

Exceptionalism in us foreign policy



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Why did the notion of “ American exceptionalism” erupt during the American colonial era and how has it influenced U. S. foreign policy from the time of the American Revolution until the Vietnam War?

Introduction

One of the core components of the American identity that has greatly influenced the creation and implementation of U. S. foreign policy is the historical notion of American exceptionalism. “ American exceptionalism” is a term used to describe the idea that the United States is a superior and unique nation with a distinct and special destiny in the world. Although the expression “ exceptional” was first used to describe Americans and their country during the early 19th century by Alexis de Tocqueville in his work Democracy in America after his travels to America, the origins of the belief can be traced back to the earliest times of the colonial era with both secular and religious roots.

Talk about foreign policy here

Like other nations, the foreign policy of the United States is influenced by a number of important factors

American exceptionalism has been used as propaganda for Americans to reason with and justify the acts of their country

Get a fancy definition of exceptionalism!

What exactly is exceptionalism?

U. S. foreign policy throughout America’s history have been influenced by two main strains of thought in regards to American exceptionalism -

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missionary and exemplar - Throughout American history, the two forms of exceptionalism have clashed numerous times and each have had a their own tremendous influence on foreign policy.

Frontiersmen ship and spreading of democratic, Christian ideals

Preserving their unique way living with out being corrupted by the outside world - could of be done since America was so isolated from Europe

America was blessed by being geographically isolated from the troubles of Europe

Also given the duty of spreading American ideals, responsible to install and ensure the freedom and liberty of others

The Emergence of American Exceptionalism

Part of the notion of American superiority can be traced back to the colonial era with one of the first groups of settlers; the Puritans. While aboard the Arbella during its passage to New England in 1630, a Puritan leader named John Winthrop delivered a lay sermon where the earliest expression of American exceptionalism can be found. In this sermon, Winthrop declared to his fellow settlers “ we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.” Unlike the Pilgrims who were Separatists, Puritans in England wanted to stay within the established order and to change it from the inside rather than to completely break away. (Galvin Finley). They saw the New World as an opportunity given to them by God where it was possible to establish a perfect, pure church and community, which would serve as models for those back in England and

around the world. Metaphorically placed in Winthrop's sermon is the idea that the colonists in America were especially blessed by God to create an ideal, utopian society for the purpose of bettering humankind.

The American Revolution and the creation of a new Republic in America asserted the notion that the United States was an exceptional nation with a unique destiny in the world. In the literature of the revolutionary era, one can find many descriptions of how special, unique and destined people thought America and its people were. The vast, numerous differences between the American colonies and the typical European society in England contributed greatly to the idea of American exceptionalism. Indeed, there were many important differences between the old European society and the flourishing one in the colonies that led the colonists to think of themselves and their country as superior. Unlike in England, there was an absence of feudalism, a class system or hierarchy, a centralized government, and there were very few immense differences in wealth between the settlers. Each individual worked for himself and owed loyalty to no one but to the land that nourished him. (What is an American?) America was land of opportunity and hope where the common person could flourish where they could not back in England. In one of the most famous pamphlets of the time *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine expresses the idea how the exceptional nation of America had outgrown its mother country due to their immense separateness and needed to seek its freedom. He asserted the notion that America had a special place in the world and claimed " the cause of America is, in great measure, the cause of all mankind." He believed that America would be the place where people could start over and a new, progressive society could be built based

on American ideals. The framers of the American Constitution took this idea and ran with it. Although they were pessimistic about its results, the farmers were hoping that the framework that they had placed in the constitution would one day lead to a perfect republic. They hoped that the unique geographical isolation of America from Europe would help protect it from the ills and corruption of the Old World. Thus, with the establishment of the Constitution, republicanism and providential ideology came together to cement the notion of exceptionalism into the national identity of Americans.

U. S. foreign policy that followed the revolution was exemplar and isolationist in nature. The United States, isolated from the evils of the European world, would serve as a model of liberty, freedom, and democracy for the rest of the world. The nation would be a city upon a hill, acting as a beacon of light for the rest of mankind. Early national leaders such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson advised Americans to protect their country's superiority over the world's ills, saying that the U. S. needed to avoid "permanent and entangling alliances." This early strand of isolationist exceptionalism however, would be challenged as the power of America grew and became more dominate in the world. Even while urging the continued separateness of the U. S., President Jefferson supervised the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 which doubled the size of the country. He defended his act by calling upon the notion that the U. S. needed to expand to preserve liberty. Coupled with the frontier spirit ...

SAY SOMETHING ABOUT THE FRONTIER - DANIEL BOONE

This idea was contributed to further by the creation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823. In this doctrine, President James Monroe declared that any European intervention in any of the states in the Western Hemisphere would be seen as an act of aggression and would invoke the involvement of the United States. With this declaration, President Monroe gave additional emphasis to the difference of intentions between the U. S. and the countries of Europe in regards to their foreign policy. It underlined the United States as the regional dominate power even though the American military at the time was weak compared to those in Europe. An inherent factor contained within the Monroe Doctrine was the belief of exceptionalism. The United States declared that it had nothing but good intentions in terms of intervening in the affairs of other states located in the Americas. The foreign policy of the U. S. was innately different from the oppressive, imperialistic ones of European countries. As once stated by John Adams, the Secretary of State at the time, the United States does not go abroad in search of monsters to vanquish. Being declared " exceptional," the United States could do no wrong and therefore was incapable of being imperialistic by interfering in the affairs of other nations. It was defended that U. S. intervention, should there even be any, would be beneficial for the state in question and would not be in the self-interest of the U. S.

The exceptional idea of the necessity of American expansion for the insurance of liberty was further asserted by President James Polk. In 1845 he reasserted the Monroe doctrine and declared that the U. S. was solely responsible for the liberty and security of all the nations within the Western Hemisphere. As maintained by Polk, the United States was not in search of

conquest but rather in search of the establishment of independence within the nations of the Americas. Again, it was declared that the U. S. interference in their neighbors' affairs was in the interests of the neighbors and was completely beneficial. U. S. intervention was exceptional in nature meaning that the motivation behind their interference was not self-interest unlike those of the imperial European nations. Polk used these notions to defend the Mexican-American War in 1846 with which he desired to expand the states all the way to the Pacific coast. Polk presented his argument for the acquirement of new land by placing emphasis on the exceptional nature of American foreign policy and through the notion of Manifest Destiny.

The idea of " Manifest Destiny" was first used by democratic journalist, John O'Sullivan in 1839 in an article where he declared that the United States had a " divine destiny" to " establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man" based on American ideals. This " destiny" was not necessarily territorial in nature but rather it expressed the responsibility of America to spread their values through the establishment of republics. O'Sullivan officially coined the phrase six years later in an article arguing for the annexation of Texas, but the phrase received little national attention. During the same year however, the expression gained a tremendous amount of recognition throughout the nation in an article he wrote for the New York Morning News. In this document, the conflict between England and the United States over the territory of Oregon was focused on and O'Sullivan argued that the United States was the one that had the right to annex the land. He believed that, through manifest destiny, Providence had given the

U. S. the task to spread their unique republican democracy throughout North America.

As noted by historian William Weeks, advocates of Manifest Destiny touched upon three main themes: the exceptional virtue of the American people (which was simply the notion of American exceptionalism), the mission to spread these virtues to remake the world in the image of the United States, and the God-Given destiny to complete His work. This idea is closely tied with the missionary strand of the American exceptionalism belief. The notion of Manifest Destiny was used to justify America's expansion and the annexation of territory in North America for much of the 19th century. A clear form of missionary exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny embodied the notion that the U. S. had a special role to play in the world. Though it was never an official political policy, the idea of manifest destiny affected the creation and conduction of U. S. foreign policy greatly. The expansion of the American territory was justified by Americans through the idea that the United States was an exceptional nation, chosen by Providence to extend their values of liberty and freedom across North America. Americans at the time also argued their right to expand because they believed that they could utilize the land and resources for the amelioration of mankind better than the previous inhabitants could.

The core element of Manifest destiny - the idea that American's had a mission given by God to spread their values and institutions across the world - became a central aspect in the belief of missionary exceptionalism. The Mexican-American War asserted this notion and by the mid 19th century,

this missionary strand had become the dominate form of American exceptionalism.

With the outbreak of the Mexican-American war, another elemental factor was added to the notion of manifest destiny which became a central aspect in the belief of missionary exceptionalism. The idea that Americans had a religious duty to uphold emerged. This religious duty validated the need for the U. S. to intervene in other state's affairs since Americans were responsible for bringing to the people their natural rights.

Once the frontier was officially declared closed at the end of the 19th century, the United States set their missionary sights on states overseas. The Spanish American War in 1898 at first gained massive popularity among Americans since it was theoretically being fought to ensure the basic freedoms of the people in the Spanish colonies. But as calls for the annexation of former Spanish territories grew soon after American victories, a national debate was sparked over the issue of American imperialism.

With the Treaty of Paris in 1898 which officially ended the Spanish-American War, Cuba was granted independence while the once Spanish territories of Guam, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico, were given to the United States. The bloody conflict that ensued afterwards in the Philippines left many Americans known as " Anti-imperialists" to question the motives of the United States. Was the U. S. acting out of its exceptional principles or was the country following in the imperialistic footsteps of the Old World?

With the issue of American oversea expansion, the two main strands of exceptionalism came into direct conflict. Both sides of the debate used

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aspects of what they believed to be the notion of American exceptionalism to defend their arguments. The majority of the proponents for the annexation of new overseas territory generally employed the potential strategic and commercial benefits for their rationale. Nevertheless, many defended American expansion with the exceptional notion that the U. S. had a divine duty to spread democracy and liberty across the globe. Theirs was a destiny to have freed the Spanish colonies from the imperial Old World. The United States, being an exceptional nation, was not being imperialistic in nature by occupying these states, but rather a beneficial actor in the territories' search for liberty and freedom. Expansionists argued that the United States would act as a nurturing mother to help develop the once-oppressed lands to fully functional, democratic nations. Once the territories were ready, they argued, they could chose either to join the union or declare independence. Evidently, these proponents were strong supporters of the missionary strand of the American exceptionalism belief and the notion of manifest destiny.

Opponents against imperialistic actions of the U. S. on the other hand drew their arguments from the exemplar strand of American exceptionalism. Anti-imperialists believed that the United States was destined to play a different role in the world than the expansionists believed. Their strand of exceptionalism emphasized that the U. S. shouldn't dirty its hands in the imperialistic dealings of the old world. The colonies which they had freed should be able to establish their own government, keeping true to the American ideology of the consent of the governed. They claimed that America was special in the fact that it did not interfere in other nations' affairs like the countries of the Old World and they feared that the United

States was not acting accordingly to the principles laid down by the Founding Fathers. Both anti-imperialists and expansionists believed America to be exceptional in nature with a special role to play in the world but each had their own expectations for what exact "role" the country would play.

The anti-imperialists failed to gain a strong following among Americans under the McKinley administration and after the Philippine uprising was crushed, the territories of Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines were annexed. Despite this failure however, the anti-imperialists provided a valuable check on the imperialistic fever that had befallen the country and helped return American sentiments to the original opposition of colonialism. One famous anti-imperialist who actively spoke out against the annexation of the Philippines was three-time presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan. Bryan, who had volunteered for the Spanish American War, argued that United States should not try to copy the imperialistic practices of Great Britain and other European countries. With his presidential candidacy defeat in 1900 however, the anti-imperialist movement gradually died down and the desire for American oversea expansion would soon follow.

Proof that this desire had receded came along with the election of President Theodore Roosevelt. Although he was a huge advocate of American expansion, Roosevelt reaffirmed the belief that America did not have imperialistic intentions in other nations. Following the Venezuela Crisis of 1902-1903, Roosevelt added the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine which asserted the right of the United States to intervene in the affairs of Latin America in cases of "flagrant and chronic wrongdoing by a Latin American Nation." He claimed that the U. S. did not have imperialistic

desires in the land and would only intervene in Latin America for their own welfare, even if their problems were internal. Roosevelt rejected the idea of complete American isolationism and instead opted for a balance of power between separation and actively spreading American ideals. With this, he effectively reconciled the two strands of the American exceptionalism belief. When extreme circumstances demanded it, the U. S. had a responsibility through manifest destiny to intervene in other nations' affairs to preserve American ideals abroad when threatened. Other than in those cases, the U. S. should spend its time focusing their attention on improving their own society to become a model for the rest of the world.

President Woodrow Wilson on the other hand strongly supported the missionary belief of American exceptionalism. Keeping to tradition, he firmly believed that the United States was an exceptional nation given a special destiny to spread its values and principles across the globe. He argued that the U. S. acted to serve the rest of the world and was not self-interested in its relations abroad. In the case of military affairs, Wilson was morally driven in his decisions. He believed that U. S. military intervention, unlike those of other nations, would be used for the amelioration rather than the oppression of mankind.

Although Wilson claimed that the United States would never again search to expand their territory, his ideologies were deeply embedded in the missionary strand of exceptionalism. He frequently used military force abroad to introduce and enforce democratic values in many different countries such as the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Mexico, Nicaragua and Russia. With the outbreak of World War I, Wilson justified his decision of

entering the conflict by declaring that the world needed to be made safe for democracy and declared that the U. S. was entering the war with the best benign intentions. The United States was going into war to protect the very ideals that they defended during the Revolution and the Spanish-American War. Doubt about the involvement was quieted by the notion of American exceptionalism being put in terms with the intervention. Thus, American exceptionalism was used to justify the U. S. intervention in World War I.

The period between the two world wars was dominantly marked by isolationist and anti-entanglement policy. The Congress rejected Woodrow Wilson's petition to join the League of Nations due to the nation's popular isolationist belief that the United States should not be under the obligation of any other country. Keeping to tradition, Americans believed that they should take advantage of the fact that they had been blessed with geographic peace and security, isolated from the ills of the Old World. Being 5, 000 miles away from Europe with two unthreatening, friendly neighbors above and below gave reason to the lack of fear of foreign attack. The United States had no real motivation to entangle itself in other nations' affairs abroad.

Proponents of isolationism and many others did not believe that the United States should remain completely separated from the world's affairs but rather detached from its trivial conflicts. America should focus on the becoming an ideal, exemplar nation that would serve as a model for the rest of mankind. Isolationists argued their opinions using rhetoric consistent with the exemplar strand of American exceptionalism.

With the outbreak of World War II, the two strands of exceptionalism came into direct conflict once more. President Franklin D. Roosevelt kept to the popular American census when war was declared on Germany and asserted U. S. neutrality.

After World War I

- Isolationism prevented the US from entering the war in 1939
- Pearl Harbor silenced these voices
- FDR used exceptionalism to justify entering the war - the US needed to protect freedom

After World War II

- The outcome of the war affirmed the belief that the US had a special role to play in the world
- US become the strongest nation in the world
- Activist internationalism
- President Truman - US was the best nation under the sun - the US had a responsibility to defend liberty and freedom all across the world
- Cold war - good vs "evil"

Vietnam – the end of American exceptionalism?

Common Sense was written in a time of doubt concerning freedom from England and Thomas Paine used the idea that America was an exceptional entity to persuade people that independence was necessary. In many other works of the time and in public discussion, England was described as being a tyrannical monster whose sole purpose was to steal the new-found liberty away from the innocent colonists. In reality however, England was acting

rational in their standards and were defending their right to tax the colonists. Many people used the idea of American exceptionalism as propaganda.

Conclusion

Although the notion is about 400 years old, one can still see today the influence of American exceptionalism on the American identity and on how U. S. foreign policy is created and conducted.

Used as a way for American's to justify their country's acts

Foreign policy turned aggressive as the notion of Manifest destiny spread