they could be. For this reason the sense of exceptionalism can never die, no matter how unexceptional the nation may appear in reality. Exceptionalism persists because of what it promises just as much as, if not more than, what it delivers. It is tied to what it means to be an American: to have faith in the values and principles that caused the nation to be founded and to continue to exist.

Advocates of both the exemplary and the missionary strands of exceptionalist belief tend to share each of these assumptions. Where they differ is in how they believe these assumptions should translate into American actions with regard to the rest of the world. All exceptionalists believe very

strongly in the basic benevolence of their actions towards other nations. National motives are not perceived as being driven solely by the desire for material gain but also by a dedication to principles of liberty and freedom for all humankind. A corollary of this belief is that it is the duty of the United States to help the rest of the world follow the example of the chosen people.

Followers of the exemplary strand of American exceptionalism have mostly advocated that the US remain aloof from the world's troubles and lead by example. Americans should strive to perfect their own society as much as possible without interfering in the affairs of others. To intervene abroad, the exemplarists argue, not only would probably harm the other nation but also would most likely undermine the American experiment at home. Far better, then, that the US should have peaceful trade relations abroad but concentrate on building a model society for others to copy rather than forcing the benefits of American life on them.

Adherents to the missionary strand of American exceptionalism, who advocate US expansion or intervention in the affairs of other nations, nevertheless believe that, unlike other nations, the United States is incapable of seeking dominion over other peoples in its self-interest. As John Quincy Adams proclaimed in 1821, the US 'goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy'. Adams insisted that America's 'glory is not *dominion*, but *liberty*' and that: 'She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all.'⁴⁸ Washington will, therefore, project its power abroad not to subjugate other nations but to help them become like the United States, to become free and democratic. These Americans seem to believe that inside every foreigner there is the potential, even the desire, to be an American. After all, to be an American is not a birthright but the willingness to believe in a certain set of political and social principles and values. The missionary strand of American exceptionalism suggests that all the people of the world want to be like Americans, whether they realize it or not. This assumption has led Americans to find it very difficult to understand that other peoples may place different values on things and have different perceptions from Americans of how the world should be. In fact, both forms of exceptionalism hold, rather paradoxically, that the unique American political values and principles are actually universal in their nature. The US is regarded as the embodiment of universal values based on the rights of all humankind – freedom, equality, and justice for all. It is the exceptional champion of these rights but they are shared by all humans, whether they are Americans or not.⁴⁹

Exceptionalism and the history of US foreign policy

In the early years of the republic it was initially the exemplar strand of exceptionalism that dominated US foreign policy. The United States would