The Past in Political Science:

American Exceptionalism and

U.S. Foreign Policy

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INTRODUCTION

Most writers on U.S. foreign policy agree that domestic ideas about what kind of country the United States is affect its foreign policy. Whether in the study of U.S. commitment to multilateralism, post-Cold War policy, or of the historic U.S. foreign policy traditions, scholars write extensively about the importance of an American identity for its foreign policy. In this context, American identity is usually understood as ‘American exceptionalism,’ which in turn is used to explain U.S. foreign policy traditions over time. Specifically, American exceptionalism is often said to have inspired a Janus-faced identity for the United States; an exemplarist identity versus a missionary identity, which in turn contributed to a Janus-faced foreign policy: an “aloof” foreign policy tradition (previously called “isolationism”) and an internationalist foreign policy tradition. I call these the identity and foreign policy dichotomies.

In this paper, I argue that not only is current scholarship marred by sloppy definitions of American exceptionalism, furthermore; the manner in which American exceptionalism is used to explain U.S. foreign policy is unsatisfactory. Those scholars who have argued in terms of dichotomous thinking have ignored the complex nature of American exceptionalism, in

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1 Indeed, this has been simultaneously the traditional lament on the part of realist historians and political scientists as well as the proof that those very same realist theories do a poor job of explaining U.S. foreign policy. Realists have consistently criticized the adherence to “idealism” or ideology that is demonstrably present in major foreign policy decisions such as Woodrow Wilson’s League of Nations and the second Iraq war, for example. See for example Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest: A critical examination of American foreign policy* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982); Robert Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in American Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994). For a critical overview of classical realism, see Michael J. Smith, *Realism from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986).


which the two strands have constantly impacted on each other rather than taking turns in one-sidedly or cyclically informing American foreign policy. Furthermore, the foreign policy dichotomy is outdated and incorrect. In fact, American identity and U.S. foreign policy have been more constant than conventional wisdom lets on.

This article seeks to clarify contemporary scholarship by mapping out the existing – and, I argue, insufficient – ways of conceptualizing American exceptionalism and its connection to U.S. foreign policy traditions. I will first discuss how to most fruitfully define American exceptionalism, giving a general overview of the differing conceptualizations of American exceptionalism in political science and history. I then present the dichotomies and argue that American exceptionalism – properly understood – should be retained as a definition of American identity but that the current manner in which American exceptionalism and U.S. foreign policy is connected is outdated. I briefly elaborate on what I deem to be a more correct way of coupling American exceptionalism with U.S. foreign policy. The aim is to contribute to a constructive debate on how to think about – and use as an analytical category – a concept which is much used and abused in writings on U.S. foreign policy.

CONCEPTUALIZING AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

The Term Itself

The term “exceptional” was apparently first used by French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville as a description of the United States in his classic work *Democracy in America*. Here, Tocqueville wrote that “the position of the Americans” was “quite exceptional.” The Frenchman, traveling in the United States in the early 1830s, was impressed with the only successful democracy at the time, lacking the feudal past of the European nations; exhibiting

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5 I thank [ ] for helping me with this formulation.
more social egalitarianism, meritocracy, and individualism, and commitment to rights than other countries. These American tendencies were reinforced by the country’s religious commitment to the “nonconformist,” congregationally organized Protestant sects, Tocqueville observed, which emphasized the individual’s personal relationship with God. Of course, as James Bryce pointed out, Tocqueville had analyzed American conditions against the backdrop of France and thus (according to Bryce, a Briton) the French inclination to view conditions different from those found in France as somehow being exceptional was ever present.

American exceptionalism has come to be used in two main ways in academe, and is used to cover a manner of sins in the vast literature on U.S. foreign policy.

First, within political science - in the study of American and comparative politics - the thesis of American exceptionalism is in fact a truth claim about the distinctiveness of American political and economic institutions. From de Tocqueville to scholars writing in the 1950s and 1960s, an “objective” concept of American exceptionalism has been developed and even tested by comparing the United States and its political institutions to other western countries. This endeavor entails a scientific search for peculiarly American approaches to government, to the economy, to culture, to religion, etc. Such studies stress the predominance of the middle class and the absence of class conflict among the (free) population as well as the lack of divisive debates among rival social ideologies in the development of the American

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policy. This way of conceptualizing American exceptionalism simply entails pointing out “the ways in which the United States varies from the rest of the world.”

In the older studies of U.S. diplomatic history (today called the history of U.S. foreign relations) the assumption of American exceptionalism was, in contrast, often a normative one. In this literature, the United States – having avoided the class conflicts, revolutionary upheaval, and authoritarian governments of Europe - represented an actual example of liberty for the rest of the world to emulate. The United States was exceptional in the sense of being just a little bit better than its European cousins. As Tyrrell argues, American historians have too often assumed that the United States is exceptional and written accordingly (indeed, this assumption of American exceptionalism influenced the “consensus” historiography in the 1950s). This could perhaps serve as a national identity feed-back loop – feeling exceptional leads to uncritically assuming one is, which leads to scholarship that takes this for granted rather than problematizing it, which again strengthens the general sense of exceptionalism.

The concept of American exceptionalism thus developed somewhat differently in history and political science. Indeed, whereas some political scientists would point out that American exceptionalism could also entail the United States performing worse than other countries at some metrics (thus the title of Seymour Martin Lipset’s book pointing to exceptionalism’s “double-edged sword”), the normative definition in history entailed a

11 Lipset, American Exceptionalism, p. 17.
12 Ian Tyrrell, “American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History,” American Historical Review vol. 96 no. 4 (October 1991), p. 1031. Tyrrell points out that advocates of exceptionalism such as Frederick Jackson Turner assumed American uniqueness rather than investigated it. See p. 1035
powerful underlying assumption: that the United States was not only different but also better than other countries.¹⁴

The notion of superiority is at the heart of the idea American exceptionalism, and has been expressed in varying ways throughout America history. For instance, in the nineteenth century American exceptionalism was expressed through the idea of “manifest destiny.” Manifest destiny held that the United States had a God-given right to expand westward, as it would bring liberty and enlightenment with it, deliberately contrasted with the less worthy efforts of the French, British, or Spanish.¹⁵ Indeed, some diplomatic historians accepted manifest destiny on its face, inscribing “the discourses of manifest destiny into the deep structures of their investigations,” historian Emily Rosenberg has argued.¹⁶ In other words, by assuming westward expansion as a natural development for the United States these historians internalized the myth of manifest destiny rather than investigate it. The example of manifest destiny is one of the clearest examples of how assumptions of exceptionalism have affected American scholarship.

Whereas the definition of American exceptionalism thus developed somewhat differently in the academic fields of political science and history, the two conceptualizations both represented academic versions of the popular American exceptionalism thesis. This thesis consists of the belief in American exceptionalism, which is widespread in popular culture and among the general American population. It is a belief articulated by every American president and held on to by every American citizen. This expression of American exceptionalism has been formulated and re-formulated throughout American history, from

¹⁵ This manifest destiny of the United States, as journalist John O’Sullivan wrote in the Democratic Review in 1845, was “to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.” See Albert K. Weinberg, Manifest Destiny. A Study in National Expansionism in American History (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1935, sixth ed.), p. 122.
John Winthrop’s “City upon a Hill” speech to Abraham Lincoln’s “last best hope on earth” to Woodrow Wilson’s mission to spread democracy to Europe to Ronald Reagan’s “shining city on a hill”. The latest incarnation of this conviction is particularly pronounced among neoconservative writers. “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.¹⁷

Such a triumphalist expression of American exceptionalism also finds its way into contemporary academe, as seen for example in later treatments of the end of the Cold War by historian John Lewis Gaddis.¹⁸ Not believing in American exceptionalism is not an option for an American politician, as President Barack Obama experienced when he answered a question on whether he believed the United States to be exceptional with less certainty than what is demanded of an American president.¹⁹

We thus find ourselves with two general ways of using the concept “American exceptionalism”: as a ground for objective comparison of political and economic institutions, and as an expression of an American national identity.

¹⁷ Richard Lowry & Ramesh Ponnuru, “An Exceptional Debate: The Obama administration’s assault on American identity,” National Review Online (March 8, 2010). URL: http://nrd.nationalreview.com/article?q=M2FhMTg4Njk0NTQwMmFlMmYzZDg2YzgyYjhmYzU= This is not new sentiment. In an editorial of the United States Journal of 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.” United States Journal, Oct 18, 1845. In 1935, 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.” See Manifest Destiny, pp. 126-27.


¹⁹ The question was posed by Financial Times journalist Edward Luce in Prague on April 4, 2009. Obama’s answer was, “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.” For journalistic observations, see Michael Scherer, “Obama Too is an American Exceptionalist,” Swampland blog, April 4, 2009, Times Magazine Online. URL: http://swamplandblogs.time.com/2009/04/04/obama-too-is-an-american-exceptionalist/
In my opinion, the former one is not a very fruitful endeavor. The very idea of a qualitative or objective - as opposed to normative – concept of exceptionalism is nonsensical. As historian Joyce Appleby argues, exceptionalism cannot simply mean different, because all nations are different.20 Indeed, Lipset’s investigations did not convincingly argue that the United States’ political or economic institutions are more different than others (especially not when compared to England).21 Trying to design studies based on the assumption that the United States is somehow more different (and therefore exceptional) than other countries is in itself an exceptionalist undertaking, then, because the academic endeavor of investigating exceptionalism inevitably entails normative judgment. To summarize: “scientific” or objective measurements of American exceptionalism are nonsensical.

The second usage - American exceptionalism as a national identity - is impossible to ascertain scientifically (how can one decide which country is the most exceptional – in the sense of being better?), which leads me to the conclusion that one must view American exceptionalism as a belief. As a scholar, by viewing American exceptionalism as a belief, one can define it as a form of civic nationalism, or national identity if you will. The issue then becomes how to properly understand American exceptionalism as an identity and - for scholars of U.S. foreign relations - how to correctly couple this with U.S. foreign policy. When viewed in this light, what becomes important about American exceptionalism is the fact that the belief in exceptionalism has been strong and persistent throughout American history, and thus can be said to have shaped the American national identity to a large and lasting degree.22

22 We also know that it is not exceptional for nations to think they are exceptional, as Britain’s and France’s missions civilisatrice tell us, for instance. Thinking one is exceptional is in fact fairly common for Great Powers. A general statement on whether or not such ideologies are developed as a means to achieve Great Power status is not within the scope of this article, but in the American case the idea of greatness certainly preceded the great power status.
This article defines American identity as the widespread and deep belief in American exceptionalism. American exceptionalism itself entails the belief in the special and unique role the United States is meant to play in world history; its distinctiveness from the Old World; and its resistance to the laws of history (the rise to power and inevitable fall, which has afflicted all previous republics).  

National identity can be defined as the “maintenance and continual reinterpretation of the pattern of values, symbols, memories, myths, and traditions that form the distinctive heritage of the nation, and the identification of individuals with that heritage and its pattern.” Thus, national identity is not a constant, but rather a concept in constant motion. Studying the nature of the American identity has a long pedigree, which is fitting insofar as the entire course of American history “coincides with the rise of modern nationalism.” The study of the rise of the United States to great power status is in a sense a study in the development of a national identity. The case for studying identity in foreign policy is that is directs our attention to preferences and the way our “interests” are defined. Indeed, part of the attraction of constructivist theory in International Relations is that it challenges the traditional focus on structural limitations on states by bringing social factors such as identity into the analysis.  

American identity is – as all national identities – complex and, as pointed out by Anthony Smith in the definition above, subject to continual reinterpretation. What is striking about the American identity is the strong and continuous presence throughout U.S. history of its exceptionalist formulation. Thus, while one risks simplifying too much, this article argues

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24 Smith, Chosen Peoples, pp. 24-25.
that when studying U.S. foreign policy, American identity is most usefully defined as American exceptionalism because the belief in American exceptionalism has been a powerful, persistent, and popular myth throughout American history, and furthermore, has been used in formulating arguments for ever more internationalist and expanding foreign policies. Significantly, exceptionalism was formulated and identified with prior to the impressive increase in American power and influence in international politics exhibited in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, strongly suggesting that an exceptionalist vision was not promoted as a rationale for gaining territory and influence at this later time (although a complex interrelationship between rhetoric and action is always present). Thus, it is important that scholars of U.S. foreign policy continue to grapple with this concept.

Specifically, what needs to be grappled with is that American exceptionalism goes a long way toward integrating other terms commonly used to describe American identity, such as “manifest destiny,” “exemplar,” “missionary” and the like, as we will see below. This is not to deny the subtlety and complexity of American national identity, but rather to seek conceptual clarity. By clearing the field of its myriad of concepts meant to describe American identity, we may gain some clarity into its impact on U.S. foreign policy.

The next question is then, how has the powerful, persistent, and popular myth of American exceptionalism affected U.S. foreign policy? I shall first present the conventional view, and then present my own argument.

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY: THE ARGUMENTS

As anyone who studies U.S. foreign policy knows well, American exceptionalism and U.S. foreign policy have been intimately connected in the literature on U.S. foreign policy to such a degree that this connection is often simply assumed or taken for granted.
The conventional understanding of how the American identity as exceptional has influenced American foreign policy employs two main dichotomies: an identity dichotomy and a concomitant foreign policy dichotomy. The identity dichotomy consists of “exemplary” exceptionalism and “missionary” exceptionalism. This means that the United States is said to have viewed itself as either an isolated New World, providing an exemplar for the world without having to engage directly with this world; or that is has viewed itself as a hands-on missionary, actively promoting its values of democracy and capitalism around the world.

The exemplary identity is then typically said to inspire an ‘isolationist’ foreign policy (more recently, “aloof” has become the preferred term). Isolationism or aloofness was said to be exemplified by Puritan John Winthrop’s “City upon a Hill” speech and George Washington’s warning against “permanent alliances” in his Farewell Address of 1796. The missionary identity, on the other hand, is said to inspire an internationalist foreign policy. Missionary internationalism is often exemplified by Woodrow Wilson’s mission to make the world save for democracy, for example. Basically, isolationism or aloofness mean essentially keeping the world at a distance and tending to one’s own business, whereas internationalism means being actively engaged in world affairs.

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29 One could be more specific and divide “internationalism/isolationism” into issue areas: economic, political, cultural, and militarily. For instance, the classic literature on American isolationism would often point out that the United States, while generally isolationist, was never isolationist in economic affairs. See for example, Lawrence S. Kaplan, Entangling Alliances with None: American foreign policy in the age of Jefferson (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1987), who argued for “political isolationism,” or Bradford Perkins, Creation of the Republican Empire in Warren Cohen, ed. The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations, Vol. III (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
Some authors portray the relationship between the two descriptors as cyclical (i.e. American foreign policy has swung like a pendulum between isolationism and internationalism in accordance with its identity dichotomy), but according to the latest edition of the *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*, the current consensus in the field is that the exemplary strand of exceptionalism dominated the early years of U.S. foreign policy, whereas the missionary strand of exceptionalism conclusively won out in the foreign policy debate only after the attacks on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

**Conventional literature:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Identity</th>
<th>Foreign Policy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Exemplary Exceptionalism</td>
<td>Isolationist/“aloof”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missionary Exceptionalism</td>
<td>Internationalist</td>
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It is my argument that these two dichotomies should be discarded with. They rely on outdated assumptions and do not explain U.S. foreign policy traditions very well. Rather, the American national identity is better thought of as American exceptionalism, which has contributed to a more steady *unilateral internationalism* throughout U.S. foreign policy history. The argument of this article can thus be simplified and summarized in two parts:

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1. There is no identity dichotomy: American exceptionalism is a more correct substitute for the exemplary/missionary dichotomy.

2. There is no foreign policy dichotomy: Unilateral internationalism is a better description than isolationist/separate or interventionist.

To simplify enormously:

| National Identity (American exceptionalism) → Foreign Policy (Unilateral internationalism) |

THE IDENTITY DICHOTOMY

I will now critically examine the idea that the American national identity consists of two opposite strains of exceptionalism. The next section will dispute that this had led to two distinct foreign policy traditions. I aim to show that the tale of the two dichotomies is simplistic to the point of being incorrect.

To be absolutely clear: The founding of the United States of America did combine two powerful ideas of exceptionalism: the Reformation idea of America as a religious exemplar, and the Enlightenment idea of America as a political harbinger for the rest of the world. But rather than remain intact as two distinct strands of American identity, impacting upon two opposite foreign policy traditions, the two ideas of exceptionalism for all intents and purposes fused with the American Revolution. The early Puritan communities contributed a Protestant strain to the nascent national identity as a “chosen” people,32 which merged with an Enlightenment ideology in the mid-to late eighteenth century, forging a distinct American identity. The result was a powerful sense of exceptionalism which, while consisting of two complementary aspects, has not led to two distinct foreign policy traditions. Rather, American exceptionalism always inspired the United States to reform the world in its image. In other words, I argue that the “exemplar” part of the identity has been taken too literally, and as we shall see in my review of the foreign policy dichotomy, it has been coupled with (and said to

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have caused) a foreign policy tradition – isolationism – which is now discarded by historians of U.S. foreign relations. Its usefulness is thus highly questionable.

I will first review how the Puritans have been portrayed in studies of early American history as the originators of the American “exemplary” identity, then go on to review the origins of the “missionary” identity. We will see that both the exemplary and the missionary theses trace their origins to the same religious and political sources. What binds them together is the concept of American exceptionalism.\textsuperscript{33}

\textit{The Exemplary Identity}

Whereas America was not a promised land in the biblical sense, it was interpreted as such by the Puritan settlers. The religious aspect of the colonists is important in order to understand the development of the dominant images of the American national identity, as it is mainly this religious strain that has inspired both the exemplary and the missionary thesis in the foreign policy literature. Essentially, Puritan settlers, having experienced a “perilous exodus across the seas”, set out to create an ideal “American Israel” and a “New English Jerusalem.”\textsuperscript{34} They viewed their own exodus to the North American wilderness as part of the Christian millennial story. The Reformation had revealed the true Christians – the Puritans – and had at the same time opened up a New World. Surely this could not be a coincidence.\textsuperscript{35} “Far from being just a simple outpost of European civilization,” writes historian Anders Stephanson, the New World “was a sacred testing ground of nothing less than world-historical importance.”\textsuperscript{36}

The various settlements within the French, Dutch, and English colonies “exhibited a powerful urge on the part of their authors to reorder some aspects of the existing European world, to reverse some social, political, or economic trends they found worrisome, or to

\textsuperscript{33} McCrisken also notes this. See “Exceptionalism,” in \textit{Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy}, pp. 64-65.
\textsuperscript{34} Smith, \textit{Chosen Peoples}, pp. 137-38. Smith differentiates between two kinds of sacred homelands: the promised land – the land of destination; and the ancestral homeland – the land of birth, i.e. the land of destiny versus the land of history.
\textsuperscript{36} Stephanson, \textit{Manifest Destiny}, p. 10.
restore some imagined lost and less threatening world.” As Puritan leader John Winthrop warned his fellow travelers in the now famous sermon “A Modell of Christian Charity”:

For we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us; so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.  

Winthrop was sounding a warning to the early American colonists, and in seizing upon America as the site for the pursuit of their “idealized versions” of the Old World, these early colonists were both responding to and providing substantial reinforcement for America’s emerging identification as a place that, in its exceptional openness, “provided an appropriate venue in which to seek Europe’s new beginnings.”

Puritans: Retreat or Revolution?

The vast literature on early U.S. foreign policy assumes the Puritans wanted to isolate themselves from Europe and that this is the ideological source of a later U.S. foreign policy strategy of isolationism.

Notwithstanding the plentiful references to the isolationist Puritans common in scholarship on early U.S. foreign policy, however, the Puritan errand was multifaceted.

Whereas the earlier Pilgrims were reluctant to leave England – and did so only because life there became impossible for Separatists – the Puritans were on an “errand in the wilderness”

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40 Theodore Dwight Bozeman argues that Perry Miller’s original essay on the errand into the wilderness discusses two different kinds of “errands,” one immediate and practical (to reform themselves and keep their church pure); and one unspoken and assumed, that of being a “City Upon a Hill” and provide a model for England. Bozeman is critical of the tendency of later authors to rely uncritically on the conventional wisdom that developed about Miller’s second errand thesis, rather than investigate it and incorporate the meaning of the first errand into their work as well. See, “‘Errand into the Wilderness’ Reconsidered,” The New England Quarterly, Vol. 59, No. 2 (June 1986).
41 Kagan, p. 8; Deborah Madsen American Exceptionalism (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), p. 16. According to Madsen, John Winthrop’s fleet was made up of “non-Separating Congregationalists.” William Bradford’s Separatists indeed intended to make a permanent and lasting colony in the New World.
to create a “working model” of fully reformed Christendom “so that ultimately all Europe would imitate New England.” Indeed, Deborah Madsen argues that Winthrop’s Puritans were seeking to escape persecution and establish a “new Jerusalem” but also expecting to be able to return to a “reformed Egypt” – to launch a “counteroffensive across the Atlantic.” In this interpretation, the Puritans were on a mission of world historic importance, namely to reform Europe. In effect, they were “global revolutionaries.” Further evidence against the isolationism of early colonists is found amongst the Anglicans in Virginia, who viewed that land as an “extension of God’s chosen England” rather than a separate place to be isolated from the mother country. In fact, the Massachusetts Bay Company was not a “battered remnant of suffering Separatists thrown up on a rocky shore;” scholar of Puritans Perry Miller has pointed out. Rather, “it was an organized task force of Christians, executing a flank attack on the corruptions of Christendom” perpetrated by the Old World.

Certainly, the geographical distance between the New and the Old World that de Tocqueville remarked upon in the 1830s served to underline the feeling of isolation on the part of the colonists. But the simple fact of geographic distance could not be the cause of isolationism. The Anglo-American settlers saw themselves as “the vanguard of an English civilization that was leading humanity into the future,” competing against attempts by the Spaniards and the French to secure their own civilizing missions in North America. New England and the Old World was the same world in this line of thinking, spiritually if not geographically.

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“rather than a temporary refuge from the difficulties and persecutions they had endured in Europe.” The Separatists had no intention of becoming a model for Europe, they were, rather, “isolating” themselves from it. The Separatists were non-conformists, meaning they did not wish to belong to the Church of England. The Puritans would retrospectively become non-conformists after the Act of Uniformity in 1662.


43 Madsen American Exceptionalism, p. 16.


45 Stephanson, Manifest Destiny, p. 4. Nevertheless, Stephanson affirms the conventional view of the Pilgrims and the Puritans as exemplary isolationists or “separatists.” See also Miller, “Errand into the Wilderness.”


47 Kagan, Dangerous Nation, p. 12; Miller, “Errand into the Wilderness.”
And so we arrive at a rather different interpretation than the conventional one: the Puritan mission was not isolated from the rest of the world. They saw themselves as spreading and reforming European (English) civilization, not escaping it. Miller’s emphasis on the non-separating and non-isolationist Puritans is significant. The Puritans were missionaries, seeking to spread the revolution. Exemplary exceptionalism thus fuses with missionary exceptionalism.

**The Missionary Identity**

The *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy* argues America’s sense of mission is represented in the ideas of “manifest destiny,” “imperialism,” “internationalism,” “leader of the free world,” “modernization theory,” and the “new world order.”\(^{48}\) Interestingly, manifest destiny is acknowledged to be a *later version* of American exceptionalism.\(^{49}\) Indeed, the era of manifest destiny was proof that the “missionary” strand of exceptionalism was becoming the dominant one, the *Encyclopedia* writes.\(^ {50}\)

But tracing the origins of an American sense of “mission” leads us back to the Puritans and the religious founding of America. Ernest Lee Tuveson, sounding a familiar theme by now, grounded America’s sense of mission in millennialism, arguing the manner in which the early American colonists understood the Reformation and its significance for world history deeply influenced their views of the emerging nation. As we saw, the millennial narrative viewed the Reformation as ushering in a sequence of victories for the forces of Good over Evil - including the discovery of America, and culminating in the American Revolution.

This becomes even clearer when we look at the political exceptionalism that developed with the American Revolution. The political founding of America acquired its missionary aspect by viewing events as divinely inspired. The success of the Revolution (1776-1783) and the subsequent Constitutional Convention in 1787 were seen as so


\(^{49}\) Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*.

\(^{50}\) McCrisken, “American Exceptionalism,” p. 68.
improbable by many Founding Fathers that they could only explained it in terms of divine intervention. As John Jay said in 1777, Americans were the first people favored by Providence with the opportunity of rationally choosing their forms of government, and thus, as Benjamin Franklin asserted, Providence itself had called America to a post of honor in the struggle for the dignity and happiness of human nature.\(^5\)\(^1\) Indeed, the Founding only built up its mythical significance with the passing of time. Abraham Lincoln’s Secretary of State, William H. Seward, characterized the entrance of the United States on to the world scene as “the most important secular event in the history of the human race.”\(^5\)\(^2\) And Woodrow Wilson - American exceptionalism personified – argued the United States was a country that would employ its force “for the elevation of the spirit of the human race.”\(^5\)\(^3\) The focus on the Founding is important because it provided the new republic with ready symbols, myths, and statesmen for the building of a common national identity out of thirteen republics. Its Enlightenment principles, expressed through its famous documents, forged a nation out of ideas. But the Founding was also about cutting bloodlines. It laid the premises for the development of an American identity as opposed to a British one. Because the United States decided to break free from England it was prevented from using its English past as the focus of the usual national project of glorifying one’s heritage, especially since their departure from one another was less than amicable.\(^5\)\(^4\) Since, nevertheless, America’s past was British and the Americans themselves were largely Britons (or ‘Anglo-Scotch’), the new United States had to look to the future, where nothing but ideas existed. American nationality became connected to an instant ideology, forged in revolution as opposed to out of a secular

\(^{51}\) Weinberg, Manifest Destiny, p. 17.
\(^{52}\) Burns, America’s Sense of Mission, pp. 14; 90.
\(^{53}\) Quoted in McRisken, “Exceptionalism,” in Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy, p. 71.
\(^{54}\) In Thomas Jefferson’s words, the Revolutionary War started as “a family quarrel between us and the English, who were then our brothers.” Americans and English began as a single people, as “our forefathers were Englishmen…” But as the English started treating the colonists as slaves, a “betrayal of family ties” inspired the War. See Onuf, Jefferson’s Empire, p. 21.
development of a “community through history.” The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution therefore ‘created’ the American nation and its central myths.\textsuperscript{55}

The development of an American identity, forged in the dramatic experience of its settlers and combined with the providentially blessed Revolution, was already well on its way to being established when the floods of European immigrants arrived at its shores later in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{56} The influx of German and Irish Catholic immigrants – eventually supplying more cultural and religious diversity - had yet to arrive at its shores when the United States was in its infancy.\textsuperscript{57} By creating a nation on the basis of Enlightenment principles, American nationalism became universalistic. Its nationalism was civic, not ethnic, freed from the shackles of history. In Daniel Bell’s words, America was “an exempt nation” that had been freed “from the laws of decadence or the laws of history.” The reason for this is that America was “born modern” – it was freed from the burden of having to shake entrenched socioeconomic and political structures and did not have to undergo a “wrenching transition to modernity.”\textsuperscript{58} As Louis Hartz has pointed out, the United States does not have a feudal past.\textsuperscript{59} America was without past or precedent, but endowed with a great future.\textsuperscript{60}

Thus, the defining characteristic of an American national identity was not really that it was a “nation of immigrants,” but rather, that it was exceptional in its blessings of liberty and republicanism. To become an American, it is not enough simply to have immigrated to the United States; one must also accept this idea of American exceptionalism. Abraham Lincoln

\textsuperscript{56} For immigration statistics, see http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/cohn.immigration.us The years from 1630-1700 averaged 2,200 immigrants per annum; from 1730-1780: 4,325; from 1780-1819: 9,900. From 1832 the immigration rates increased dramatically (yearly average of 71,916, with high percentages coming from Ireland and Germany), whereas they virtually exploded in 1846 (averaging 334,506 until 1854, again with high rates of Irish and Germans). Not until the 1880s did the percentages of Central, Eastern, and Southern Europeans climb significantly in the immigration statistics.
\textsuperscript{57} When they did, in the 1830s and onward, New England historians, mostly clergymen, began emphasizing the Protestant origins of the United States. See Stephanson, Manifest Destiny, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{60} Hans Kohn, American Nationalism, p. 41.
stated that no matter the origins of immigrants, by accepting the “moral sentiment” of the Declaration of Independence, they were as much Americans “as though they were the blood of the blood and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration.” In essence, then, the motto *E Pluribus Unum* – out of many, one – fits better than perhaps initially thought. Originally suggesting the unity of a country made up of different colonies or states, it has come to mean today the unity created among a diverse population. Either way, the claim holds: America is diverse, but still one through its strong and unifying identity as exceptional.

In short, authors have identified the idea of American exceptionalism as the force behind the missionary part of American identity, which results in “U.S. expansion or intervention in the affairs of other nations,” as political scientist Trevor McCrisken writes. The United States would project its power abroad in order to help other nations become more like itself, since “inside every foreigner there is the potential, even the desire, to be an American.” Thus, writes McCrisken, the missionary strand of American exceptionalism postulates that all the people of the world want to be like Americans, whether they realize it or not.

Together the Puritans, the settlers, the explorers, the revolutionaries and the Founding Fathers contributed pieces to the developing American national identity. The religious and political founding combined to create an exceptionalist image, leading to the idea that the United States was a “model” for the rest of the world. What is not clear, however, is that this entailed the United States remaining aloof from the world’s troubles and only lead by

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62 Gunnar Myrdal, and many others, commented on this apparent paradox of Americans: they were a diverse lot yet one could easily identify a “strong unity” and a “basic homogeneity and stability in its valuations.” Myrdal quoted in Vanessa B. Beasley, *You, the People. American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), p. 25. See also Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma; the Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers), 1944.
example, as the *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy* argues. In fact, it seems to have meant the opposite.

**THE FOREIGN POLICY DICHOTOMY**

Those scholars of U.S. foreign policy who argue that there was an exemplarist identity in American history which inspired an isolationist foreign policy have a problem: contemporary historians do not think early U.S. foreign policy was isolationist at all, and the term itself only appeared in the early 20th century as an accusation used by adherents of a vigorous U.S. foreign policy to hurl against the opposition. In fact, the idea of an exemplar identity inspiring an isolationist – or aloof - foreign policy constitutes the *old* paradigm among historians of U.S. foreign relations. The idea used to be that the United States was founded as a country aiming to isolate itself from the world, cutting off any ties to potential corrupting influences emanating from the Old World. Many historians and political scientists have quoted Thomas Paine’s dictum from *Common Sense*, where he stated that the American colonies “ought form no partial connection with any part of [Europe]. It is the true interest of America to steer clear of European contentions.” Then they would usually conclude that Paine’s view would come to dominate “U.S. foreign policy over much of the next two hundred years,” as diplomatic historian Walter LaFeber has written, and the isolationist paradigm came to dominate diplomatic history.

No more, however.

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65 McCrisken, “Exceptionalism,” in *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*.
The Old Paradigm

Briefly, the old paradigm of early U.S. foreign policy held that the United States only emerged onto the international scene in the late nineteenth century, when it suddenly and forcefully expelled the Spanish empire from the U.S. sphere of influence in the Spanish-American War of 1898. (Along the way, the United States also somehow acquired colonies in Asia.) This imperial “aberration”—as Samuel Flagg Bemis called it—marked the transition from isolationism to internationalism in U.S. foreign policy, a tradition cemented with Woodrow Wilson’s quest to make the world “safe for democracy.” The reason for this early aloofness on the part of the United States was the commitment to being an “exemplar” to the world—an idea supposedly inherited from the Puritans and followed through by the Founders. And as we saw, the internationalist foreign policy tradition would also be traced back to exceptionalism—this time a missionary kind of exceptionalism. Some historians would argue that the United States in fact had cycled between internationalism and isolationism throughout its history, whereas others argued the United States was first isolationist, then internationalist. This was, in short, the old isolationist/internationalist dichotomous paradigm of diplomatic history, one which was also utilized by political scientists writing about U.S. foreign policy.

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The old paradigm argued that notwithstanding the initial alliance with France to gain independence, ‘isolationism’ was the strategy of choice of a new and idealistic republic, rejecting “traditional diplomacy and power politics,” as Felix Gilbert wrote in *To the Farewell Address*. Gilbert concluded that the United States existed under conditions in which its “foreign policy could become a policy of isolation.” In this classic paradigm of isolationism, George Washington’s “Farewell Address” (which counseled against “permanent alliances”) and Thomas Jefferson’s First Inaugural Address (which counseled against “entangling alliances”) “embedded isolationism in the public mind.” These statements were seen as the definitive formulation of early American thinking on foreign policy, updated to a nineteenth century context by the Monroe Doctrine. Importantly, the United States could be isolationist because, as C. Vann Woodward wrote, it enjoyed “free security” and free land, enabling the national myth of “America as an innocent nation in a wicked world” able to obtain freely and innocently that which other nations sought by the sword. The idea of “free security” naturally went along with an assumption of the United States as an isolated and isolating, as opposed to an expanding and expansionist, nation.

But this meant the isolationist paradigm contained an inherent contradiction. The classic paradigm argued that the United States had expanded dramatically during the nineteenth century, yet had – at the same time – been isolationist. The Spanish-American War seemed like a strange and sudden lunge for a republic that adhered to isolationism. Only by assuming nineteenth century continental expansion was somehow part of domestic history, as opposed to acts of foreign policy, could U.S. foreign policy be characterized as isolationist until the 1890s, when the United States suddenly experienced a brief period of imperial

70 Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address*, p. 89. Gilbert also noted how this view transformed through experience, of how even though Americans disliked traditional diplomacy and power politics; they came to realize these were not structures that would “fall at the first blowing of the trumpets of liberty.”


72 Ibid, p. 12.

“aberration” contrary to its assumed nature as exceptionally peaceful and good. Essentially, the old thesis of expansionism as ‘isolationism’ rested on a Eurocentric view of American foreign policy, a perspective that viewed U.S. international relations as primarily faced toward the Atlantic Ocean. This is connected to the fact that some historians of foreign relations assumed manifest destiny’s inherent legitimacy, rather than question westward expansion within a colonial or imperial framework, which again is connected to their assumption of a normative exceptionalism on the part of the United States.  

As historian Emily Rosenberg argues, “these processes of conquest are still often masked by the disciplinary structures that place ‘frontier’ history as a subdivision of ‘domestic’ rather than of ‘international’ history.” Indeed, not only classic literature, but also current scholarship straddles the expansionism-isolationism issue rather uncomfortably. Despite less frequent use of the term ‘isolationism’ the idea of isolation and aloofness is often used. For example, one often reads that the United States was an “aloof” country in its early years, taking care to keep away from the “continuous jostling of European power politics” but that it later became an “internationalist” country. For instance, political scientist Patrick Stewart argues that nineteenth century U.S. security policy consisted of “isolationism with a unilateral thrust.” As a rule, he argues, the United States kept political engagement with other nations to a minimum, but, “closer to home, the United States moved first toward continental domination – creating Jefferson’s ‘empire of liberty’ – and then regional hegemony.” Here, Stewart is arguing that hegemony in the western hemisphere is compatible with isolationism, an argument that seems more than a little Eurocentric. The argument of

75 Ibid. For a literature review of studies of the “great American desert” (as the study of U.S. foreign policy during the era of manifest destiny up till the Civil War has been called), see Kinsley Bauer, “The Great American Desert Revisited,” Diplomatic History Vol. 13, Issue 3 (1989).
76 Ruggie, “The Past as Prologue,” p. 89.
78 Stewart, The Best Laid Plans, p. 5.
79 Ibid.
“exemplary expansion” only holds however, if we assume that the acquisition of new territory, previously not belonging to one’s country, somehow falls within the realm of *domestic*, as opposed to *foreign*, policy.

In other words, the string of territorial acquisitions up till the Spanish-American War was characterized as a “domestic” matter (thus validating an “isolationist” or aloof thesis) by believing that large swaths of territory in North America and the Caribbean were “naturally” (future) parts of America. One essentially has to buy the logic of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism to support this argument. Granted, one could argue any ‘isolationism’ was purely directed at the European Great Powers. In other words, only Atlantic foreign policy counted as foreign policy. But this logic contains two tensions: First, it does not take into account the fact that these very same Great Powers had colonial possessions in the Americas and the Caribbean and thus coveting these territories was, in fact, a way of meddling in European affairs. Second, such an argument would then have to incorporate expansion and expansionism into a narrative about an “exemplary” or isolated country/people not seeking imperial possessions in the manner of the European powers. Never mind the awkward fit this makes for cases such as the ethnic cleansing of Native Americans, the Mexican-American War, and the continued obsession with Cuba.

In fact, nineteenth century continental expansion and expansionism was intimately related to the building of Great Power status – as current literature in history points out - and should thus not be seen in isolation from the United States’ later imperial adventures. When seen in the light of the steady expansion and strong expansionist ideology espoused by

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80 As Lawrence Kaplan did to modify his thesis of isolationism.
81 France controlled the St. Lawrence River region through eastern Canada and down the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River. After the Seven Years’ War, France ceded most of the Louisiana Territory east of the Mississippi River to Great Britain, and that west of the River to Spain. France retained the area around New Orleans. Spain also controlled Florida and the Caribbean, as well as the Southwest and California (until Mexican independence) and the Louisiana territory (until the 1800 Treaty of San Ildefonso with France).
Americans and their leaders since the Founding Fathers, one is loath to view the War of 1898 as merely an “imperial aberration.”

The New Paradigm

The idea of isolationism as the classic U.S. foreign policy strategy is a thesis that was very influential in the field of diplomatic history between 1960 and 1990. Today however, historians of U.S. foreign relations reject the term ‘isolationism’ as a valid description for early American foreign policy.82

It was the so-called revisionist historians of the Wisconsin School, led by William Appleman Williams, who challenged the classic story of isolationism. Turning the paradigm on its head, the revisionist historians argued that the United States was actively participating in international affairs from its inception, and that it never aimed to isolate itself from the world. Rather, the United States had always been “expansionist” and much less innocent than previously assumed by proponents of a normative exceptionalism on the part of the United States.83 The continental expansion during the nineteenth century and the ideology behind it - formerly falling in under western or settler/frontier history - was in fact the United States building an empire, and today this history is incorporated into the new paradigm as acts of foreign, not domestic, policy.84 In fact, it is now commonplace for historians of U.S. foreign relations to connect the issue of expansion and expansionism in the nineteenth century to an overall U.S. foreign policy tradition, linking early U.S. foreign policy to its twentieth century

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82 See for example, McDougall, Promised land, Crusader State and Kagan, Dangerous Nation for explicit rejections of the term, as well as George C. Herring, From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
foreign policy.\textsuperscript{85} One does not need to endorse the “Wisconsin school” thesis championed by Williams in order to argue that early U.S. foreign policy was not isolationist, however.\textsuperscript{86} Regardless of one’s theoretical attachments, the historiographical consensus that has emerged is that U.S. foreign policy was internationalist since the very founding of the country. Rather than a nation growing up in isolation enjoying “free security,” historians of early U.S. foreign policy agree that this was a nation “defined by its enemies, at home and abroad.”\textsuperscript{87}

“Revolutionary Americans did not aspire to isolation,” Peter and Nicholas Onuf write, “but rather to closer integration in the European world.”\textsuperscript{88} This, in essence, is the new paradigm.\textsuperscript{89}

The United States acquired a transcontinental territorial empire (if that is the word one wishes to use)\textsuperscript{90} in less than half a century; achieved supremacy in the Western Hemisphere;


\textsuperscript{86} See for example McDougall, Promised Land, Crusader State; Walter Russell Mead, Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World (New York: Routledge, 2002).


\textsuperscript{89} For authors rejecting the thesis of “free security” and showing how the United States was, rather, embroiled in international affairs and great power rivalries, see for example, J.C.A. Stagg, Mr. Madison's war: politics, diplomacy, and warfare in the early American republic, 1783-1830 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983); Peter Onuf & Nicholas Onuf, Federal union, modern world: the law of nations in an age of revolutions, 1776-1814, 1st ed. (Madison : Madison House, 1993); J.C.A. Stagg, Borderlines in borderlands: James Madison and the Spanish-American frontier, 1776-1821 (New Haven : Yale University Press, 2009).

\textsuperscript{90} For a discussion of what empire entails, see Charles S. Maier, Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). Although Maier hedges on whether or not the United States can be categorized as an empire as of yet, he makes the valuable point that the distinction between hegemon and imperial power is a fragile one: “At best, hegemony seems potential empire, not just a high-minded renunciation of intervention.” P. 63. For a thorough discussion of what hegemony entails, see Bruce Cronin, “The Paradox of Hegemony: America’s Ambiguous Relationship with the United Nations,” European Journal of International Relations 2001, Vol. 7 (1): 103-130. Michael H. Hunt argues the United States has been an empire for a long time and in several guises, beginning as a continental empire (a form of settler colonialism already at the time of national independence); turning to formal overseas empire at the end of the nineteenth century; thereafter practicing informal empire in large areas of Central America and the Caribbean, maritime East Asia, western Asia, and arguably even western Europe in the early Cold War. See “Empire, Hegemony, and the U.S. Policy Mess,” (May 21, 2007) History News Network. URL: \url{http://hnn.us/articles/37486.html}
and laid the foundations for a twentieth century superpower status in remarkably short time.\textsuperscript{91} This expansion was aided by the idea of American exceptionalism, since it was fueled by the conviction that U.S. foreign policy “is not tainted with evil or self-serving motives.”\textsuperscript{92} Americans, rather, “are exceptions to the moral infirmities that plague the rest of humankind, because our ideals are pure.” The active expansion was fueled by a faith in the axiom of America’s moral exceptionalism.\textsuperscript{93} Indeed, the spectacular appropriation of half of Mexico (as a result of the U.S.-started Mexican-American War (1846-1848)) was treated by many Americans as moral vindication of their values in what Albert Weinberg characterized as “the conception of a religious duty to regenerate the unfortunate people of the enemy country by bringing them into the life-giving shrine of American democracy.” Woodrow Wilson could not have said it better himself. Thus, the Mexican-American War confirmed the belief that American wars were wars for civilization, not subjugation – a moral exceptionalism. This perspective of continuity challenges the perspective of an aloof U.S. foreign policy up till the Spanish-American War of 1898, where the war is seen as the start of an American “empire” rather than its culmination. The empire literature\textsuperscript{94} argues there is little reason to categorize 1898 as a “break” in the history of U.S. foreign policy at all. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge might agree. As he noted in the debate over what to do about the Philippines during the Spanish-American War; empire was nothing new to the United States - it had been practicing it for over one hundred years.

What current history of the early Republic tells us it that the Founding Fathers expressed lofty visions for a future “empire for liberty” of the Americas. Expansionism was an integral part of the building of this empire, and, as previously mentioned, is intimately

\textsuperscript{91} Weeks, \textit{Building the Continental Empire}, p. x. Nugent calls the third – and current - American imperial phase the “global empire.”
\textsuperscript{92} Walter Nugent, \textit{Habits of Empire}, p. xiv.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{94} Literature that argues U.S. foreign policy has been constantly expansionist, rather than cycled between “internationalism” and aloofness or “isolationism.” See, for example, Nugent, \textit{Habits of Empire}; Onuf, \textit{Jefferson’s Empire}; Kagan, \textit{Dangerous Nation}. 

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connected to the rejection of an isolationist/internationalist dichotomy. The fact that the Americans did not see themselves as invaders, aggressors, or occupiers is testament to the powerful exceptionalist identity that was expressed through its manifest destiny version during the nineteenth century.

This is not to deny internal debate amongst historians. Historian of U.S. foreign relations Walter Russell Mead states that there are today two basic views among students of U.S. foreign policy: One school sees a distinct break between an early American tradition of reticence and modesty on the international stage and a later and more “problematic” era of assertiveness and expansionism (with the year 1898 seen as dividing the two ages). The other school connects important features of twentieth-century U.S. foreign policy (expansionism, assertiveness, imperial ambition) in American history dating back to the colonial era. Thus, whereas the concept of isolationism has been discarded, the foreign policy dichotomy separating an early tradition of “reticence” or “modesty” from a later tradition of assertive internationalism is still employed by some historians.

*Old Paradigms in History Die Hard in Political Science*

This subtlety is mostly lost on political scientists who write on U.S. foreign policy. Notwithstanding the rejection of the concept of ‘isolationism,’ many scholars still reproduce the dichotomy by substituting aloofness for isolationism – or, in other cases, authors still validate the thesis of isolationism. Fareed Zakaria based his well-received book on U.S. foreign policy on the assumption - and to him, the puzzle - that the United States “hewed to a relatively isolationist line” after the Civil War, arguing the United States underperformed as a

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96 Contemporary political scientists who explicitly reject the term “isolationism” are Rajan Menon, *The End of Alliances* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) and Jeffrey Legro, who, in his book *Rethinking the World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005) rejects the term “isolationism” but still uses the term “separateness” which serves much the same function in terms of breaking up U.S. foreign policy history into a dichotomy.
great power. In “the Past as Prologue,” John G. Ruggie writes that ever since George Washington expressed aversion to “entangling alliances” in his Farewell Address (which, in fact, he did not do, rather it was Thomas Jefferson who used that phrase much later) the United States has enjoyed its position as far removed from the power politics of the European great powers. Charles Kupchan writes of the United States’ “self-imposed isolation” in its early years (which he contrasts with the “radical internationalist departure since 1941”). Patrick Stewart argues that for most of the nineteenth century, “the dominant strain in U.S. security policy remained isolationism with a unilateral thrust.” John J. Mearsheimer writes that “the United States had strong isolationist tendencies until World War II.” Indeed, most accounts of U.S. foreign policy since 1941 rely on the spoken or unspoken assumption that the United States was “isolationist” or aloof up until the attack on Pearl Harbor December 7, 1941.

A different, but related, manner of using American exceptionalism to explain U.S. foreign policy is found in the works on multilateralism by John G. Ruggie and G. John Ikenberry. A multilateral vision of world order is in fact “singularly compatible with America’s collective self-conception as a nation,” argues Ruggie; indeed this vision “taps into


100 Stewart, The Best Laid Plans, p. 5.


102 Whether or not the United States was “isolationist” during the 1930s is a different debate, one which most recently has been critically examined by Bear F. Braumoeller, “The Myth of American Isolationism,” Foreign Policy Analysis 6(4): 349-371.

the very idea of America.¹⁰⁴ Both Ruggie and Ikenberry’s argument links the liberal founding with support for a liberal international order. Ruggie’s way of solving the problem of aloofness in U.S. foreign policy history was to argue that only political efforts employing the rhetoric of American exceptionalism could inspire lasting U.S. internationalism. Similarly, Ikenberry also uses American identity to solve the puzzle of why the United States transformed into a multilateral state during the Second World War and – significantly for a liberal theorist challenging realist theories – stayed committed to multilateralism after the Cold War ended. Ruggie and Ikenberry both build their understanding of American exceptionalism on Lipset’s, and both are explicit in that their understanding of the concept is objective (i.e. exceptional means different, not better).¹⁰⁵ Thus, they argue, American exceptionalism understood as being a distinct model of different ethnicities coming together to form a liberal polity helped the United States understand and commit to multilateralism later.

I have already argued against the usefulness of an “objective” definition of American exceptionalism, and I think Ruggie and Ikenberry commit a fundamental mistake when they identify American exceptionalism with descriptive qualities (a nation of immigrants defined by civic, as opposed to ethnic, nationalism) rather than as a national identity. The fact of different nationalities coming together to form the United States was less important to the development of the national identity than was the belief in American exceptionalism (in addition to the fact that the United States was quite homogenous in its early period). But, as intimated earlier, not only is it problematic for all the arguments mentioned above that they assume that there was an earlier tradition of isolationism or aloofness, it is even more problematic that they assume an “exemplary” strand of American exceptionalism to be behind this illusory foreign policy tradition.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 111.
I thus argue it is more fruitful to stop talking about exemplary and missionary identities and instead use the concept American exceptionalism. Its function as a unifying American identity is important in itself, of course, but also important is its ability to highlight the continuities in American foreign policy – such as the early and persistent expansionism of the nineteenth century justified by manifest destiny, a later iteration of American exceptionalism. Conceptualizing American exceptionalism as an identity also allows us to avoid a meaningless discussion about a normative hierarchy of nations. American exceptionalism cannot be a truth claim. The United States is not “freer,” or more democratic than “any other nation on earth.” Rather, American exceptionalism is an ideology, and, as such, it actually does not matter whether or not the United States “is still exceptional.” American exceptionalism - and U.S. foreign policy with it - has a teleological aspect to it: what is America today will be the world tomorrow. Americans have always assumed that people everywhere share American political and moral ideas – “that the people left to themselves would abandon their ‘wicked’ statesmen and espouse the cause of peace and reasonableness as understood in the liberal world, and above all, in the United States.” This underlies the idea that in every foreigner there is an American waiting to get out. It is an assumption that links the otherwise unlikely pairing of Woodrow Wilson, Ronald Reagan, William Jefferson Clinton, and George W. Bush, and their mission to reform the world in the American image.

I have also argued for the constant “internationalism” of U.S. foreign policy. The old thesis that America was an ‘isolationist’ nation before being ‘drawn’ into the dirty world of

107 As Americans ask themselves all the time. See, for example, Kathleen Parker, ”President Obama and that ‘exceptional’ thing,” Washington Post, January 30, 2011.
international politics after 1898 was itself a product of the implicit exceptionalism on the part of American historians. That certainly serves to explain why the Spanish-American War of 1898 and its accompanying colonial acquisitions were for a long time treated as an “aberration” in American history, rather than connected with previous American imperialism in the Western Hemisphere and later American imperialism in Asia and ultimately in Europe.\(^\text{110}\) Rather, if one accepts continental expansion, economic intercourse, and waging wars against Great and small Powers (such as the War of 1812 and the Mexican-American War) as evidence of internationalism, there can be no doubt that the United States was an active and eager participant in international politics from the first days of the Republic. Indeed, the unilateral character of this internationalism is naturally a consequence of exceptionalism: Thomas Jefferson thought that there were, 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.”\(^\text{111}\) The ideology permitting Americans to see their own nation’s rights as outweighing those of another was exceptionalism; that special mission of championing freedom and liberty on behalf of all mankind; transmitted from the “patriotic clergy who first propagated the idea of an ‘American Israel,’” to the Founding Fathers. America was, in Thomas Jefferson’s phrase of 1805, “the world’s best hope.”\(^\text{112}\)

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\(^\text{111}\) Ibid., p. 29.

\(^\text{112}\) Ibid., pp. 38-40.
CONCLUSION

Historians of U.S. foreign relations have concluded that isolationism in the early Republic never was a real phenomenon. I have concluded that the identity said to be behind it – exemplary exceptionalism – is also illusory in the way that it has been portrayed as an independent strain of the American identity. In essence, the dichotomous view of American exceptionalism and U.S. foreign policy does not comport with reality. Rather, the United States has always sought to expand, model, lead the way, and meddle – viewing itself as the one country chosen by God to lead the others to the End of History.113 One should thus reject the traditional identity dichotomy and its relationship to a foreign policy dichotomy.

Finally, American exceptionalism has been accused of explaining everything and nothing.114 Its function right now in the literature comes close to validating this criticism. This paper does not provide enough space for the complete elaboration upon my theory of how American exceptionalism can be more fruitfully used to explain U.S. foreign policy, other than to point to American exceptionalism as a formulation of an American national identity, and its connection to the discarding the old saw of the U.S. foreign policy tradition of isolationism or aloofness.115 Rather this article has sought to map the existing ways of conceptualizing American exceptionalism in the contemporary literature on U.S. foreign policy as well as re-trace its historical origins, in order to clarify its development as a belief in American uniqueness and thus point to its important function as an American identity. Its aim has been to contribute to a constructive debate on how to think about – and use as an analytical category – that concept which the Puritans imagined and de Tocqueville wrote about.

113 Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" The National Interest (Summer 1989).
115 But see Hilde Eliassen Restad, “Identity and Foreign Policy: The Case of American Exceptionalism and Unilateralism” PhD. Diss. Charlottesville, VA. University of Virginia, 2010 for such an attempt.