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# The influence of American exceptionalist thought on the role of the United States in the contemporary "War on Terrorism".

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THE INFLUENCE OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALIST THOUGHT  
ON THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES  
IN THE CONTEMPORARY "WAR ON TERRORISM"

A Dissertation Presented

by

MICHAEL DOMINIC D'AMORE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

February 2009

Department of Political Science

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Approved as to style and content by:

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John Brigham, Chair

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Dean E. Robinson, Member

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John A. Hird, Department Head  
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ABSTRACT

THE INFLUENCE OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALIST THOUGHT  
ON THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES  
IN THE CONTEMPORARY “WAR ON TERRORISM”

FEBRUARY 2009

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For the past fifty years, many scholarly works written on the subject of the American political tradition conclude that the polity in the United States has adopted many of the mores espoused in classical liberal thought. This dissertation examines the influence of American Exceptionalist thought on American foreign policy in the age of the contemporary “War on Terrorism.” The philosophy of American Exceptionalism has influenced the planning of foreign policy decisions and as part of the rhetoric used to explain those same decisions to the public. The Exceptionalist narrative has also contributed to shaping the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> relationship between the United States and the rest of the world.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### America in the Immediate Aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> Attacks<sup>1</sup>

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, George W. Bush delivered formal remarks from the Oval Office. Within his brief statement, Bush attempted to make sense of the assaults that occurred earlier that day. Among Bush's comments was the firm and sure statement that "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world."<sup>2</sup>

Nine days later Bush presented a formal address to a joint session of Congress and a nationwide television audience. During his forty-minute speech he attempted to answer the burning questions that were surely in the minds of many Americans - "Who attacked our country?" and, more specifically, "why do they (the terrorists) hate us?" To the second question Bush responded that the terrorists "hate our freedoms - our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each

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<sup>1</sup> The terms "America" and "American" are used often in this dissertation, mostly in reference to the theoretical concept known as "American Exceptionalism." Such terminology is often too casually used within the U.S. as synonymous with the United States of America. "America" more properly refers to the entirety of the Western Hemisphere. When it is used in the former sense, the term "America" is parochial and ethnocentric. I do not want to repeatedly use the term "America" in this dissertation without, at least, calling for heightened awareness of both the implications that follow the use of particular language in academic works and the often unspoken conceit that seems to permeate political discourse in the United States. Since this dissertation is about American Exceptionalism, I hope that such arrogance is not lost upon my readers.

<sup>2</sup> George W. Bush, "Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation," The Whitehouse, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html>.

other.”<sup>3</sup>

Almost immediately, Bush’s overly simple answers to the complex questions that stemmed from the September 11th attacks were greeted with well-deserved criticism.<sup>4</sup> However, Bush received much more praise than criticism from the mainstream media. Howard Kurtz of the Washington Post called Bush’s September 20<sup>th</sup> speech “rousing” and “often inspirational.” Kurtz also noted “no pundit on the major networks uttered a negative comment. They were, in a word, wowed.”<sup>5</sup>

Journalists were not the only individuals to heap praise upon Bush’s words. The noted public intellectual Stephen E. Ambrose compared Bush to Winston Churchill and predicted that his words would “resonate with the American people for a very long

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<sup>3</sup> George W. Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People,” The Whitehouse, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

<sup>4</sup> See the following sources for a sample of the critique leveled at Bush’s “our freedoms” theory: for a series of interviews with citizens of various Middle Eastern countries, see Peter Ford, “Why Do They Hate Us?,” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 27, 2001; for a list of indictments against U.S. intervention in the Middle East since 1947, see Stephen Shalom, “The United States and the Middle East: Why do ‘They’ Hate Us?,” Z Communications, <http://www.zmag.org/znet/viewArticle/18505>; for another critique of U.S. foreign policy, specifically the relationship between the U.S. and Israel, see Kenneth Zapp, “The Naiveté of Asking ‘Why do They Hate Us So Much’?,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, October 13, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Howard Kurtz, “Bush Speech Wins Critics, Wins Praise,” *Washington Post*, September 21, 2001. The title of this piece is rather misleading, since there is little mention of substantial criticism of Bush’s speech in Kurtz’s article. In fact, Kurtz cites a variety of glowing quotes on Bush’s remarks delivered by well-established members of the mainstream media.

time.”<sup>6</sup>

Some thought that Bush’s comments may have lacked complexity, but they struck a deep chord inside many Americans. It is likely that temporary feelings of shock, fear and insecurity led some Americans to agree with Bush simply because he occupied a position of authority. It is further possible that discriminatory feelings regarding race and difference conditioned many Americans into accepting the premise of Bush’s argument. However, I argue that there is another important reason for the widespread approval of Bush’s words.

Bush’s allusion to “our freedoms” seems to appeal less to the various tangible freedoms that are present in many liberal democracies than to the symbolic belief that the American polity is set apart from the world because it is special, unique and normatively superior to all other nations. The president came very close to echoing the often quoted words of Puritan leader John Winthrop who stated that “wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty vpon a Hill, the eies of all people are vpon vs... ..wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world (sic).”<sup>7</sup> Such “city on a hill” language appeals to, and often seeks to re-affirm, deeply ingrained exceptionalist assumptions shared by many within the American polity.

The subject of this dissertation will be an examination of the often alleged

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<sup>6</sup> Brent Baker, “Bush Earns Rave Reviews for Speech,” Catholic Exchange, <http://catholicexchange.com/2001/09/21/84958>.

<sup>7</sup> John Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charity,” in *The Puritans: A Sourcebook of Their Writings*, ed. Perry Miller & Thomas H. Johnson (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001), 199.

existence of an unconscious, yet pervasive, pattern of common political thought within the American polity. Scholars have often referred to this pattern of thought as “American Exceptionalism.”<sup>8</sup>

The focus of this paper will be to examine the influence of American Exceptionalist thought on contemporary U.S. foreign policy decision-making and the use of American Exceptionalist rhetoric to explain U.S. policy decisions surrounding the contemporary war on terrorism. In the process of developing the above thesis, I will also discuss the effects of exceptionalist thought on the relationship between the United States and the world since September 11, 2001.

To understand the relationship between American Exceptionalism and the rhetoric employed by George W. Bush, let us begin with the examination of the particular word “freedom.” The following dialogue is excerpted from the 1969 movie *Easy Rider*; the conversation takes places between George Hanson (played by Jack Nicholson) and Billy (played by Dennis Hopper).

*George Hanson:* You know, this used to be a helluva good country. I can't understand what's gone wrong with it.

*Billy:* Man, everybody got chicken, that's what happened. Hey, we can't even get into like, a second-rate hotel, I mean, a second-rate motel, you dig? They think we're gonna cut their throat or somethin'. They're scared, man.

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<sup>8</sup> Scholars credit Tocqueville with coining the term “America Exceptionalism,” often pointing to the following quote: “The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be in a similar one.” Quoted in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Richard D. Heffner (New York: Mentor, 1991), 160. In addition, see Judith Lichtenburg, “Precedent and Example in the International Arena” (paper presented at the “Intervention: Then What?” Conference, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, October 3-5, 2003), 16. See also, Michael Kammen, “The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration,” *American Quarterly* 45 (1993): 7.



*George Hanson:* They're not scared of you. They're scared of what you represent to 'em.

*Billy:* Hey, man. All we represent to them, man, is somebody who needs a haircut.

*George Hanson:* Oh, no. What you represent to them is freedom.

*Billy:* What the hell is wrong with freedom? That's what it's all about.

*George Hanson:* Oh, yeah, that's right. That's what's it's all about, all right. But talkin' about it and bein' it, that's two different things. I mean, it's real hard to be free when you are bought and sold in the marketplace. Of course, don't ever tell anybody that they're not free, 'cause then they're gonna get real busy killin' and maimin' to prove to you that they are. Oh, yeah, they're gonna talk to you, and talk to you, and talk to you about individual freedom. But they see a free individual, it's gonna scare 'em.

*Billy:* Well, it don't make 'em runnin' scared.

*George Hanson:* No, it makes 'em dangerous...<sup>9</sup>

This dialogue illustrates a classic disconnect between theory and practice in American politics. The concept of freedom is extolled and the word itself is rigorously defended by many Americans. At the same time, this concept is an abstraction that is completely devoid of any practical denotation. Many within the American polity proclaim to uphold and defend freedom, but their actions indicate that they might not fully understand the implication of such a statement.

When a group of individuals, such as members of the 1960s counterculture, attempt to attach a material meaning to the word freedom, they are often vilified by many Americans who consider themselves within the ideological mainstream of American politics. This presents us with a paradox – those who attempt to change freedom from a concept into reality by giving it a definition (in the case of the counterculture, defying the

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<sup>9</sup> Internet Movie Database, "Memorable Quotes for Easy Rider," The Internet Movie Database (IMDb), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0064276/quotes>.

social, economic and political traditions of their parents' generation) face persecution at the hands of individuals who extol the word "freedom" but loath the manifestation of it.

Freedom is an abstraction for the persecutors in the above example. Rather than representing a material state of existence with specifically defined liberties for individuals, "freedom" possesses no specific meaning beyond its apparent "American-ness." We can see the development of a circularly logical argument: Freedom is inherently American and America is the birthplace of freedom. This, of course, tells us nothing about either the nature of "freedom" or the American political tradition.

To develop a mature understanding of both freedom as a theoretical concept and the American political tradition in general, we must move beyond the often accepted rhetoric of American Exceptionalism. Exceptionalist rhetoric generally serves to cloud the discussion and often it also brings reasonable debate to a screeching halt. In this dissertation, I will attempt to add my voice to an ongoing reasonable debate involving the discussion over the nature of theoretical constructs such as "freedom" and the proper place of such constructs in the larger American political tradition.

### Outline of the Dissertation

In the subsequent chapter, I will briefly discuss the intellectual roots of the theory of American Exceptionalism. I will focus upon members of the Cold War Era "Consensus" School of American Exceptionalism, such as Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Boorstin and Louis Hartz. The consensus theorists are important because they were the most ardent adherents to the Exceptionalist tradition and, as such, would become indispensable if unwitting influences upon the development of the brand of

neoconservative thought that is dominant among the primary decision makers in the second Bush administration.<sup>10</sup>

In this dissertation, I am using the term neoconservative to define a variant upon traditional conservatism that became noteworthy in the late twentieth century. Neoconservatives often prioritize foreign policy issues above domestic policy; occasionally “neocons” openly disagree with traditional conservatives on social issues, but these issues are rarely prioritized in the neoconservative world view.

Neoconservatives have become the primary backers of an aggressive and often unilateral military policy. In fact, the prime objective of neoconservatism appears to be the projection of American military power around the globe with the goal of maintaining the United States as the unipolar power in the international arena. Neoconservatives play a significant role in the current Bush White House, especially in matters of foreign policy planning and implementation.<sup>11</sup>

Examples of neoconservative thinkers would be Irving Kristol, his son William,

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<sup>10</sup> Sources on the Consensus Theorists will include: Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1953), Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991), Louis Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964), Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men who Made It* (New York: Knopf, 1948).

<sup>11</sup> Sources on the association between the George W. Bush administration and neoconservatism, see Didier Chaudet, "The Neoconservative Movement at the End of the Bush Administration: Its Legacy, Its Vision, Its Political Future" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, San Francisco, CA, USA, March 26, 2008). For connections between the consensus theorists and neoconservatives, see Alan Wolfe, "The Revolution that Never Was," *The New Republic*, June 7, 1999), 42.

Charles Krauthammer, Charles Murray, Richard Perle, Daniel Pipes and Norman Podhoretz. The elder Kristol founded *The Public Interest*, the first journal that catered to what would become known as neoconservative ideas; Kristol is considered the founding father of neoconservatism by many supporters and detractors alike.<sup>12</sup>

The third chapter will discuss more recent approaches to the study of American Exceptionalism. There are two contemporary trends that I will highlight in Chapter Three.

First, I will examine the evolving thought of a long-standing adherent to the theory of American Exceptionalism. Seymour Martin Lipset stands out because of his large volume of work on the subject of American Exceptionalism. Lipset revisited the relevance of exceptionalist thought in the post-Cold War Era. His conclusions will certainly prove indispensable to a sophisticated understanding of the impact of Exceptionalism in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

In his recent works, Lipset noted that while the United States moved closer to adopting public controls over economic matters in the mid-20th century, it never came close to developing a comprehensive European-style social welfare policy. In fact, Lipset claimed that European political thought had begun to resemble the American version of classical liberal political thought by the end of the 20th century. Lipset cited contemporary European political movements, such as the “third way” centrism supported

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<sup>12</sup> For a brief overview of the neoconservative philosophy, see Irving Kristol, “The Neoconservative Persuasion,” American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, [http://www.aei.org/docLib/20030820\\_15676Kristolgraphics.pdf](http://www.aei.org/docLib/20030820_15676Kristolgraphics.pdf).

by the likes of British Prime Minister Tony Blair and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroder as support for his thesis.<sup>13</sup>

If Europeans are beginning to act more like Americans in their political relationships, does that make the United States less “exceptional?” Lipset stated that the “United States clearly is no longer as exceptional politically as it once was... ..(y)et for all that, the United States remains exceptional in other important ways. It is still an outlier at one end of many international indicators of behavior and values.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Lipset added that such distinctions between the U.S. and other nation-states are clearly not always positive; rather, he notes that in many ways American Exceptionalism is a “double-edged sword.”<sup>15</sup>

Second, I will examine the relationship between American Exceptionalism and conservative political theory. I will focus, on two particularly different conservative theories by looking at two of the most notable interpretations of the post-Cold War global order. The two theorists that I will examine are Francis Fukuyama and his “End of History” thesis and Samuel Huntington and his “Clash of Civilizations” thesis.

In 1989, Fukuyama wrote his historic essay “The End of History?” as Soviet

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<sup>13</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, “Still the Exceptional Nation?,” *Virtù e Fortuna* 1, <http://martintanaka1.blogspot.com/2007/01/still-exceptional-nation-by-seymour.html>

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> I will be examining Lipset’s recent works, particularly Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996) and Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks, *It Didn’t Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).

Communism was collapsing in Eastern Europe. Using Hegelian language, Fukuyama predicted that the demise of Soviet Communism would usher in “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”<sup>16</sup>

Effectively, Fukuyama was articulating a transcendent version of American Exceptionalism. For him, the exceptional United States had overwhelmed its greatest enemy and, in the process, transformed the ideological structures of the entire globe into its own image and likeness.

Since the 1992 publication of his theory in full book form, Fukuyama has tempered his perspective. In the aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, Fukuyama reversed himself on the question of the inevitability of history and furthermore, he claimed that the impact of organizations such as Al-Qaeda compels Westerners to ask “real questions about the viability of our civilization.”<sup>17</sup>

In 2006, Fukuyama appeared to temper his original thesis even more with a hard-hitting critique of the neoconservative movement and the role of the neo-cons in promoting the current Iraq War. However, in spite of Fukuyama’s clear attempt to adjust his thesis, the original declaration of the “end of history” provides political inspiration for those who chose to adopt the messianic style of foreign policy associated with the

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<sup>16</sup> Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest*, Summer 1989, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Francis Fukuyama, “Has History Started Again,” *Policy*, Winter 2002, 3. Also, see Francis Fukuyama, “The End of American Exceptionalism,” *New Perspectives Quarterly*, October 2001.

administration of George W. Bush.<sup>18</sup>

Unlike Fukuyama, Samuel Huntington did not declare the end of the Cold War to be the end of “history.” Rather, Huntington suggested that serious conflicts would remain part of the new global order; the nature of such conflicts, however, would be fundamentally cultural instead of political or economic.<sup>19</sup>

Huntington does not refer to an “American” civilization, specifically; however he does discuss the distinctive elements of “Western” civilization, as he defines it. Aspects of Western culture highlighted by Huntington, such as “individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, rule of law, democracy, free markets (and) the separation of church and state,” are strikingly similar to the traditionally “exceptional” traits thought to be dominant within the American polity.<sup>20</sup>

Huntington’s theory of civilizations lacks the messianic qualities found in Fukuyama. For Huntington, America will not conquer all with the superiority of its culture. However, Huntington does provide us with an important construct that doubtlessly influenced neoconservative foreign policy practitioners - the partitioning of the globe into separate and rival camps.

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<sup>18</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven: Yale University, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?,” *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993, 22.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 40. The definition of Western Civilization is subjective. Huntington politically defined Western Civilization as the nation-states of Western Europe and nation-states with political and social institutions that were heavily influenced by Western Europe, including the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Emad El-Din Aysha concluded that Huntington's thesis, like the theory of American Exceptionalism, stressed the existence of and the need for "political unity" and "cultural homogeneity" within the subject population<sup>21</sup> Such core ideals encourage the adoption of and support for a foreign policy based upon the principle that "(e)ither you're for us or you're against us."<sup>22</sup>

In the fourth chapter, I will examine the influence of American Exceptionalist thought on U.S. policy following the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks. I will analyze the discourse surrounding the "new normal" standard of American life on the home front during the contemporary war on terror. I expect to find that current U.S. policy is presented to the average citizen by appealing to Americans' sense of themselves as unique and superior to other nations.

In the fifth chapter, I will examine the condition of American Exceptionalism in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>. I will consider the economic, political and social position of the United States and its citizens. This examination will reflect on America domestically and also on the role of the United States within the larger global community.

As a corollary to the main argument in this chapter, I plan to consider the image of the United States abroad. I anticipate finding that the image of America has been

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<sup>21</sup> Emad El-Din Aysha, "Samuel Huntington and the Geopolitics of American Identity: The Function of Foreign Policy in America's Domestic Clash of Civilizations," *International Studies Perspectives* 4 (2003): 113.

<sup>22</sup> George W. Bush, "President Unveils Back to Work Plan." The Whitehouse, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011004-8.html>.



tarnished by the sense that the United States is profoundly arrogant concerning its perceived uniqueness in the world.

My concluding chapter will discuss the potential for moving beyond the Exceptionalist myth. Included in that chapter will be an examination of the contemporary thought of Rogers Smith. Smith has argued that the American Exceptionalists were too narrow in their focus on a particular set of social relations. When a multitude of social relations is examined, Smith asserts, it becomes apparent that there are multiple political traditions within the American polity.<sup>23</sup>

Several of these traditions (e.g., the maintenance of slavery long after its disappearance in the remainder of the Western world, the denial of citizenship and voting rights) are not at all valorous, especially when compared to the self-serving nature of the traditions trumpeted by the American Exceptionalists. However, recognition of these multiple traditions, with warts and all, gives Americans an important sense of agency over their political future.<sup>24</sup>

Smith's "multiple traditions" theory challenges the doctrine of American Exceptionalism in a most profound way. If the Exceptionalists are correct in their argument that America is unique and its polity is hopelessly enslaved to the classical liberal tradition, then we can infer that there is little hope for the successful implementation of fundamental policy changes. However, if there is evidence that there

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<sup>23</sup> Rogers M. Smith, "Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America," *American Political Science Review* 87 (1993): 549-550.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 550.

are multiple traditions and these traditions have figured prominently at various historic moments, then prospects for fundamental change are significant and Americans have the opportunity to re-fashion their polity based upon a different narrative.

In my conclusion, I plan to address Smith's prescription for a less "exceptional" America and I will also provide my own thoughts on the prospects for a post-Exceptionalist United States. Finally, I will discuss the benefits of accepting a different narrative, particularly the positive impact that a new American narrative might have on the global perception of the United States.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE INTELLECTUAL ROOTS OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

#### Introduction

As noted in the previous chapter, exceptionalist interpretations of the American experience can be traced back to the Puritans. However, it was intellectuals during the Cold War era who attempted to find a modern application for the long-standing belief that the American polity is a unique institution in world politics. In this chapter, I will discuss the major figures that gave birth to the modern conception of American Exceptionalism and I will further explain their influence upon the accepted wisdom concerning Exceptionalism.

One should not be surprised to find an explicitly exceptionalist conception develop during the 1950s since the political thought of this period was dominated by the bi-polar global relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. Scholars, like many Americans, were searching for a model that could explain the comparative differences between the conflicting world-views championed by these two dominant nation-states.

Each of the first three sections of this chapter will briefly examine a theory presented by one of the major Exceptionalist thinkers of this time. The final section of the chapter will discuss the major similarities among the various brands of early Exceptionalism. In addition, I will attempt to point out the features of each theory which impact the most upon the discussion of the role of the United States in the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> world.

Richard Hofstadter and *The American Political Tradition*

Richard Hofstadter can reasonably be considered the first Cold War Consensus theorist. As a young man, Hofstadter was influenced by the materialist analysis of history advocated by Charles Beard and others during the Progressive Era. He was active in the American Communist Party before World War II, but did not remain a member for very long. By the late 1940s, Hofstadter had abandoned leftist political ideology but largely maintained a classical Marxian approach as his primary tool of historical inquiry.<sup>25</sup>

In 1948, Hofstadter wrote *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*, the first major post-World War II work dealing with the question of American Exceptionalism. Hofstadter's book was a compilation of twelve biographical portraits of American leaders, some of whom initially appeared to reside outside of the political mainstream of their time. Hofstadter concluded that all of the men profiled in his book held political ideas that were strikingly similar to one another in spite of the common perception that they qualified as ideological outliers from the norm.<sup>26</sup>

The main thesis of this work is Hofstadter's argument that the leaders featured in his book are a microcosm of the entirety of American political thought. In his biographical profiles, he attempted repeatedly to demonstrate that the parochial political differences which surface at given moments in American history were not systemic

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<sup>25</sup> Bruce Kuklick, review of *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography*, by David S. Brown, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Fall 2006, 574-575.

<sup>26</sup> Hofstadter 1948, v-x.

conflicts but were actually minor policy disagreements. Furthermore, Hofstadter asserted that such seemingly significant policy disagreements occurred between factions and leaders who ultimately shared a multitude of fundamental assumptions.<sup>27</sup>

The American political scene, according to Hofstadter, was marked by a “series of conflicts between special interests” rather than between socio-economic classes. He claimed that both professional historians and casual observers of American social history often miss this point because they focus upon the ferocity of the conflict at various moments in the past. Historians, he believed, placed conflict “in the foreground” while “commonly shared convictions (were) neglected.”<sup>28</sup> Hofstadter’s project in the book was to offer a counter-argument to the majority of historians who, he believed, wrongly focused on minor conflicts rather than on the significant consensus.<sup>29</sup>

He reasoned that the intense and sometimes violent moments in American history were not revolutionary moments. Rather, these dramatic moments camouflaged the fundamental nature of struggle in American politics; political conflict has often been among elites over narrow points of divergence within their own ranks.<sup>30</sup> He stated that “beyond temporary and local conflicts there has been a common ground, a unity of cultural and political tradition, upon which American civilization has stood.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, ix-x.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, viii-ix.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

Hofstadter asserted that major political leaders and the movements that they championed over the years displayed strikingly similar core beliefs. For him, these core beliefs were primarily economic and, furthermore, distinctly capitalistic. The shared assumptions included a rather strict adherence to three principles: “the right to property, the philosophy of economic individualism (and) the value of competition.”<sup>32</sup>

Based upon his observations, Hofstadter reasoned that a unique political culture developed within the United States as a result of the near consensus on fundamental political values. He claimed that the “range of ideas” in American political discourse was narrow and limited by the common assumptions that were held by all but a small group of “dissenters and alienated intellectuals.”<sup>33</sup>

In this unique political culture, procedural democracy and the accompanying equality of opportunity for all citizens are often lauded as a fundamental feature of the American tradition. However, Hofstadter pointed out that democracy was seen as an important value because it provided opportunities for the personal enrichment of the isolated individual. From his observations, he concluded regrettably that the collective or fraternal aspect of democracy appeared to be neglected in the American political scene.<sup>34</sup>

For Hofstadter, traditional American individualism and the propensity to focus upon the strictly procedural aspects of democracy combined to foster a culture that has

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., viii.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

been “intensely nationalistic and for the most part isolationist.” In addition, he claimed that “it has been fiercely individualistic and capitalistic” as well.<sup>35</sup>

### Daniel Boorstin and *The Genius of American Politics*

If Hofstadter is correct that there is a clearly rigid consensus in American political thought, the next question should be how and why did such uniformity in political thought development in the United States? Daniel Boorstin offered one possible answer to this philosophical mystery.

Boorstin was both a legal scholar and a professor of history at the University of Chicago. Much like Hofstadter, Boorstin was a proponent of left-wing politics as a young man, but he clearly drifted away from socialist thought or any other definitive ideology by the 1950s. In fact, his book *The Genius of American Politics*, written in 1953, trumpeted his belief that the American polity lacked a strong political ideology of any kind. Boorstin wrote *Genius* early in his intellectual career, but it stands as both his most overtly political and his most explicitly exceptionalist statement.

For Boorstin, the foundation of America’s philosophic “genius” is the unqualified simplicity of American political thought. He clearly assumed that his consideration of American politics as “genius” diverged fundamentally from the standard philosophic analysis which focused upon a few extraordinary intellectuals who wrote memorable treatises. Quite the contrary, Boorstin asserted that American political thought qualified

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, x. Late in his academic career, Hofstadter appeared to revise his exceptionalist viewpoint. The primary source for his seeming transformation is Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968).

as “genius” in spite of its lack of both philosophical giants and an original canon.<sup>36</sup>

Boorstin’s assertions lead him into a puzzling paradox that he attempted to overcome in the course of his book. Early in *Genius*, he stated that Americans hold a firm belief that “political life (in the United States) was based on a perfect theory;” yet, he further asserted that “no nation has ever been less interested in political philosophy or produced less in the way of theory.”<sup>37</sup>

For the remainder of the text, Boorstin endeavored to solve the political paradox between the intuitive sense that the American nation was built upon the perfect theory and the general aloofness of most Americans toward the musings of intellectuals and philosophers. In so doing he claimed to have discovered the source of both the uniqueness and the greatness in American political life.<sup>38</sup>

For Boorstin, the source of the American consensus was a phenomenon he called “givenness.” Boorstin defined this concept as the belief in values that “are in some way or other automatically defined: *given* by certain facts of geography or history particular to us.” He further asserted that there was both a distinctive “American Way of Life” and an inimitable “American Way of Thought.” These exceptional social and cultural traits were “given” or born out of the unique material conditions found on the American

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<sup>36</sup> Boorstin, 2.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*



continent.<sup>39</sup>

Boorstin hypothesized that faith in the “givenness” of concrete American ideals is so strong that certain political characteristics appear to be interconnected with the United States itself. He stated that Americans:

have been told again and again, with the metaphorical precision of poetry, that the United States is the *land* of the free. Independence, equality, and liberty, we like to believe, are breathed in with our very air.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, he asserted that Americans tend to think of political conditions such as equality, liberty and democracy as distinctively possessions of the United States.<sup>41</sup>

What if Boorstin is correct that the average American sees a distinction between “*American* equality” and garden-variety equality or “*American* democracy” and rudimentary democracy?<sup>42</sup> If this is the case, then the political terminology in question becomes devoid of its literal meaning. Instead the term is given an abstract definition by its American interpreter; equality, for example, is nothing more than “*American-ness*” and “*American-ness*” is all about equality. The above statement is tautological and, potentially, susceptible to manipulation by those who profess to be the keepers and defenders of The American Way of Life.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

## The Source of “Givenness”

Boorstin based his notion of “givenness” on a key assumption about the American polity. Above all, he asserted, Americans tend to believe that the history of their land is strikingly homogeneous. While admitting that this common set of assumptions is actually the product of poor historical analysis, Boorstin stated that this widespread ahistorical perspective is one of the fundamental factors in the strong feeling of cultural continuity throughout American development.<sup>43</sup>

Boorstin asserted that a noticeably orthodox political tradition developed as a result of the dominant paradigm in the American political tradition. Furthermore, Boorstin claimed that the existence of an American orthodoxy becomes obvious when one examines the markedly unique political behavior of citizens of the United States.<sup>44</sup>

One example Boorstin outlined to support his orthodoxy hypothesis was the number of fanatical and capricious “heresy-hunts” throughout American history. Historical moments such as the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts, the post-World War I Red Scare and the McCarthy era were prime examples cited by Boorstin as classical American heresy-hunts.<sup>45</sup>

Heresy-hunts are not uncommon in modern history, but in most nation-states such repressive action is inflicted upon practitioners of an explicit political philosophy by their

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 9-12.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 11-14.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

ideological rivals. In America, Boorstin stated, those accused of political heresy are not branded in accordance with their ideology, rather, they are accused of “acts of irreverence” against the “American creed.”<sup>46</sup>

In other words, the supposed heretics are seen as more than ideological enemies within the same polity; they are accused of possessing ideas that are foreign to the “American way.” Furthermore, the alleged heretics are proclaimed to be anti- or un-American. Boorstin claimed that this tendency is unique to the United States. Simply stated, he wrote that “‘un-Italian’ or ‘un-French’” are not terms used in the same way as un-American.<sup>47</sup>

Boorstin stated that even intellectuals are prone to criticize the alleged heretics within their midst. He cited critical attacks launched against Charles A. Beard’s class analysis of the American Constitution as a prime example of the kind of heresy-hunts that took place inside the hallowed halls of academia.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to heresy-hunts, Boorstin also cited the cherished constitutional doctrine of “original intent” as another illustration of the conspicuous orthodoxy within American politics. Boorstin argued that only in America could such a doctrine persistently be taken seriously by intellectuals as well as common citizens. By contrast,

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 14. The term “American Creed” originally came from economist Gunnar Myrdal’s study of race in the United States during the 1940s. See Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1944).

<sup>47</sup> Boorstin, 14.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 18.

he stated that no “sensible Briton would say that his history is the unfolding of the truths implicit in Magna Charta and the Bill of Rights.”<sup>49</sup>

#### The American Orthodoxy: Consensus and Continuity in History

Much like Hofstadter, Boorstin asserted that there was a conspicuous consensus of political thought throughout American history. However, unlike Hofstadter, who began his examination of American political philosophy with the American Revolution, Boorstin traced the American Consensus back to the Puritans.

The Puritans, Boorstin said, created a philosophy that conformed to their life in the American wilderness. In effect, the Puritan conception of political life was a creed designed to fit a society that possessed a direct relationship with nature.<sup>50</sup>

Because they were living in an environment that was extremely foreign to their European sensibilities, Boorstin claimed that the Puritans were compelled to develop techniques that allowed them to subdue and conquer their surroundings. In addition to material adaptations, Boorstin stated that the thought patterns of the Puritans were focused around their competition with nature and with the obstacles that emanate from it. From these Puritan origins, Boorstin stated, a distinct pattern of political thinking developed within the American polity. As decades and centuries passed by, this pattern of thought became cemented into the minds of subsequent generations of Americans.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 36-38.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

The American Revolution, which Boorstin said was “hardly a revolution at all” rather “merely a colonial rebellion,” did not pose a challenge to this political consensus.<sup>52</sup> Boorstin claimed that, unlike the French Revolution of the same era, the American Revolution was conservative and legalistic in its origin. He asserted that the revolt against the British monarch was philosophically similar to the 17<sup>th</sup> century struggle of the British Parliament over the same authority. According to Boorstin, there was no radical departure in ideology with this revolution; rather it was simply a successful attempt to institute British Constitutional governance in the American colonies.<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, Boorstin claimed that the Civil War, while a tremendous cataclysm in American history, did not mark a significant ideological departure from the American consensus. Much like the American Revolution, Boorstin stated that the political discourse surrounding the Civil War was mostly legalistic wrangling between two geographic territories within a large nation-state. Boorstin asserted that instead of two competing sides with distinctly different world-views, the Civil War was a conflict between two sides that saw themselves as fighting for their specific legal rights within an already established political framework. The framework, Boorstin said, remained static and unchallenged by either side during this titanic struggle.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 68-69.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 67-69, 81-84 and 95-96.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 100-101 and 121-122.

## Consensus in Both Politics and Religion

In addition to tracing the American philosophical consensus thought history, Boorstin provided a thorough analysis of the unique relationship between religion and politics in the United States. He identified what he believed to be an important correlation between the philosophic consensus and the frequent “mingling of religious and political thought” in America.<sup>55</sup>

Boorstin stated that an overt expression of religious faith was essential for any individual who wished to have a significant political impact on America. He said that “it is important to be a member of *a* church... (w)hich particular church is far less important.”<sup>56</sup>

For Boorstin, the parallel between politics and religion was simple, yet enlightening. Political life thrived in the United States in spite of the noticeable lack of a sophisticated pursuit toward a guiding political ideology. Similarly, he said that “religion flourishes in this country” while “theology and religious studies languish.”<sup>57</sup>

In sum, Boorstin considered the general acceptance of religion and the equally wide-ranging rejection of theology as significant reinforcement for the existence of his doctrine of “givenness.” Basically, he asserted that Americans find it unnecessary and often disadvantageous to adopt an overarching theory that explains political, social or

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 135.

even spiritual relations. All encompassing theories are extraneous because they believe that certainty is imbued in the institutions of this continent.<sup>58</sup>

### The Impact of "Givenness" on American Political Thought

Boorstin's conclusions concerning the impact of "givenness" on American politics are as distinctive as his observations of the political scene in the United States. Based upon Boorstin's observations, one could potentially build the foundation for a scathing critique of the American polity and the naiveté of its citizens concerning their history and political relations. However, rather than finding fault with the uniqueness of American politics, Boorstin celebrated it and considered it to be a mark of inherent "genius."

Boorstin claimed that there was profundity in the apparent simplicity of American politics. He explained his conclusions with an analogy; he compared the perceived political consensus with the religious practice of the Ancient Hebrews.

Boorstin stated that:

When the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem fell in 63 B.C. and Pompey invaded the Holy of Holies, he found to his astonishment that it was empty. This was, of course, a symbol of the absence of idolatry, which was the essential truth of Judaism. Perhaps the same surprise awaits the student of American culture, if he finally manages to penetrate the Arcanum of our belief.<sup>59</sup>

For Boorstin, the lack of "idolatry" in American politics can be found in the perceived wide-ranging rejection of essentialist political theories along with the general

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 133 and 137-8.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

acceptance of a theory-less philosophical consensus. He claimed that the rejection of ideological idolatry discouraged political attempts to overhaul society based upon grand visions of human nature and human social relations. Instead, our tendency to dismiss theoretic idols fostered a healthy pragmatism and a (small c) conservative tendency in American politics. The result of such a traditionalist consensus is that perspectives on the extremes of the political spectrum remain rather unpopular and quite unlikely to disrupt the smooth functioning of the polity.<sup>60</sup>

Furthermore, Boorstin asserted that the combination of a lack of political idolatry and the strong sense of historical continuity led many Americans to consider the United States a nation of destiny. He referred to this feeling of destiny as “seamlessness.” As with “givenness”, he viewed the perceived phenomenon of “seamlessness” as a positive value because it cultivated a feeling of togetherness and unity in the American polity.<sup>61</sup>

At the beginning and again in the closing pages of his book, Boorstin provided one final observation that will be very important for our study of American Exceptionalism. He asserted that the unique “genius” of American politics, literally, is one of a kind and cannot be replicated in other nation-states. Materially and historically, he stated, America is different and separate from the remainder of the world, including the Western world. Just as European political ideologies did not play well in America, our American pragmatism could not be exported to countries that did not share in our

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 3 and 175-176.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 175-177.



unique history and geography.<sup>62</sup>

As he constructed his argument, however, Boorstin seemingly glossed over a potential weakness in his theory. He did not take into account that while both “givenness” and “seamlessness” represented a repudiation of a classical philosophical orthodoxy they also, in effect, represented a political theory in their own right. As we continue this exploration of American Exceptionalism, we must make room for the possibility that the American consensus may very well be an ideology as meaningful as the various theories developed in Western Europe.

Louis Hartz and the *Liberal Tradition in America*<sup>63</sup>

Our next theorist would also argue that there was a resilient political consensus in American politics. Yet, in contrast to Boorstin, he would define that consensus in ideological terms. Louis Hartz was a Harvard professor who, like Hofstadter and Boorstin, had a background in socialist thought. However, by the 1950s, Hartz had completely abandoned the idea that socialism could have a meaningful impact upon the American political scene.

Hartz's most important contribution to the study of political theory was his attempt to explain the development of political ideology in the regions of the world that were conquered and colonized by Europeans. Hartz claimed that nations such as the

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 4-6 and 186-187.

<sup>63</sup> A portion of this section was adapted from chapter 2 of my Masters thesis. See Michael D. D'Amore, “C. L. R. James on the ‘American Civilization’: The Contrasts between James and Louis Hartz on the Subjects of American Individualism and the Liberal Tradition,” (M.A. thesis, University of Vermont, 1998), 17-27.

United States, Canada, South Africa, Australia, and the countries of Latin America developed into societies that were "fragments" of their European colonizers.<sup>64</sup>

In terms of political ideology, Hartz asserted that these new nations became stuck in time and developed a political culture that almost unquestionably accepted the philosophy of its European conquerors at the time of the original settlement. Hartz stated that the acceptance of the founding ideology in these new societies was so deep that it sank "beneath the surface of thought to the level of an assumption."<sup>65</sup>

For the purposes of this study, we will concentrate on Hartz's analysis of the American political culture. Hartz claimed that the United States presents "the clearest case," among the European fragments, of the ideological dominance of liberalism.<sup>66</sup>

Based on historical development and recorded patterns of political action in the United States, Hartz concluded that political conflicts in America are framed by a rigidly defined liberal tradition. He claimed that political debate in America is often nothing more than superficial disagreements between factions that share the same Lockean presuppositions. Hartz's thought is based on the premise that the lack of a dominant

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<sup>64</sup> Hartz 1964, 3-5.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 72. Tom Wicker gives an excellent summary of Hartz's definition of liberalism. Wicker states that a liberal "is one who believes in individual liberty, equality, and capitalism and who regards the human marketplace, where a person succeeds or fails by his or her own efforts and ability, as the proper testing ground of achievement." See Tom Wicker, introduction to *The Liberal Tradition in America*, by Louis Hartz (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991), ix.

feudal experience in America caused this particularly fixed ideology of liberalism to mature.<sup>67</sup>

If Americans are "born equal"<sup>68</sup> as Hartz theorized then they are born without the residue the socio-political hierarchy indicative of feudalism. Americans also lack another remnant of feudalism; simply, a sense that each social class, from the most dominant to the most submissive, is reliant upon the others for its continued existence. The important tendencies of a feudal residue, which Hartz's claimed was missing in America, included a history of communal social arrangements, a feeling of class identity, a sense of both competing and cooperative class interests, and a background in internal revolutionary process.

Hartz explained that due to this distinctly equal and individualistic existence, alternatives to liberalism, such as socialism, seem alien to Americans. Such alternatives, he stated, often are rejected out of hand by Americans because they are based on a strong sense of communal relations and class identity -- two traits that are missing in American life and culture.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Hartz 1991, 3, 14-15 and 68-69. Hartz defines feudalism as the "institutions of the medieval era" (i. e., a system with a monarchical form of government, the existence of a landed gentry that rule over their fiefdoms and the peasantry that live and work on the land, strict traditions of inheritance of land and property, etc.).

<sup>68</sup> Hartz borrows here from Tocqueville.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

## Locke's Impact on the United States

In *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Hartz presented his argument in great detail. Once again, he argued that the United States is a unique example of the practice and socialization of the classical liberal doctrine, specifically the liberalism expressed in the writings of the English philosopher John Locke. According to Hartz, the United States is a bastion for an uncritical acceptance of the liberal norm. This is a norm that Americans perceive to be inherent in any "good and just" society, and an unspoken, yet prevalent aspect of their own national identity.

Furthermore, Hartz claimed that Americans, in general, were not standard, garden variety Lockean liberals, but rather, "irrational" Lockeans.<sup>70</sup> Americans are irrational Lockeans simply because "the American Way of Life (is) a nationalist articulation of Locke which usually does not know that Locke himself is involved."<sup>71</sup>

Locke's theory of liberalism comprises two distinct arguments. The first half of Locke's argument is an implicit defense of the state as legitimate because it is the entity created by the common consent of the masses. For Locke, the state is the exclusive purveyor of coercive power via the social contract. The execution of this power in an attempt to serve the needs and wants of the polity is entirely appropriate as long as the state complies with the limitations of the contract.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 59-60.

The obligation of the state to use its powers within the confines of the social contract is the second half of Locke's theoretical claim. This portion of Locke's theory involves the explicit limitation of state power over the individual citizen. Hartz asserted that this second claim is the only part of Locke acknowledged in the American political community.<sup>73</sup>

According to this thesis, Americans, in general, operate within the framework of this second Lockean supposition alone. Hartz claimed that the "master assumption of American political thought" was behind this ideology. Unlike Europe, where the liberal-enlightenment concepts of individuality and social liberty were subject to furious debate, the basic belief in "atomistic social freedom" is unquestioned in America. Hartz asserted that the main reason for this bold assumption was the unique social situation that the new settlers found on this continent. Once again, we are made to understand that the Europeans who colonized America discovered a land without feudal traditions, or, for Hartz, any traditions at all.<sup>74</sup>

Because of this veritable state of nature, social freedom was won by the new Americans on an individual or small group level, not through mass party participation

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 62. The fact that there *were* thriving social conditions among the native tribes of the "new" continent apparently did not concern European settlers (though "conquerors" may be a more accurate term) all that much. Similarly, Hartz does not seem to pay particular attention to the fact that many complex political cultures were expunged from the continent by the European settlers along with the people who created them. For the purpose of this work we understand that it is the *perception* of the European settlers that is the key to Hartz's thesis; therefore, we accept his claim in this context.

and social revolution, as was the case in Europe. There were no feudal lords here, just an indigenous population, whose land was ripe for occupation. The American settlers' response to this situation was to enter into a "social contract," the first being The Mayflower Compact.<sup>75</sup>

As the settlers migrated across the American frontier, this liberal right of founding was entered into again and again. Unlike Europe, the establishment of a political society in America was not brought about by the popular usurpation of state power and the subsequent struggle to change the rules of government and law. Rather, it came into being through a series of individual claims to a given area and the enforcement of that requisition by the same individuals who laid claim to it.

In this sense, free people came first in America and then they were followed by the development of the state through a social contract. The state, therefore, is perceived as an outside force – one that primarily seeks to constrain liberty and only secondarily provides for the general welfare in compensation for that loss of liberty. The balance between the Lockean conception of a state that equally constrains, protects and provides is not present in standard American political discourse.

#### The Prevalence of Liberalism in American History

Because of this imbalance, Hartz asserted that American political development is skewed toward fear and distrust of the state. This unique attitude toward the state brings an equally unique history to America; any government action beyond the basic tasks of

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 60-61.

defending the nation and its inhabitants has always been held in suspect. The concept of government playing a profound social role in public affairs is not often a topic of consideration in our political discourse because the will of the individual is almost always considered sacrosanct. It is commonly held that the rugged individual can rely only on her/himself in her/his relentless "pursuit of happiness."

Therefore, the quest for improved living conditions is isolated to the domain of the individual in America. Pulling oneself up by one's "bootstraps" is the only acceptable means of upward mobility. At the same time, the legitimacy of the state providing for the social welfare of its citizens is tempered by the belief that the state is almost always a hostile actor and almost always seeks to limit individual rights when it acts.

It follows from this perception, that various possibilities for social advancement through state involvement are rarely perceived by Americans as worth the accompanying erosion of individual rights at the hands of the state. As a result of this unique political outlook, the scope of social welfare policy in the United States has been limited when compared to the nation-states of Western Europe.

Hartz claimed that the prevailing liberal paradigm in America overwhelmed state-oriented and community-based methods of social action throughout American history. Hartz devoted the bulk of his book, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, to illustrating this effect of irrational Lockeanism. Once again, his assertion was that the prevalence of American liberalism and its accompanying distaste for state power shaped American

development. Liberalism in America ultimately led to the exclusion of alternatives considered in other parts of the developed world, such as socialist democracy.

### The American Revolution

Much like Hofstadter and Boorstin, Hartz tells the story of the American Revolution in decidedly non-revolutionary terms. The colonists liberated the continent from British rule and formalized the tenants of liberalism into a federal system of government. However, unlike their fellow liberal revolutionaries in France only a decade later, Americans did not need to unite on the basis of class or any similar identity to destroy an indigenous feudal elite in a bloody revolution.<sup>76</sup>

The American Revolution was a war to revise an antiquated social contract between the colonists and their British lords. After the war, most farmers went back to their land and tried to live as before. The same was true of the urban artisans and professionals. Finally, the government of the new nation was not radically changed from that of the pre-revolutionary Continental Congress. The American Revolution was a historic event, but it was *not* an upheaval that radically reshaped social relations on the new continent.<sup>77</sup>

The French Revolution, by contrast, was a revolt motivated by class interests which successfully altered the very structure of French society and subsequently changed the fundamental social relations in that nation. The newly created relations were forged

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-43.



by the struggle of the various classes present in French society at the end of the eighteenth century. Post-revolutionary France was a new society formed out of the political struggle and it reflected the class differences that played an integral part in its creation.

### Post-Revolutionary War Development

Hartz claimed that after the Revolutionary War, the psychology of American liberalism became all encompassing. The political disputes among various factions in the early days of the United States seemed to resemble the factional disputes among adherents to the new European liberal and enlightenment tradition, rather than the vigorous class conflict that became a standard feature of European political development in the nineteenth century.

A prime example of conflict American-style was Shays' rebellion. Hartz asserted that Shays and his guerilla army did not seek to seize the farmland of Western Massachusetts from the major local landholders and operate these lands as a collective. Rather, Shays' army consisted of independent farmers who felt compelled to take drastic measures to save their personal slice of land during a difficult economic depression. Hartz claimed that American rebels who followed in the tradition of Shays held to a similar philosophy. All of them were propelled into action by the fear of losing their property, which was seen as a means for perpetuating their independence and self-

reliance. These rebellious Americans were not, however, motivated by the dream of winning a new society, like the followers of Marx and Engels in Europe.<sup>78</sup>

Within these early American disputes, however, Hartz found an interesting contradiction between reality and perception on the part of the wealthiest citizens of America. The upper class, observing events like Shays' rebellion, perceived that they were being attacked by their class enemies, but in reality both groups were ostensibly looking for the same thing - the right of the individual to provide an independent living for her/himself.<sup>79</sup>

Hartz claimed that the struggle between the perceived aristocrats and the common Americans illustrated the predominance of the liberal norm among all classes of American society. As a whole, common Americans did not detest the wealthy as did their working class counterparts in European countries, but rather the proletariat in the United States desired to someday attain extensive wealth in their own right.

### The Triumph of American Individualism

From this observation Hartz reached the conclusion that will prove to be most important for us as we compare his thought with that of the other writers in this study. Hartz stated that the preeminent liberal belief imbued within all of the various classes of American society led Americans to seek individualistic answers to their problems. According to this analysis, the quintessential "self-made man" of the nineteenth century

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-75.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-95.

Horatio Alger stories, becomes the poster child for two hundred years of American life.<sup>80</sup>

Hartz observed that the goals of average Americans, be they yeoman farmers or an industrial laborers, are geared toward the bourgeois "concepts of property and individualism."<sup>81</sup>

From Hartz's position, we find a nation where governmental action, communal responses, and specifically socialistic responses to social needs are seen as anathema. Such thought, Hartz claimed, is relegated to the outer fringes of American society. In fact, the only prevailing communal value in American is an ardent and irrational Lockeanism that despises anything which stands outside of the liberal norm of individual enterprise, property rights, and restricted government.<sup>82</sup>

As he analyzed American history, Hartz focused on the urban classes, and paid particular attention to the absence of a committed rank and file union movement and the lack of a strong, successful socialistic movement in the United States. According to Hartz, "Marx dies (in America) because there is no sense of class, no spirit of revolution, no yearning for the corporate past."<sup>83</sup>

The implication here is that workers will not organize as a class because their prime ideological objective is not grounded in their collective membership in the working

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 55-58.

<sup>83</sup> Hartz 1964, 7.

class. In America, the goal of the working class is to "rise above" their current socio-economic status and enter the bourgeoisie; a class-based political and social movement will be considered unattractive to most of these incipient entrepreneurs.

### The Lessons Learned from the Cold War Consensus School

The three intellectuals profiled above employed different approaches to arrive at their findings, but their conclusions were very much in harmony with one another. They all began their scholarly pursuits as practitioners (to one degree or another) of left-wing ideology and subsequently jettisoned their ideological roots once they reached their professional maturity. During this process, they came to an agreement on the belief that a transcendent consensus exists in American political thought and that this consensus reached back to the very beginning of the American experience. Moreover, they concurred that this consensus was so overwhelmingly dominant that it practically erased all other ideological options from the public discourse in the United States.

In addition to their general agreement, these three intellectuals reached some common inferences that will prove to be important for our examination of the impact of American Exceptionalism thought on the political discourse of our present era. In the following three sections, I will enumerate the most important of these conclusions.

#### Individualism in the American Consensus

All three use their own distinct terminology to describe the consensus, but in effect they all settled on the same definition. Unlike Boorstin who argued that the ideology of America, in fact, was no ideology at all, Hofstadter and (especially) Hartz were much more precise in describing the most defining aspects of the American

consensus. For them, the American consensus, roughly, follows the tenets of the classical liberal tradition. There is a particular emphasis upon the defense of the right to individual property ownership and a general preference expressed for the interests of individual citizens over the interests of the government.

Furthermore, Hofstadter, Hartz and to some extent Boorstin stressed the schizophrenic nature of American liberalism. The celebration of the isolated rugged individual is placed far into the forefront of American political mythology while collective or fraternal tendencies are practically unacknowledged by the same tradition.

Just as the individual is prized above the assemblage on the domestic political scene, the parochial interests of the United States in foreign affairs are often placed far above the interests of mutual respect among nation-states and international co-existence. Given these assumptions, issues of international relations are most likely to be considered (as Hofstadter predicted) from a strongly nationalistic and possibly even isolationist point-of-view.

Within such a framework, a foreign policy argument premised upon an "us versus them" attitude will likely often win more adherents than a more cooperative approach. We need to remain cognizant of this possibility, particularly as we examine the political attitudes surrounding the contemporary war on terrorism.

#### Anti-Intellectualism in the American Consensus

In addition to the strong predilection for the individual over the collective, all three of our observers, particularly Boorstin and Hartz, discussed anti-intellectualism in American consensus. Hartz seemed deeply frustrated by the "irrationality" of American

political thought, while Boorstin found something positive in American anti-intellectualism. Nevertheless, both asserted that the disparagement of intellectual inquiry deeply affected the manner in which most Americans perceive both social relations and their own history. Two important and related by-products of American anti-intellectualism are the tendency to homogenize the American experience and the propensity to ascribe a divine quality to American historical development. Boorstin's chapter on "The Mingling of Political and Religious Thought" is particularly illuminating regarding the second inclination.<sup>84</sup>

It should not be surprising that there was a general tendency to exaggerate the homogeneity of the American experience during the Cold War. The United States had just overcome two of the most significant crises in its history – the Great Depression and World War II. Moreover, the post-war world order gradually became further and further dominated by the competition between United States and the Soviet Union. During the 1950s, the danger of one wrong move leading to the annihilation of the entire globe was a very real concern that united Americans of all demographic backgrounds.

In addition, the United States was experiencing an economic expansion that would elevate this nation-state to an unprecedented status in world history. In reality, prosperity was not being shared equally among all citizens, but there was a popular perception among the dominant class of citizens that the American Dream was achievable.

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<sup>84</sup> Boorstin, 133-160.

In both these good and bad times, surely there must have been a strong sense that our respective differences were secondary to national unity. Additionally, more than any other time in its young existence unity within the American polity must have seemed both possible and indispensable for the future success of the nation-state.

Similarly, a call for unity within the American polity was alluded to by many citizens of various political stripes in the days immediately following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. As we compare these moments of crisis and uncertainty, we must remember that the yearning for sameness is often a powerful stabilizing force in moments of volatility.

#### The Uniqueness of the American Consensus

Finally, both Boorstin and Hartz shared the assumption that the American consensus is truly “exceptional” as it cannot be exported to other nation-states. Boorstin made this point explicitly clear at the beginning and again at the conclusion of his argument. For Hartz, this assumption was implicit; the unique conditions surrounding the American founding could not be replicated, so it was logical to presume that the extreme version of liberalism found in American politics would not likely surface anywhere else.

As we examine the exceptionalist discourse surrounding the contemporary War on Terrorism, we will find some contradictory statements regarding the ability to export American political thought to other around the globe. Sometimes, the contemporary exceptionalist discourse will focus on the absolute uniqueness of the American democracy while other discussions will concentrate on the need to achieve stability by making the rest of the world more like the United States.

We will incorporate the three tendencies outlined above into our discussion of the role of Exceptionalism following September 11<sup>th</sup>. However, before we begin our direct discussion of the post-September 11th political discourse, we must first discuss the evolution of Exceptionalist thought from the Cold War Consensus School through the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The next chapter will detail this development; then we will engage the politics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in chapter four.



## CHAPTER 3

### RECENT TRENDS IN AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the evolution of the theory of American Exceptionalism beyond the Cold War consensus school. It is nearly impossible to remove consensus theory from its Cold War origins; as we have seen in the previous chapter, American Exceptionalism was a doctrine forged as a means to explain the essential differences between the United States polity and the portion of the globe that fell under the influence of Marxism-Leninism in the post-World War II era.

We should, therefore, expect that as the Cold War drew to a close, the narrative of consensus would change to meet the new material conditions. The fall of the Soviet Union raises several important questions regarding American Exceptionalism. Did the United States prevail over the Soviets because of its truly “exceptional” (in this case, read superior) ideals? Did the end of the Cold War also mean the end to the major impediment preventing the spread of the American Ideal around the globe? Would the United States remain “exceptional” (in this case, read unique) if the American ideal spread across the globe in the wake of the Soviet collapse? And finally, would a new challenge rise against the “Exceptionalism” (in this case read both superior *and* unique) of the United States?

An argument could be made that both contemporary liberals and contemporary conservatives are the inheritors of the legacy of American Exceptionalism. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will focus upon the connection between American

Exceptionalism and conservative ideology in the following chapter. Locating the association between American Exceptionalism and contemporary conservative thought will both illuminate the post-Cold War perspective on American uniqueness and facilitate our understanding of the rhetorical position of the Bush administration in foreign policy matters connected with the aftermath of September 11th.<sup>85</sup>

My mission in this chapter is two-fold. First, I will follow the evolution of the theory of American Exceptionalism out of its Cold War context and assess its meaning in contemporary times. Second, I will examine the “exceptional” characteristics of two distinctly conservative theories that emerged in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

#### American Exceptionalism after the Cold War

The work of sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset is comparable and complimentary to that of the Consensus theorists discussed in the previous chapter. During the 1950s and 1960s, Lipset studied various American institutions and concluded that a social consensus existed with regards to certain fundamental values.

In his 1963 book, *The First New Nation*, Lipset argued that equality and achievement were two deep-seated American values forged during the conflict of the Revolutionary Era. Furthermore, he asserted that these two core values remained relatively unchanged into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, he posited that these static values helped to shape and preserve a unique and lasting American character that withstood the

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<sup>85</sup> For the connection between exceptionalism and neoliberalism, see Rick Fantasia and Kim Voss, *Hard Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

forces of change brought on by the dramatically evolving material conditions over the past 200 years.<sup>86</sup>

For Lipset, the values of equality and achievement were not always complimentary; in fact, he claimed that they often conflicted with one another. However, he claimed that the conflict between the two, almost dialectically, helped determine the character of both American social thought and political institutions in the United States.<sup>87</sup>

Lipset is vital to our understanding of the contemporary meaning of American Exceptionalism because his intellectual inquiry into the American consensus begins during the Cold War, but is then revisited in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Lipset, therefore, serves as an all important bridge between the Cold War consensus school and our contemporary understanding of American Exceptionalism.

#### Still Exceptional After All These Years

The fall of Soviet-style Communism in the early 1990s and the end of the Cold War certainly signaled a significant change in the global political order. The end of the four decade-long bi-polar struggle was a victory for the United States and, by implication, the American way of life. Those ideologically pre-disposed to accept the theory of American Exceptionalism might further point to the uniqueness of the United States as an indispensable contributing factor to its victory over the Soviet Union.

Lipset does not address the root cause of the Cold War's end, nor does he

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<sup>86</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective*, (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 1-7, 16 and 104.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-104.

conclude that America's uniqueness always translates into superiority. However, he does undertake a thorough examination of the status of American Exceptionalism twice in the decade following the Soviet collapse. In their 2000 book, *It Didn't Happen Here*, Lipset and co-author Gary Marks reach the conclusion that America remains exceptional even though public policy formulation in comparable countries of Western Europe began to more closely resemble political decision making in the United States during the final decade of the twentieth century.<sup>88</sup>

Specifically, Lipset and Marks asserted that the industrially developed world experienced a period of political moderation following the Cold War. This period was marked by a noticeable shift towards the political center on the part of many European social democratic parties. Accompanying this ideological shift was the dismantling of select facets of the welfare state in those same countries.<sup>89</sup>

By moving toward the political center and away from established policies designed to deliver social democratic outcomes, many nation-states of the West began to set aside the class-based competition that was a central component of their political discourse for many decades. For the most part, Lipset and Marks claimed that American politics has historically been devoid of the class-based approach to party politics and public policy formulation. Therefore, if one accepts their thesis, one could conclude that the centrist ideological drift in the West signaled an end to the uniqueness of American

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<sup>88</sup> Lipset and Marks, 262-263.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 273-278.

politics.<sup>90</sup>

During the 1990s, Western parties which had previously leaned decidedly to the political left, such as the British Labor Party, began to very closely resemble the moderately left-of-center ideological position of the Democratic Party in the United States. However, at the same time, the Democratic Party was moving even closer to the political center under the leadership of President Bill Clinton and the Democratic Leadership Council. Therefore, as formerly left-wing parties drifted toward the center (and, therefore, closer to the Democrats in the United States), the already centrist Democratic Party moved even further towards the center of the political spectrum.<sup>91</sup>

After considering the political push toward the center during the 1990s, Lipset and Marks concluded that the United States remains exceptional in key indicators such as taxation, social spending levels, union membership and economic inequality. These factors, Lipset and Marks asserted, are closely correlated with the amount of political power possessed by the lower class in a given polity (e.g. higher levels of social spending often correlate with greater political power in the hands of the lower class). Since the diffusion of power in a pluralist political system is essential to ensure that the government is answerable to a cross-section of its citizenry, the lack of power vested in the lower class might mean a troublesome lack of democratic responsiveness in the American

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 262-263. Lipset and Marks argued that, in spite of the pre-industrial origins of American Exceptionalism, modern claims to Exceptionalism can be reduced to the absence of a sustained and viable socialist or working class political movement in the United States.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 274-276.

political system.<sup>92</sup>

As stated previously, the American working class has had great difficulty obtaining and particularly sustaining an independent grasp on political power in the United States. In their concluding remarks, Lipset and Marks suggested that this may translate to other groups outside the status quo in the American political hierarchy. If their speculation is correct, then we might conclude that American Exceptionalism has effects beyond the Cold War question of socialism (or the lack thereof) in America. Most notably for the purposes of this dissertation, we might expect to find that elite opinion will dominate the political discourse of the United States.<sup>93</sup>

#### *The Double-Edged Sword*

Four years before *It Didn't Happen Here*, Lipset addressed the question of American Exceptionalism in the more recent wake of the Cold War's demise. Lipset's title *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* accurately summarizes his conclusions at that time concerning the American Consensus. Specifically, Lipset was interested in analyzing both the perceived positive and negative ramifications of our alleged political and social uniqueness. As with his subsequent book, Lipset positioned himself as an adherent to the idea of Exceptionalism defined merely with reference to difference and not concerning any particular notion of superiority.

Rather than exclusively extol the virtues of American Exceptionalism, Lipset

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 262-292.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 292-294.

concluded that the results of our outlier status are equally positive and negative. He states that American Exceptionalism has been a contributing factor to the development of a polity that displays unmatched levels of optimism, productivity, volunteerism, concern for individual rights and upward mobility. However, Lipset claimed that the same factors that encourage the above attributes also contribute to a society tainted by high crime rates, significant inequalities in wealth, low rates of political participation, high levels of litigiousness and a general “disregard for communal good.”<sup>94</sup>

To better evaluate both the positive and negative impact of American Exceptionalism, Lipset endeavored to define a set of exceptional traits to study. He referred to these traits as the “American Creed.” Basically, Lipset described the American Creed in five broad terms of “liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism and laissez-faire” supplemented by unusually strong religious fervor. The religious component observed by Lipset is important for our purposes as it tends to be both very individualistic and messianic in nature.<sup>95</sup>

### Exceptionalism and Conflict

Lipset claimed that the individualistic climate in America, combined with a religious tradition that focuses on human perfectibility deeply affects the way that the American polity addresses important matters, most notably questions of war and peace.

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<sup>94</sup> Lipset 1996, 20 and 268.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 19. There are considerable similarities between Lipset’s definition of the “American Creed” and Daniel Boorstin’s theory which is discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

As a result of our exceptionalist nature, Lipset asserted that both support for *and* resistance to war tend to be presented in exceedingly moral terminology. Lipset stated that average Americans endorse a war if they can define the role of the United States “as being on God’s side against Satan – for morality, against evil.”<sup>96</sup>

Lipset noted that comparative public opinion surveys show that Americans are significantly more patriotic and more willing to fight in their country’s wars than citizens from more than thirty similar nation-states. He concluded that this outlier status is due to a dominant popular conception that the United States fights crusades “to destroy evil” instead of wars for specific material interests.<sup>97</sup>

Lipset stated that American wars are almost always presented as struggles for “moral goals, such as the quest ‘to make the world safe for democracy,’” or a cataclysmic battle against an “evil empire.” He cited the 1991 Persian Gulf War against Iraq as a recent example of the sometimes tortured logic that emanates from such a moralistic world view. In the run-up to Operation Desert Storm, Saddam Hussein, who was a peripheral ally of the United States for many years was demonized as “the incarnation of absolute evil” and “another Hitler.” Clearly, the leader of Iraq was a brutal dictator who both committed and ordered the commission of atrocities for many years. However, his crimes only seemed to reach the level of criticism when the United States was in the process of launching a war against his country. At that point, the reporting and criticism

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 20 and 63.



of his crimes were exaggerated to epic proportions; no longer was he simply a thug, but he was the incarnation of the greatest evil the world has ever seen.<sup>98</sup>

Lipset claimed that the same moralistic paradigm that dominates American's thinking about foreign affairs also heavily impacts the nature of internal conflict throughout our history. United States history has more than its share of deep, and often bloody, social conflict. Arguably, America has had more violent internal conflict in its past than any other developed country. Lipset concluded that the fierce nature of conflict in America can be attributed to the tendency of contesting groups to frame their objectives in intense moralistic terms rather than in rationally defined material interests.<sup>99</sup>

Lipset also noted that boundaries are established which determine the appropriate form that internal conflict takes in the United States. In this exceptionalist context, "Americanism" becomes an ideology unto itself. One's loyalty to Americanism is measured by one's adherence to the tenets of the American Creed. Those who appear to stand against those basic tenets are labeled "anti-American" or "un-American."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 65-67.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 25-26. Lipset cautioned his reader not to confuse the existence of an ideological consensus with the absence of conflict. He argued that any evaluation of conflict in American must look carefully at the divergence between groups to determine whether the contesting parties truly operate from identifiably different class positions. Lipset asserted that contesting parties in the United States generally do not operate from different class positions and concluded that internal strife is best describe as interneecine conflict between those who define the American Creed differently.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 31. Again, we find a strong comparison between Lipset and Daniel Boorstin's theory. See Chapter 2 of this dissertation for a brief discussion of Boorstin's perspective on the claim of anti-Americanism.

Much like Boorstin, Lipset asserted that the United States is the only polity in the developed world to have crafted such an extreme national identity. He stated that “one cannot become un-English or un-Swedish” in the same way that one can be considered “un-American.” Perhaps, this is the reason that radicals on the political margins of the American polity have historically attempted to assert their “American-ness” in the face of charges to the contrary. Lipset pointed out that many radicals speak of their mission in terminology considered to be a traditional part of the American Creed.<sup>101</sup>

Whether it is on a domestic or international scale, conflict that is perceived to be rooted in static moral beliefs is difficult to resolve because it almost inevitably demands that participants compromise at least a portion of their core values to reach a peaceful settlement. Moreover, the internal group decision to engage in such conflict in the first place is difficult to debate rationally for the same reason. Conflict framed in moral terms discourages resolution and complex reasoning and encourages aggressive behavior and simplistic thinking. Lipset’s theory on the link between American Exceptionalism and conflict will certainly inform our analysis in the next chapter as we take a direct look at the specific rhetoric employed by President George W. Bush to explain his War on Terrorism.

#### The Connection between Neo-Hegelianism and American Exceptionalism

If Marx truly stood Hegel onto his philosophical head, then Francis Fukuyama represents the first and most vociferous post-Cold War attempt to turn Hegel around

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<sup>101</sup> Lipset 1996, 31 and Lipset and Marks, 265.

again. In summer 1989, Fukuyama caused an intellectual uproar with an article entitled “The End of History?” The piece appeared in *The National Interest*, an overtly conservative journal of international affairs and proffered a neo-Hegelian analysis of the imminent fall of the Soviet Union. Simply, Fukuyama asserted that the end of Leninism in Russia marked “an unabashed victory” for classical liberalism.<sup>102</sup>

### Fukuyama and History

The focus of Fukuyama’s analysis was “the realm of ideas or consciousness.” He assented to the incompleteness of liberal preeminence in the material world of 1989, but he confidently asserted that “there are powerful reasons for believing that (classical liberalism) is the ideal that will govern the material world *in the long run*.”<sup>103</sup>

Like the German idealist philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Fukuyama hypothesized that ideas precede being and consciousness eventually serves as the determinant of material conditions. History (with a capital H) is driven by the contradictions and conflict between ideas in a process that progressively moves toward an end state of human social and political order which contains no inherent internal contradictions.<sup>104</sup>

Fukuyama summarized his neo-Hegelian philosophy by stating that the end of

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<sup>102</sup> Fukuyama 1989, 3-5.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-9.

History meant that “all of the really big questions had been settled.”<sup>105</sup> For Hegel, the settling of all the “big questions” was achieved within the *very* limited liberalism of the Prussian government during his lifetime; for Fukuyama, the end state was classical liberalism as expressed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Western world.

Certainly, Fukuyama saw the ascendancy of classical liberalism in relation to the slow collapse of the Soviet Union, but he claimed that there were other signs of liberal primacy visible to any objective observer in 1989. He first pointed to the “declining membership and electoral pull” of leftist parties in Western democracies and a corresponding increase in electoral victories for decidedly conservative parties. The rise in the popularity of “unabashedly pro-market and anti-statist” policies was particularly notable in the global economic superpowers. Furthermore, like Lipset and Marks, Fukuyama noted various attempts by the same Western leftist parties to moderate their policy platforms with the hope of regaining popular support.<sup>106</sup>

In addition to the shifting political winds, Fukuyama argued that the world-wide proliferation of Western consumer culture indicated the seemingly inevitable victory of the political system that cultivated consumerism in the first place. He stated that consumer culture changed the political landscape of Asian Tigers such as South Korea; moreover, consumerism had begun to truly assert its power by infiltrating the ancient

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<sup>105</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), xii.

<sup>106</sup> Fukuyama 1989, 10.

culture of China by the late 1980s.<sup>107</sup>

According to Fukuyama, History's end would not bring about an immediate millennial transformation. Actually, he expected that the world would remain quite a dangerous place with part of the international community living under post-Historical conditions and part under Historical conditions. He predicted continued strife caused by ideas that were remnants of the Historical world, namely wars of national liberation and terrorism.<sup>108</sup>

#### Exceptionalism in Fukuyama

On the surface it is difficult to perceive the connection between Fukuyama and American Exceptionalism. After all, Fukuyama consistently refers to classical liberalism as a product of the West rather than an exclusive possession of the United States. The foundation of his philosophic inquiry (Hegelianism) is decidedly European as are many of the examples he cites to support his assertion that History has come to an end. So, given these particulars, the logical question becomes: where does one find the connection between Fukuyama and American Exceptionalism?

I believe that the connection between Fukuyama and Exceptionalism can be found in two places. First, it exists as a subtext throughout Fukuyama's argument. Second, it can be found in the response to Fukuyama from leading conservatives of the day.

In their brief critique of the affect of American Exceptionalism on the teaching of

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 18.

history, British historians Arthur Haberman and Adrian Shubert pointed to the effect that often unspoken exceptionalist assumptions have on American intellectuals. They stated that the:

end of history for Hegel, someone said, was Hegel. The end of European history for the United States is the United States, not as it was or came to be, but as it wants to have been and wants to be seen. European history is studied as a prelude to the leadership of the world by the United States.<sup>109</sup>

In short, Haberman and Shubert cautioned that when American intellectuals like Fukuyama speak about the importance of the West, they often really mean the United States as the culmination of Western civilization.<sup>110</sup>

Literary historian Brook Thomas noted this nuanced connection between Fukuyama's theory of History and American Exceptionalism. He asserted that:

Fukuyama's argument adds a new twist to the celebrations of American Exceptionalism. For him... ..the United States' difference with the rest of the world is over... .. (F)or Fukuyama American values have triumphed around the globe.<sup>111</sup>

Journalist and historian Godfrey Hodgson echoed a similar sentiment calling Fukuyama's work American Exceptionalism that was "dressed up in a resuscitated Hegelianism."<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Arthur Haberman and Adrian Shubert, "American Exceptionalism and the Teaching of European History," American Historical Association, <http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/2006/0609/0609vie1.cfm>.

<sup>110</sup> In the next section of this chapter, we will discover that this implication is overtly stated by Samuel Huntington in his Clash of Civilizations theory.

<sup>111</sup> Thomas Brook, *The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1991), x.

<sup>112</sup> Godfrey Hodgson, "New Statesman Profile: Francis Fukuyama," *New Statesman*, <http://www.newstatesman.com/200204220011>.

Indeed, Fukuyama himself explicitly mentioned the United States (as opposed to the West) as the prime mover of the world-wide transformation to classical liberalism. First, he extolled the United States for being the first to achieve a “fundamentally egalitarian” and “classless” society.<sup>113</sup> Second, Fukuyama also credited the United States with establishing and spreading a consumer culture that he believed marked a sure sign of the triumph of classical liberalism.<sup>114</sup>

Given Fukuyama’s position, we should ask the same rhetorical question as political scientist Philip Abbott: “what could be more American exceptionalist than the belief that the triumph of democracy is really not an American idea but a universal idea working its way through humanity with America as its world carrier?”<sup>115</sup> In the hands of Fukuyama and those who were inspired by his theory, American Exceptionalism becomes something that can be exported to the world community regardless of differences in culture, social mores and material conditions of existence.

In addition to the subtextual implications within Fukuyama, we can see a distinct focus placed on the United States in the response of one of his fellow conservative intellectuals. Irving Kristol, often described as the founding father of neoconservatism, critiqued Fukuyama’s thesis on the grounds that the declaration of a definitive victory for

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<sup>113</sup> Fukuyama 1989, 9.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>115</sup> Philip Abbott, “Redeeming American Exceptionalism / Redeeming American Political Science: An Analysis of Judith N. Shklar’s Presidential Address,” *Social Science Journal* 32, (1995), in Academic Search Premier (accessed August 10, 2004).

classical liberalism was made with far too much haste. He did, however, interpret Fukuyama as claiming that “the job has been done and that the *United States of America* is the incarnation we have all been waiting for (emphasis added).”<sup>116</sup> In fact, Kristol makes it clear that he concurs with Fukuyama as far as the superiority of “American civilization” (as opposed to generic Western civilization) over “various forms of anti-liberalism and anti-capitalism.”<sup>117</sup>

Kristol’s commentary opens a window on the manner in which Fukuyama’s ideas were perceived by his contemporaries. Even if Fukuyama was not implying that the United States was the logical conclusion of Western civilization (which seems quite unlikely), his essay was certainly received in that spirit by many of his conservative colleagues.

#### *The Clash of Civilizations and American Exceptionalism*

Much like Fukuyama, Samuel Huntington wrote an essay from a conservative political perspective that attempted to attach meaning to the post-Cold War world. Also like Fukuyama, Huntington’s essay caused a flurry of intellectual discussion in the years following its publication. Huntington’s original article entitled “The Clash of Civilizations?” appeared in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993. Three years later he expanded this

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<sup>116</sup> Irving Kristol, “Responses to Fukuyama,” *The National Interest*, Summer 1989, 27.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.



initial piece into an entire book on the same subject.<sup>118</sup>

In contrast to the unabashed optimism perpetrated by Fukuyama, Huntington's analysis of the emerging world order in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse was quite disconcerting for those who presumed that the end of the Cold War would bring prospects of lasting peace. In fact, he criticized Fukuyama for developing a "one harmonious world paradigm" that was "far too divorced from reality to be a useful guide."<sup>119</sup> In contrast to Fukuyama's "illusion of harmony," Huntington envisioned the definite potential for conflict and warned that such discordance could escalate into major wars unless his warning was heeded by the leaders of key nation-states around the globe.<sup>120</sup>

In spite of the differences between him and Fukuyama, Huntington also draws upon a foundation in American Exceptionalism to help formulate his analysis of Western civilization in the post-Cold War world. More particularly he displays a distinctly exceptionalist stance in the final chapter of *Clash of Civilizations* as he attempts to

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<sup>118</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996). It should not go unmentioned that both Huntington and Fukuyama attached a question mark to their now renowned articles (possibly designed to spur discussion) but eliminated the question mark when they expanded their ideas into a full-length book (possibly designed to signal the culmination of the discussion).

<sup>119</sup> Huntington 1996, 32.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

develop a comprehensive prescription for a safer world order in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>121</sup>

### Clash of Civilizations

Huntington's *Foreign Affairs* article and subsequent book represent an attempt to develop a paradigm that facilitates our ability to understand the relations among nation-states in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union. Huntington claimed that the end of the Cold War also meant an end to the strict bipolar arrangement in foreign affairs and a decisive shift in focus away from political ideology and towards culture as the primary cause of conflict in the global arena. In short, the almost fifty year rivalry between the two superpowers was "replaced by the clash of civilizations."<sup>122</sup>

Huntington was careful to proclaim his presumption that nation-states would likely "remain the principal actors in world affairs." However, he expected the actions of national leaders to be guided by the motivations of the dominant civilization within each country.<sup>123</sup>

Huntington defined "civilization" as the highest level of cultural identity recognized by humans in their social relations. For him, civilization is defined by "language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and by the subjective self-identification

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<sup>121</sup> The doctrine of American Exceptionalism is not new ground for Huntington. His most explicitly "exceptionalist" work is Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1981). In this book, Huntington explores the disconnect between lofty American ideals and the mundane institutions of American politics, which often do not live up to the admirable ideals espoused in the American Creed.

<sup>122</sup> Huntington 1996, 13-14, 21 and 28.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

of people.”<sup>124</sup>

By this definition, a civilization is the ultimate extended family that is recognized by people living in various societies. All those within one’s civilization are considered part of a large, distinct, yet personally distant, kinship bond.<sup>125</sup>

In sum, Huntington asserted that those who identify themselves as part of the same broad civilization feel a sense of commonality with and empathy for one another. These sentiments are important because they make cooperative action more likely among the nation-states of each civilization.<sup>126</sup>

According to Huntington, civilizations do not have impermeable boundaries or specific origins, but they do “rise and fall” and “merge and divide.” He claimed that civilizations also evolve over the course of centuries of human history.<sup>127</sup>

Huntington both began and concluded his book on civilizations with the somewhat paradoxical claim below. Untangling the two parts of the following statement will provide us with a key to understand Huntington’s thesis:

clashes of civilizations are the greatest threat to world peace, and an international order

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 20. Within the book, Huntington is not explicitly clear about the precise number of civilizations in the world today. In various parts of the book, he places the number at 7, 8 and 9 (26 and 29). On a world map (26), he identifies the following civilizations: Western, Latin American, African, Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, Orthodox, Buddhist and Japanese. At another place in the book, he repeats the list, but excludes Buddhist and Orthodox (45-47).

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 44.

based on civilizations is the surest safeguard against world war.<sup>128</sup>

First, Huntington stated that values and morals differ greatly among people of different civilizations. Because of the profound differences in cultural mores, he expected that conflict was likely between countries of different civilizations. He particularly anticipated that conflict levels would be high among nation-states that share geographic proximity, but are guided by different cultures.<sup>129</sup>

Huntington did not necessarily posit that this conflict between civilizations was a negative tendency in the post-Cold War world order. In fact, he stated that people attempting to understand their own cultural identity are assisted somewhat by defining themselves as the antithesis of their perceived enemies. Therefore, an “other” is essential for the complete development of self awareness within a civilization.<sup>130</sup>

Huntington’s second point is more difficult to discern. Even though he claimed that cultural differences facilitate conflict among different civilizations, Huntington asserted that a global order built upon the recognition of civilizational differences offers the potential for stability. Such stability is only possible, however, when the core states of each civilization reject the notion of universalism and resist the lure of intervening in the affairs of nation-states from other civilizations.

Huntington’s prescription is very reminiscent of the paleoconservative tendency

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 13 and 321.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 20-21 and 129.

in American political thought. Essentially, his thesis can be reduced to the vulgar attitude that people with contrasting identities should “keep to their own kind.” In sum, Huntington’s solution for peace in the post-Cold War world proposes a system of regional isolationism that would facilitate the development of pockets of like minded nation-states tied together by mutually beneficial alliances but permanently separated from the remainder of humanity.<sup>131</sup>

### Exceptionalism in Huntington

#### The Decline of Western Civilization

Huntington’s perspective on Western Civilization’s place within the global milieu clearly points toward another facet of his thinking; a facet that contrasts with Fukuyama, but, in its own right, is rooted in an exceptionalist perspective. Like Fukuyama, Huntington focused on the role of Western civilization in the post-Cold War global order. He stated that each “civilization sees itself as the center of the world and writes its history as the central drama of human history;” he asserted that this was particularly true for Western civilization.<sup>132</sup>

The pretentious belief that Western history is akin to human history should come

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<sup>131</sup> In this dissertation, I am using the term paleoconservative as a means of defining a particularly American version of classical Burkean conservatism. Paleoconservatives in 21<sup>st</sup> century America often consider themselves ideologically different from the neoconservatives that dominate the current Bush White House, particularly in matters of social policy. However, paleoconservatives also tend to differ with neoconservatives on foreign policy. Paleoconservatives generally espouse a rigid isolationism while neoconservatives tend to espouse an aggressive internationalism. Examples of paleoconservative thinkers would be Pat Buchanan and Robert Novak.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-55.

as no surprise to anybody. No other civilization known to humankind possessed the ability to influence all of its fellow civilizations as completely, effectively and, at times, devastatingly as Western civilization did during the twentieth century. Huntington made the point that the West remained in a position of considerable dominance well into the early years of the post-Cold War era.<sup>133</sup>

Unfortunately for proponents of Western global dominance, Huntington predicted that the West had reached the pinnacle of its power and was likely on the decline at the same time that it was reveling in its victory over Soviet Communism. To make matters worse for the West, Huntington repeatedly claimed that the global clash of civilizations could reasonably be reduced to a singular competition between “the West and the rest” with particularly significant challenges coming from the Islamic world and civilizations on the Asian continent.<sup>134</sup>

In direct contrast to Fukuyama, Huntington did not celebrate the dissolution of the Soviet Union as the ultimate and final victory for Western morality over contrasting values nor did he claim that the end of the Cold War signaled the dawn of an era of Western preeminence. Rather, Huntington stated that the Cold War contributed to the exhaustion of the West as the preeminent civilization in the world.<sup>135</sup>

Moreover, Huntington cautioned that other dominant civilizations in human

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 81, 183-184 and 304.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 29, 54, 82-83, 102, 183-185 and 209-213.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 82.

history wrongly imagined that their era represented the culmination of history. Not only did all previous declarations of the end of history prove to be wrong, but Huntington further points out that such pronouncements often came after the civilization in question had already begun its decline relative to other cultures.<sup>136</sup>

While Fukuyama asserted that Western influence was destined to grow and Western culture was poised to become the global culture, Huntington claimed that attempts to “Westernize” competing civilizations by establishing a universal civilization would likely be perceived by the rest of the globe as imperialistic. Furthermore, he posited that such arrogant and clumsy attempts at dominance could lead to a major conflagration that might accelerate the decline of the West. Huntington suggested that leaders of Western nation-states should refuse to give in to the messianic impulse that is fundamentally part of Western culture.<sup>137</sup>

#### The United States: the Epitome of the West

The differences between Fukuyama and Huntington are many, but one commonality between the two thinkers is their belief that the United States represents the culmination of Western civilization. Huntington asserted that since World War II, the United States has been the standard bearer of Western civilization; he further stated that America might yet be the savior of Western civilization in the post-Cold War era as long

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 58, 66, 183-184 and 211.

as its leaders heed his foreign policy advice.<sup>138</sup>

Huntington's prescription for curbing the deterioration of the West is comprehensively exceptionalist in nature. He called upon leaders in the United States to once again embrace "principles of the American Creed." By now, the core tenets of this canon should ring familiar to us: Huntington parallels the Exceptionalists that came before him with his list of core creedal values: "liberty, democracy, individualism, equality before the law, constitutionalism, private property."<sup>139</sup>

In the final chapter of his book, Huntington's focus turns abruptly away from foreign policy and towards the domestic debate over culture. He asserted that multiculturalism represents the most profound threat to the West because it directly challenges the elemental nature of the American Creed. The proper response to this threat, according to Huntington, was the reaffirmation of the American Creed within the United States and a defense of the core principles of that Creed against the perceived destructive influence of multiculturalism. "Rejection of the Creed," Huntington warned "means the end of the United States of America as we have known it" and also the end of the West.<sup>140</sup>

Huntington's affirmation of exceptionalist principles is somewhat more reminiscent of Lipset than Fukuyama. He is adamant about the appropriateness of the

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 83 and 306-7.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 306-307.



American Creed for the United States and the suitability of Western culture for the nation-states of the West; however, unlike Fukuyama, Huntington is equally unyielding about the need for the countries within Western civilization to resist the urge to force their core tenets upon other civilizations. For Huntington, neither the American Creed nor Western civilization is superior to the fundamental values of other civilizations.<sup>141</sup>

Basically, Huntington concluded that “maintaining the uniqueness of Western culture” is vital for the continued existence of Western civilization, but those same cultural standards are completely inappropriate to impose upon others. By contrast, others have their own cultural mores that are appropriate for them and completely inappropriate for the West. Huntington’s suggestion, then, is for America and the West to maintain its exceptional (in this case, read unique) position in the world as a means of forestalling the decline of Western civilization.<sup>142</sup>

### Enemy Mine

In his critique of Huntington, Emad El-Din Aisha explains the exceptionalist tendencies he found within the “Clash” thesis. Aysha asserted that Huntington’s Exceptionalism can best be found in these rarely discussed domestic policy prescriptions. According to Aysha, Huntington articulated the “Clash” theory for the purpose of preserving social cohesion and cultural homogeneity within the United States by positing “others” as the implacable enemies of the Western tradition. Whether they are the

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 310-311.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 318.

product of reality or myth, the hope was that the challenge posed by such relentless foes would unite the citizens of the West (particularly the United States) by encouraging them to identify closely with the similarities between them and their fellow compatriots.<sup>143</sup>

Of course, foreign enemies will respond to American posturing by mobilizing against the United States in a similar fashion. This poses a potentially dangerous threat, but Aysha noted that Huntington was willing to accept the risks of civilizational disputes because they bring with them a corresponding reward. On balance, the incentive to participate in civilization disputes is greater than the threat; the reward for perpetuating the “clash” is unity at home in the face of a threat from abroad.<sup>144</sup>

In the next chapter, we will revisit the implications of a search for enemies in a post-September 11<sup>th</sup> world. In the case of the attacks of that day, the threat was made manifest as a small group of terrorists, also seeking to make civilizational enemies, provided ample evidence of its destructive capacity and its ability to expose the vulnerability of the United States and the West.

### American Exceptionalism at the Bridge to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The doctrine of American Exceptionalism seemingly reached its paradigmatic apex during the Cold War. However, the three theories we examined in this chapter indicate that it remained a relevant analytical tool for some scholars who examined the changes in global order brought on by the fall of Leninism in the Soviet Union. Certainly

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<sup>143</sup> Aysha, 118-120 and 125-126.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 123-125

the narrative of consensus changed somewhat from its Cold War roots, but the foundational belief that the United States represents a unique (Lipset, Fukuyama and Huntington) and perhaps superior (Fukuyama alone) polity in world history was not tossed into the ashcan of history by intellectuals of the late twentieth century.

Lipset provides us with a comprehensive evaluation of both the long-term benefits and detriments of our unique political patterns of thought. In a similar vein, Huntington offers us a gloomy, but still clearly exceptionalist analysis of the future for United States in particular and Western civilization as a whole. Both Lipset and Huntington approach the subject of American cultural superiority with caution and both also express concern over the powerful messianic tendencies that seem to be an integral part of doctrine of Exceptionalism. As we move into the twenty first century in the subsequent chapter, we will certainly revisit the potential downside of these two aspects of American Exceptionalism.

As for Fukuyama (at least the early 1990s version of Fukuyama), he offers us an unapologetic defense of American and Western superiority as well as an impenitent messianic mission to spread the seed of Americanism around the globe in the aftermath of the Cold War. As we proceed into Chapter Four, we will find the clearest comparisons between Fukuyama's End of History theory and the exceptionalist rhetoric of George W. Bush. While Fukuyama does not quite fit the standard neoconservative mold, his confidence in American superiority and his near evangelical zeal are strikingly similar to the vision made public by Bush in the days following the attacks of September 11, 2001.

## CHAPTER 4

### BUSH, SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup> AND AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

In this chapter, we will examine the rhetoric employed by George W. Bush to explain the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> to the American people. We will find that Bush's rhetoric employs many of the Exceptionalist themes that we have seen in previous chapters.

My goal is to look at the particular language employed by the president in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. I propose that the rhetorical foundation that was laid in the weeks following September 11<sup>th</sup> deeply impacted the way the American public perceived subsequent military actions taken by the United States. Furthermore, I will show that the Exceptionalist nature of Bush's rhetoric lent additional credence to his interpretation of events in the minds of many Americans.

#### The Power of Rhetoric in Times of National Crisis

Most introductory American government textbook discusses the power of the "bully pulpit" that is held by the President of the United States. Furthermore, these same texts usually discuss the inordinate power of the presidency both in the arena of foreign policy and in times of national crisis. Historically, many citizens look to the President to decipher the complexities of foreign affairs, particularly on matters of military engagement. Considering this, it is not surprising that, following the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the words of George W. Bush figured prominently in the minds of most

Americans.<sup>145</sup>

In its 2004 report on the importance of what is referred to as “strategic communication,” the U.S. Defense Department provided reinforcement for the idea that presidential rhetoric is the most important means of both influencing popular perceptions and crafting support for administration policies. While the report focused mostly on global strategic communication, it discussed the profound impact that the words of the President of the United States have on the shaping of American public opinion on security matters.<sup>146</sup>

Northwestern University Communications Professor David Zarefsky noted that in addition to the prominence of the presidency during times of crisis, the average person is more likely to be influenced by persuasive rhetoric from an authority figure in times of grave insecurity. Regarding the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, Zarefsky stated that most Americans internalized an interpretation of the attacks which was principally dependent upon Bush’s contextualization of the events and in days following the assault on New York and Washington.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> As an example, see Gary Wasserman, *The Basics of American Politics, Thirteenth Edition* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2008), 50-51, 65-66 and 70-71.

<sup>146</sup> Defense Science Board, “Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication, September 2004,” Federation of American Scientists, <http://www.fas.org/irp/agency/dod/dsb/commun.pdf>.

<sup>147</sup> David Zarefsky, “George W. Bush Discovers Rhetoric: September 20, 2001, and the U.S. Response to Terrorism,” in *The Ethos of Rhetoric*, ed. Michael J. Hyde (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2004), 137-138.

## Labeling Terrorism an Act of War

Zarefsky asserted that Bush's most impactful rhetorical decision was to label the terrorist attacks acts of war rather than something else. Zarefsky's related claim that this was an "instinctive response (and) not the result of deliberate planning or calculation" is somewhat speculative (and questionable), but that does not detract from his important observation on the discourse of war.<sup>148</sup>

Transnational Institute fellow Phyllis Bennis concurred with Zarefsky's assertion.

She stated that:

The seeming unanimity of calls for war...(occurred)... after hours and days of hearing from the president and high-ranking officials that only war could answer such a crime.<sup>149</sup>

The acts of terror perpetrated by nineteen men, none of whom were citizens of Afghanistan or any of the soon-to-branded Axis of Evil countries, could have been easily interpreted as a grievous criminal act instead of an act of war. Accomplices of the now deceased hijackers could have been investigated, pursued and prosecuted like any other international criminal. Labeling the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> as an act of war was a conscious, but certainly not obvious, choice made by the president and his foreign policy advisors.

As Zarefsky accurately noted, important characteristics of an active state of war were absent in the aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. Most notably, the United

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>149</sup> Phyllis Bennis, *Before and After: US Foreign Policy and the September 11th Crisis* (New York: Interlink Publishing, 2002), 224.

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States was attacked by civilian terrorists and not by military personnel from a specific nation-state.<sup>150</sup>

The Taliban government in Afghanistan was eventually identified as culpable in permitting the terrorist group Al-Qaeda to train and operate within their borders. However, no proof was ever offered to suggest that Taliban officials authorized the attacks on the United States or participated in the planning of those acts of aggression.

Furthermore, recent history does not appear to support the assertion that the war paradigm is ultimately the most accurate lens with which to evaluate terrorist activity by non-state actors. American Timothy McVeigh firmly believed that he was at war with the United States government when he bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, OK; however, he was tried as a criminal and ultimately sentenced to death by a federal court. His prosecution was conducted and his sentence was carried out by civilian law enforcement officials, not military officials.<sup>151</sup>

Perhaps a more fitting analogy is the lengthy dispute over the status of captured members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) in the 1970s and early 1980s. Members of the PIRA in the custody of British authorities considered themselves soldiers in a war against the British Empire and bitterly opposed being treated like common criminals. They repeatedly sought to have their status changed to that of political prisoners or prisoners of war. In direct contrast to the war rhetoric of the Bush

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<sup>150</sup> Zarefsky, 140.

<sup>151</sup> Timothy McVeigh, "McVeigh's Apr. 26 Letter to Fox News," Fox News, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,17500,00.html>.

administration, the British government, again and again, refused to grant an exceptional status to PIRA members; instead, they persistently referred to these individuals as criminals worthy only of prosecution to the fullest extent of the law.

In these examples from recent history, we see two global powers defining acts of violence perpetrated by non-state entities as criminal behavior rather than employing war terminology. By not considering terrorists like McVeigh and the PIRA as legitimate combatants, the two powers that were attacked by these non-state actors denied a level of legitimacy to their challengers. In fact, had either the United States or Great Britain acknowledged the viewpoint of their attackers, they would have effectively elevated these non-state individuals to a position on par with themselves.

Considering this recent past, why was the president so adamant about labeling the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> as the initiation of a state of war? Rhetoric not only encourages people to think in a specific direction, but it can also be used to direct people away from thoughts that may contrast with the overarching message of those seeking to persuade them.

By discussing the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> in the context of war, Bush was able to propose actions that normally would be considered off limits if the matter were viewed as best solved by international criminal justice procedures. Particularly, the level of institutional violence considered permissible by the populace increases considerably within a war context.

Moreover, the rhetoric of war is so unyielding and definitive that it almost instantly trumps the idea of framing the attacks as a criminal act or anything else that



qualifies as less than war. In the face of the war rhetoric, those attempting to analyze the situation in a legal context are seen as offering a feeble response to a brutal incident. Worse, those who sought to employ a criminal justice lens to evaluate the terrorist attacks appear guilty of trivializing a confrontation in which thousands of lives were lost.

Zarefsky stated that “the rhetoric of war” is important because it “assumes and celebrates national unity.” When a nation is at war, it is easier for those in political power to craft policies and allocate resources in the direction they see most fit as long as they can claim that it is serving the war effort. Also, if the nation is on a war footing, dissent is much more difficult to justify and even simple legislative attempts to oversee the activity of the executive may be dismissed as “luxuries that must await the return of more tranquil times.”<sup>152</sup>

As we will see later in this chapter, the president used the war on terrorism as a validation for the enactment of several policy initiatives in the near aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>. It is interesting to hypothesize about the different level of support (or lack thereof) that some of these measures would have received had they not been publicized as part of the war effort.

#### Exceptionalism and the Rhetoric of War

The rush to both label and understand the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> as acts of war was almost certainly impacted by exceptionalist motivations on the part of the American

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<sup>152</sup> Zarefsky, 140.

president. Furthermore, the war rhetoric was likely received positively by many Americans for the same reason.

Yale Law Professor Harold Hongju Koh stated that:

September 11 brought upon the United States, like Achilles, a schizophrenic sense of its exceptional power, coupled with its exceptional vulnerability. Never has a superpower seemed so powerful and vulnerable at the same time. Given that we have already suffered some 3,000 civilian casualties in the war against terrorism, the question fundamentally posed by the Bush Doctrine is how best to use our superpower resources to protect our vulnerability?<sup>153</sup>

At a moment of collective vulnerability, the rhetoric of war surely resonated because it appeared to be an explicitly proactive position from which to fight back at an enemy who wounded the country so severely. Twentieth century history informs us that the United States is outstanding at prosecuting war. At a moment of national weakness, it was surely consoling to think that if the United States could defeat imperial Germany twice and stare down the Soviets until they crumbled, then it could unquestionably use its overwhelming power to completely annihilate an enemy who exposed American vulnerability so completely on September 11<sup>th</sup>.

As International Relations Professor Barry Buzan noted, the “idea that the US is special because its economic and political values are destined to shape the future of humankind” is reinforced by the fact that the United States has been able to enforce its will around the world for many decades. Buzan further argued that over time, the

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<sup>153</sup> Harold Hongju Koh, “On American Exceptionalism,” *Stanford Law Review* 55 (2003): 1497.

unrivaled strength of the United States becomes the hallmark of our Exceptionalism and, moreover, a good to be defended against any and all challengers.<sup>154</sup>

The unipolar world that existed for the decade between the fall of Soviet Communism and the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> only further reinforced the idea that the United States was exceptional (in this case read both superior and unique). The logic to support this deduction is simple: If United States was not a unique country in world history, how else could America reach such historic heights as a nation-state?

Because many Americans are convinced that the United States possesses a unique and superior way of thinking and living, they are more easily convinced that the country has a special right, above all other nations, to protect its exceptionality by any means necessary. Therefore, threats are exaggerated in the minds of citizens, actual events are seen as more cataclysmic, and, of course, the domestic population does not perceive disproportionate responses by their own country as terribly inappropriate.<sup>155</sup>

Given these exceptionalist impulses, it is completely understandable that a sizeable portion of the American populace readily accepted Bush's determination that the attacks ushered in a state of war between the United States and the all who plan or support global terrorists acts. Furthermore, exceptional beliefs encourage the popular sentiment that anything less than placing the country on a complete war footing represents a negligent and unacceptable response by American officials.

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<sup>154</sup> Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press), 155.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 172-173.

## Exceptionalist Language in Bush's War Rhetoric

As early as the evening of September 11, 2001, George W. Bush began to frame the terrorist attacks not only as an act of war, but the beginning of a battle between the forces of good and evil. In the introductory comments to his address from the Oval Office, Bush said that not only were individuals assaulted earlier that day, but “our way of life, our very freedom came under attack.” Bush continued with the statement that “America was targeted for attack because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world.”<sup>156</sup>

From his earliest pronouncements on the matter, Bush treated the following baseless assumption as if it were irrefutable truth – war was declared upon the United States of America because of its distinctive freedoms. As Zarefsky noted, in addition to the assumption that the terrorist attacks were acts of war, Bush also presumed that the attacks were specifically designed to target the United States as a nation-state and that the reason for targeting the United States is that America is the epitome of the thing that the attackers hate - freedom and liberty. Bush established all three of these rhetorical points at the very beginning of the crisis and never publicly wavered from the position that all were “incontrovertible facts.”<sup>157</sup>

It is entirely possible, and even likely, that Bush was correct in considering the attack was focused upon the United States as a nation-state. Over a year after the terrorist

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<sup>156</sup> Bush, “Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation.”

<sup>157</sup> Zarefsky, 142.

attacks of September 11th, Osama bin Laden was credited with writing a letter directed to the American public. In that letter, bin Laden made it clear that the United States was specifically targeted and that terrorist forces under his command were contemplating future attacks on the United States and its citizens.<sup>158</sup>

In this letter, bin Laden also mentioned numerous reasons for the hostile acts launched against the United States. The reasons listed, however, were mostly worldly grievances linked to the behavior of the United States and not related to accusations associated with abstract concepts such as freedom and liberty. Instead of discussing the American penchant for freedom, he cited grievances against U.S. policy toward Palestine, Somalia and Iraq; he also alluded to American support for dictatorships that allegedly served the interests of the West over the needs of their own people. The only issue raised in the letter that could conceivably come close to referring to “our freedoms” is a brief diatribe in opposition to the libertine nature of American culture.<sup>159</sup>

Of course, this letter is by no means authoritative. The authenticity of this letter has not been firmly established; it is quite possible that this letter was not even written by Osama bin Laden or one of his close followers. Moreover, if the letter is genuine, we still have no means to verify the veracity of its claims. We very well may be examining a prime example of counter-rhetoric on bin Laden’s behalf. He may have been recruiting for Al-Qaeda by calling attention to causes that would most likely appeal to the Arab

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<sup>158</sup> Osama bin Laden, “Full Text: bin Laden's 'letter to America', ” Guardian (UK), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/nov/24/theobserver>.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

Street.

In any case, this letter gives us, at least, an opportunity to consider bin Laden's mindset and his motives independent of Bush's rhetoric. There is little indication that American or Western political liberties were at the top of his list of grievances or considered a priority in the minds of the nineteen September 11<sup>th</sup> hijackers.

The idea that American freedoms were the primary motivating factor for the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks appears to be the creation of George W. Bush or one of his close advisors. Nevertheless, Bush's rhetoric resonated with many Americans in the immediate aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

In the remainder of this section, we will see that the language employed by Bush to promote his three main assumptions is deeply rooted in American Exceptionalism. Furthermore, I will propose that Bush's assumptions may have been accepted by many Americans because large portions of the American public also believe the Exceptionalist myth.

### Freedom under Attack

In his September 11<sup>th</sup> remarks, and in many other speeches immediately following the terrorist attacks, Bush cited American freedom as the motivational target for the terrorists who attacked the United States. Specific commentary to this effect included, but was not limited to the following statements: "freedom and democracy are under attack," the implication that the people of the United States were attacked because we "embrace freedom," the reference to "the heinous acts of violence perpetrated by faceless cowards upon the people and freedom of the United States" and the quote that

“(t)hey have attacked America because we are freedom’s home and defender.” In the last comment, “freedom” was framed in a particularly unusual manner; it was set apart as an independent entity that is uniquely American.<sup>160</sup>

Bush’s rhetorical use of the word freedom makes this term an abstract and symbolic construct that bears little resemblance to any tangible material conditions. In fact, as Peter Slevin suggested, the details of freedom when it is used in this context are simply left to the interpretation of the listener.<sup>161</sup>

However one may define it, the operational meaning of the term freedom does not have any impact on Bush’s overarching point. Rather the concept of freedom seems to serve as:

a political device... ..as well as a source of moral authority. (Bush) invokes the word as shorthand for American values as he defines them, and treats the concept as an argument-stopper.<sup>162</sup>

If we look at Bush’s usage of the term freedom using the lens of American Exceptionalism as our mode of analysis, we might conclude that his extensive and

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<sup>160</sup> George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President in Photo Opportunity with the National Security Team,” The Whitehouse, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010912-4.html>; George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President While Touring Damage at the Pentagon,” The Whitehouse, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010912-12.html>; George W. Bush, “Honoring the Victims of the Incidents on Tuesday, September 11, 2001,” The Whitehouse, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010912-1.html>; George W. Bush, “President’s Remarks at National Day of Prayer and Remembrance,” The Whitehouse, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010914-2.html>.

<sup>161</sup> Peter Slevin, “The Word at the White House: Bush Formulates His Brand of Foreign Policy,” *The Washington Post*, June 23, 2002, B01.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

abstract use of this word allowed the president to tap into deeply held assumptions that are shared by many Americans. Freedom, in this rhetorical sense, takes on a meaning far beyond the rights of political participation and procedural liberties that can be found in a plethora of nation-states around the globe. Rather, it takes on a metaphorical meaning that is independent of specific material conditions. Freedom, in this context, comes to symbolize a uniquely American way of life.

In accordance with this perspective, those outside of the United States may possess certain mundane aspects freedom, such as the power to participate in governmental decision making or the protection of a considerably broad slate of positive and negative liberties. However, freedom in its purest and noblest form is exclusive to the United States of America.

Such a rhetorical construct separates the material meaning of the word from its philosophical underpinnings in a fashion reminiscent of the Platonic Forms. For Plato, the Forms were knowable by only a select few philosophers; the remainder of the population could never acquire genuine knowledge of the Forms. Based upon this logic, it follows that the United States would be in sole possession of Freedom, while other nation-states merely possess various vestiges of freedom but not bona fide Freedom.

### Good versus Evil

Much like freedom, the word “evil” quickly became another rhetorical construct that Bush claimed as his own in his address to the nation on the evening of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Bush informed us that earlier that day “our nation saw evil.” In total, the President



made four allusions to the term evil in his short speech that evening.<sup>163</sup>

The day after the terrorist attacks, Bush coordinated his use of both the constructs freedom and evil to begin rallying citizens around his plan for a military response (as opposed to a legal response – see the previous section). First, Americans were told that “(f)reedom and democracy are under attack.” Then, they were advised that the enemy of freedom “hides in the shadows” and “preys on innocent and unsuspecting people.” Finally, we were informed that there would be an upcoming military engagement against this enemy and that this battle would “be a monumental struggle of good versus evil. But good will prevail.”<sup>164</sup>

By using concepts such as freedom and evil, Bush effectively framed the terrorist attacks as the first salvo in an apocalyptic conflict. This conflict was presented in almost biblical terms – the battle would be between the forces of freedom and good on one side and the forces of evil on the other.<sup>165</sup>

In subsequent comments, Bush continued to effectively use the term evil to define anyone even remotely associated with the terrorist attacks. Bush used the label “evildoers” to define both the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks and their supporters at

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<sup>163</sup> Bush, “Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation.” The speech is only 594 words long.

<sup>164</sup> Bush, “Remarks by the President in Photo Opportunity with the National Security Team.”

<sup>165</sup> See also, Bush’s conclusion to his remarks on the evening of September 11<sup>th</sup>. He stated that America will “go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world.” Bush, “Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation.”

all levels. He informed Americans that all evildoers must be “punished severely,” and apparently indiscriminately, because the “enormity of their evil demands it.”<sup>166</sup>

The impact of the above rhetoric is amplified by the context in which it appeared – a proclamation for a National Day of Prayer and Remembrance. In this milieu, Bush played a dual role – political leader and religious leader. In this capacity he attempted to join together the denunciation of the terrorists as evil with the implication that divine retribution must be sought by those who “in the face of all this evil... ..remain strong and united”<sup>167</sup>

In the days following the terrorist attacks, Bush remained on message, repeatedly claiming that the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> signaled the commencement of a cataclysmic battle between good and evil. At the same time, he continually restated the assertion that retaliation was not only justifiable, but a moral requisite given the epic nature of the conflict. Specific commentary to this effect included, but was not limited to the following statements: “our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil,” “(w)e will rid the world of the evil-doers,” “the evil-doers have never seen the American people in action before... ..they’re about to find out” and his statement that those who offer “safe havens” for the “evil-doers” “will be

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<sup>166</sup> George W. Bush, “National Day of Prayer and Remembrance for the Victims of the Terrorist Attacks on September 11, 2001,” The Whitehouse, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010913-7.html>.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

held accountable.”<sup>168</sup>

The dramatic dichotomy presented in Bush’s rhetoric on good and evil is difficult to take seriously unless one maintains a romanticized and truly exceptional perspective on both American history and the position of the United States in global affairs. The United States simply has not been an unflinching force for goodness in the world, especially since it assumed the mantle of superpower during the Cold War.<sup>169</sup>

As Zarefsky claims, such language encourages those on the receiving end to suspend their ability to think critically with the promise of a definite reward for doing so. The remuneration is a comfortable answer to the deeply disturbing question – why was my county attacked by a cadre of foreign invaders?<sup>170</sup>

If the attackers are evildoers, then the population subjected to the rhetorical argument can more easily reconcile in their own minds the reason for the devastating and in many ways inexplicable terrorist attacks. Such an argument proceeds in the following concise manner: if the forces of evil are diametrically opposed to the forces of good in the world; and evil attempted to attack the most obvious source of good in the world;

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<sup>168</sup> Bush, “President’s Remarks at National Day of Prayer and Remembrance;” George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President Upon Arrival,” The Whitehouse, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>; George W. Bush, “Guard and Reserves ‘Define Spirit of America’,” The Whitehouse, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010917-3.html>.

<sup>169</sup> The list of sources on this matter is overwhelming. Perhaps the most convenient quick reference guide to the exertion of U.S. power in the second half of the twentieth century is William Blum, *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions since World War II* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1995).

<sup>170</sup> Zarefsky, 143-144.

therefore the attacks can be explained as part of a dualistic struggle well beyond the control of the average citizen.

Psychology Professor John Edwards asserts that the terrorist attacks were shocking and devastating for reasons beyond the large number of human beings killed on that fateful day. The attacks also struck at the heart of American's national pride. The fact that nineteen citizens of underdeveloped countries could expose the weakness of the United States was humiliating for the collective consciousness of America.<sup>171</sup>

The pre-September 11<sup>th</sup> hubris of many U.S. citizens was violently deconstructed as quickly as the physical structures that were under assault. It is very probable that such a flawed belief in the absolute nature American security was in some measure supported by a frame of mind deeply influenced by exceptionalist assumptions. Seemingly, only someone with a definitive belief of the inherent greatness and superiority of their country could reasonably believe that their nation-state was immune to a devastating attack such as the one launched on September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Bush's good versus evil rhetoric plays directly at the damaged collective psyche of the America public. If the perpetrators that attacked the United States possessed nothing but the most evil intentions, then such as heinous only reaffirms the intrinsic goodness and righteousness of the United States. Therefore, even at the height of our national weakness, Americans were experiencing the reinforcement of exceptionalism courtesy of the rhetorical positions taken by our leaders.

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<sup>171</sup> John Edwards, "After the Fall," *Discourse and Society* 15 (2004): 162-163.

## Values

Bush's rhetorical claims about freedom, good and evil were further reinforced by his subsequent declaration that the terrorists "don't share the same values that we share." The non-descript nature of the term values in the previous statement likely does not refer to anything specific. Much like the other terms examined in the previous sections, the discussion of values is an abstraction that can mean anything or nothing at the same time.<sup>172</sup>

However, if one scrutinizes this language using an exceptionalist perspective such arguments about values become very meaningful. Most of the theorists examined in the previous two chapters posited the existence of an established set of values often referred to as the American Creed. For those who adhere to this philosophy, the American Creed defines the unique values of a unique culture.

The values contained within the American Creed almost take on an existence of their own; they are abstracted from any material definition at any given time and also removed from their origins. Minor disagreements over the specifics of the Creed are immaterial, rather defense of the Creed becomes an indispensable part of maintaining a familiar way of thinking and living.

Without specifying the particular values that are in dispute between America and its enemies, Bush proclaimed that the terrorists "hate our values... . (and) hate what

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<sup>172</sup> Bush, George W. "Remarks by the President While Touring Damage at the Pentagon."

America stands for.”<sup>173</sup> While lacking any means for verification, such a statement has the ability to contribute to the creation of an irresolvable dichotomy between Americans and the Other. The Other, of course, possesses nothing in common with the good, freedom loving people of the United States. Citizens convinced of the existence of a Manichean schism could more easily be swayed to support an extensive militaristic response to an attack such as the one perpetrated against the United States on September 11th.

The discussion of conflicting core values, the good/evil dichotomy and the abstract use of concepts like freedom seemed to resonate within the American polity. The message delivered by the president did not only affect the mindset of average American citizens, but it also influenced a significant number of intellectuals who, early on, publicly supported the actions taken by George W. Bush.

In February 2002, sixty academics signed onto an open letter drafted under the auspices of the Institute for American Values (IAV). The signatories included notable conservatives such as Fukuyama and Huntington; the list also included intellectuals from elsewhere on the ideological spectrum such as Robert Putnam, former Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan and noted “just war” theorist Michael Walzer.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> George W. Bush, “President Pledges Assistance for New York in Phone Call with Pataki, Giuliani,” The Whitehouse, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010913-4.html>.

<sup>174</sup> Institute for American Values, “What We’re Fighting For: A Letter from America,” Institute for American Values, <http://www.americanvalues.org/html/wwff.html>.

Significant portions of this letter read as if they were lifted, wholesale, from Bush speeches. The IAV letter clearly asserted that the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> were launched as an assault against “our overall society, our entire way of living.” Furthermore, the letter extolled American values as something that is “attractive, not only to Americans, but to people everywhere in the world.” Finally, the signatories state that the planners of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks represented a “world-threatening evil that clearly requires the use of force to remove it.”<sup>175</sup>

The rhetoric employed by the president may have influenced the esteemed group that drafted this letter. If so, the scope of the impact that Bush’s persuasive rhetoric had on American society extended beyond average citizens and included certain intellectual elites.

We can find four clear hallmarks of American Exceptionalism in the rhetorical arguments of the president in the aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. Bush’s more excessive statements on the cataclysmic battle between good and evil lead us to recall Lipset’s comments regarding the Manichean nature of exceptionalist thinking. Bush’s strictly dualistic conception of reality possesses a strong religious component. Intense religious zeal, including the messianic search for perfectibility, is a second characteristic of exceptionalism as discussed by both Boorstin and Lipset. Third, we find in Bush’s rhetoric the effective definition of an other whose value system is diametrically opposed to the American Creed. Huntington argued that unity at home can be reinforced by

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

rallying against a foreign other whose political and cultural mores are vastly different from our own. Finally, in Bush's arguments we find an appeal to irrationality that is reminiscent of Hartz's irrational American who adheres to certain ideological constructs in their entirety but appears only to partially understand the complexity of those constructs.

I submit that the existence of the above qualities in Bush's argument indicates the presence of a dominant exceptionalist narrative within his rhetorical position on the contemporary War on Terrorism. Furthermore, Bush's early success in crafting public opinion suggests that exceptionalist tendencies seemingly contribute to shaping the political thinking of many members of the American polity.

#### The Use of Rhetoric to Build Support for Changes in Public Policy

As days passed into weeks following the terrorist attacks, Bush maintained a consistent rhetorical posture. Repeatedly, we find him alluding to the key concepts of "freedom," "good/evil," and "values." The constant repetition of the same rhetorical position was seemingly designed to have a profound impact on the public policy making process. Built upon the foundation of Bush's rhetorical statements were a number of actual policy initiatives. Those influenced by the president's arguments would surely be more likely to consent to the passage of his proposals into law.

Because there were serious policy implications linked to them, the statements made by Bush during these troubled times are worth examining beyond a simple exercise in presidential rhetoric. Specific commentary to this effect included, but was not limited to the following statements which all came from the same speech: "all of a sudden, some



evil people came and they declared war on America,” “(we) want to talk about the battle we face, the campaign to protect freedom” and reference to “a mighty land, a land of compassionate people, a land who wants to help a neighbor in need, but a land who stands solidly on principles -- the principles of freedom.”<sup>176</sup>

Bush focused a great deal on the concept of freedom during his historic address to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001. During that speech, he also began to connect proposed policies to his rhetorical concepts. For example, to defend freedom, we are told that the United States needs to embark upon a “war on terror” which would begin “with al Qaeda, but... not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.”<sup>177</sup>

Lost among the thunderous ovation which followed the above comment, was the recognition that the President of the United States had just announced the beginning of what promised to be a long and protracted war that would likely extend far beyond geographic boundaries of Afghanistan and the political boundaries of the war powers granted by Congressional Resolution on September 14, 2001. As Bush, himself, admitted later in the same speech, it remains unlikely that the ambitious goal of defeating all global

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<sup>176</sup> George W. Bush, “President: We’re Making Progress,” The Whitehouse, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011001-6.html>.

<sup>177</sup> Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People.” Commentary on freedom included, but was not limited to the following statements: “Tonight we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom,” “On September the 11th, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country” and “Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom -- the great achievement of our time, and the great hope of every time -- now depends on us.

terrorists will be fulfilled during his presidency or anytime in the near future for that matter.<sup>178</sup>

Not only did Bush announce the United States involvement in a lengthy war, but he demanded that all other nations-states around the globe join the struggle or risk being labeled supporters of terrorism. His famous quote “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” may have received a resounding round of applause from the assembled officials, but it is difficult to defend such a statement rationally unless one’s subject audience has already been convinced that one side of the dispute is completely correct and represents unimpeachable good and the other side is utterly incorrect and represents unmitigated evil.<sup>179</sup>

In addition to the announcement of a permanent state of war against a non-state enemy, Bush also used the occasion to usurp Congressional authority by creating the Office of Homeland Security (OHS), an entirely new entity within the federal bureaucracy. The announcement of the OHS was a sweeping policy move in which Bush unilaterally determined that the OHS would enjoy “cabinet level” status. Bush even named a person, former Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge, to head the operation before Congress had the opportunity to create the office by legislation in accordance with the

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid; *Joint Resolution to Authorize the use of United States Armed Forces Against Those Responsible for the Recent Attacks Launched Against the United States*, Public Law 107-40, 115 Stat. 224 (2001).

<sup>179</sup> Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People.”

dictates of our constitutional system.<sup>180</sup>

It is understandable and perhaps even expected that the chief executive authority within a nation-state will react quickly and decisively to an urgent situation such as the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>. What is unexpected is that the President of the United States would assume such absolute power to act without either waiting for authorization from the Congress or presenting justification for the enactment of emergency powers. Such justification would hopefully extend beyond simplistic rhetorical allusions such as the need to defend “America’s freedom” from the forces of evil.<sup>181</sup>

Only days following his Congressional address, Bush again employed the rhetorical constructs of “freedom,” “good/evil,” and “values” to justify proposed policy changes that gave the executive branch more authority to prosecute “the war on terror.” In his speech at the FBI headquarters on September 25<sup>th</sup>, the President stated that “law enforcement” must have “the tools necessary” to be effective in their efforts against terrorism. The necessary tools for law enforcement included granting the FBI the “ability to track calls when (suspected terrorists) make calls from different phones” and “the authority to hold suspected terrorists who are in the process of being deported, until they’re deported.”<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> George W. Bush, “President: FBI Needs Tools to Track Down Terrorists,” The Whitehouse, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010925-5.html>.

Rather than defend these proposed powers on their merits, the president justified his request with a slew of claims that were consistent with his rhetorical position since September 11<sup>th</sup>. Specific commentary to this effect included, but was not limited to the following statements:

The people who did this act on America, and who may be planning further acts, are evil people. They don't represent an ideology, they don't represent a legitimate political group of people. They're flat evil. That's all they can think about, is evil. And as a nation of good folks, we're going to hunt them down, and we're going to find them, and we will bring them to justice.<sup>183</sup>

Also,

America is a nation built upon freedom, and the principles of freedom, the values of freedom. And this is a nation that will not -- will not -- blink from the fight. This is a nation that will stand strong for the great values that have made us unique."<sup>184</sup>

Eventually, the necessary tools Bush referred to in the above speech were granted via the passage of the USA-PATRIOT Act. For the most part, the USA-PATRIOT Act was a complex series of amendments to existing surveillance laws, particularly the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act initially passed in 1978. The specific changes offered by the USA-PATRIOT Act were often glossed over by its supporters and the bill passed in near record time considering the typical glacial speed of the U.S. Congress. The title of the legislation, itself (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism), was a testament to the influence of the exceptionalist rhetoric in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks.<sup>185</sup>

At the signing ceremony for the USA-PATRIOT Act on October 26<sup>th</sup>, Bush made sure to include commentary regarding the moral status of those who might be surveilled and detained under the many provisions of the new piece of legislation. He stated that “we’ve seen the enemy... ..They recognize no barrier of morality.”<sup>186</sup>

Of course, the text of this new legislation did not list “immoral evil doer” as a prerequisite for one to be subjected to the particulars of the USA-PATRIOT Act. The act expanded executive discretion, further limited checks upon the presidency and challenged the established equilibrium between public safety and the Fourth Amendment rights for both citizens and non-citizens alike.

Perhaps there was a good reason for instituting the particular provisions of the USA-PATRIOT Act. One could argue that the extraordinary events of September 11<sup>th</sup> required an unusual and temporarily domineering response from the government. However, the possibility that a rational argument might have led to the passage of the

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<sup>185</sup> *Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT Act) Act*, Public Law 107-56, 115 Stat. 272 (2001); The Federal Judiciary, “Understanding Intelligence Surveillance: A FISA Primer,” U.S. Courts, <http://www.uscourts.gov/outreach/topics/fisa/whatisfisa.html>; Center for Democracy and Technology, “Setting the Record Straight: An Analysis of the Justice Department’s PATRIOT Act Website,” Center for Democracy and Technology, <http://www.cdt.org/security/usapatriot/031027cdt.shtml>.

<sup>186</sup> George W. Bush, “President Signs Anti-Terrorism Bill,” The Whitehouse, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011026-5.html>.

USA-PATRIOT Act does not contradict the evidence that indicates that a rhetorical position, not an intellectual position won the day for the Bush Administration.

In the weeks following the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, Bush even attempted to promote his economic policy as a component of the “war on terror.” While speaking at the Department of Labor on October 4, 2001, Bush discussed the economic impact of the terrorist attacks. He stated unequivocally that it was

not the time to be timid, it's the time to be wise. It's also the time to act. And that's why yesterday the Secretary of Treasury and I both said that we need to have more stimulus available. *We need for there to be more tax cuts.* (emphasis added).<sup>187</sup>

Tax cuts had been a major component of George Bush’s economic policy since the beginning of his campaign for the presidency. His support for tax cuts was consistent with and justified by his economic philosophy. However, here we see Bush using the language of the “war on terror” and not the language of supply-side economics to rationalize the call for an intensification of a policy that he supported long before the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Bush certainly tried to convince the American people that tax cuts were, for some inexplicable reason, necessary to win the war on terrorism. He claimed that the tax cut legislation, if passed, would “make sure freedom stands, to rout out evil, to say to our children and grandchildren, we were bold enough to act, without tiring, so that you can live in a great land and in a peaceful world.”<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Bush, George W. “President Unveils Back to Work Plan.”

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

Here we see Bush using the rhetoric of the war on terrorism to affect more than just foreign policy decisions, but also to promote an important component of his domestic policy agenda. The impact of such discourse on overall policy making success is important to note even if one concedes that the days following September 11<sup>th</sup> represented an extraordinary moment in American history. Finally, the fact that Bush was successful in achieving policy objectives in both the areas of foreign policy and domestic policy suggests that his rhetoric may have had a significant impact on the public discourse.

#### A Reason to be Concerned over the Impact of Exceptionalist Rhetoric

Many American citizens were encouraged to support specific policies of the Bush Administration not because the president's arguments were consistent and rational, but because he used his bully pulpit to successfully tap into the collective subconscious of this nation during a moment of intense crisis. Bush appeared to frame his rhetorical approach to the war on terrorism in a manner that appealed to the Exceptionalist tendencies of many Americans. His policy proposals exploited American's commonly held beliefs; the fundamental rationale behind his exceptionalist claim was that extraordinary measures were needed in extraordinary times to defend an extraordinary polity from an assault perpetrated by an extraordinary evil.

Some might consider the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> and their aftermath an extreme example – an outlier event that cannot accurately yield important findings on the impact of exceptionalist rhetoric upon American politics. The carnage wrought by the attacks was certainly shocking to citizens of the United States and people all around the globe.

Perhaps this is an outlier event from which there is no frame of reference for Americans to operate; perhaps there is simply no logical explanation to offer for these devastating acts of aggression. It is possible that the president and his closest advisors, surely in shock themselves, reached into their bag of rhetorical tricks and pulled out the first thing they got their hands on. The war analogy and the Exceptionalist rhetoric, as fantastic as it was at times, may have been employed because there was no other reasonable manner in which to discuss the attacks.

Certainly, the above caution holds some relevance; the attacks were unquestionably overwhelming to the collective American psyche. Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that the use of Exceptionalist rhetoric to manufacture support for various policies, including military engagement, has a long-term impact that may not necessarily be positive. A careful examination of the rhetoric employed in the immediate aftermath is essential because of the potentially devastating effect that subsequent policies may have had on citizens of the United States and citizens of the world.

Seven years after the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the United States is over-extended in two undeclared wars of occupation in the Middle and Near East. Our forces around the world are strained to near maximum due to these two military campaigns and the soldiers in the two war zones are serving long and often multiple tours of duty.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Steven Lee Meyers and Thom Shanker, "Pentagon Considers Adding Forces in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, May 3, 2008; Associated Press, "Army Won't End Stop-Loss Practice In 2008," CBS News, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/04/22/national/main4033774.shtml>.



In addition to the burden placed upon our military forces, the cost of the two occupations is mounting. In March 2008, professors Linda Bilmes and Joseph Stiglitz estimated that the final cost of the Iraq war alone would top the three trillion dollar mark. Bilmes and Stiglitz summarize this point perfectly by stating that a nation-state cannot expect to spend that much money “on a failed war abroad and not feel the pain at home.”<sup>190</sup>

Moreover, the reputation of the United States appears to be suffering around the world. Nation-states from around the world elicited a great deal of genuine sympathy toward the United States in the immediate aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. French journalist Jean-Marie Colombani summed up the feelings of solidarity that many around the world had for the United States on September 12, 2001. She wrote the now famous quote “We are all Americans! We are all New Yorkers.”<sup>191</sup>

Unfortunately, the reputation of American seems to have been sullied over the past seven years by the policies enacted by the Bush Administration. It is painfully obvious by now that the world does not see us as we see ourselves. On the whole, citizens of other countries do not appear to regard Americans as liberators and fighters for freedom. Ostensibly, the United States is considered to be something much more neutral or negative by many and potentially dangerous and detrimental to the cause of world peace by some around the globe.

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<sup>190</sup> Linda J. Bilmes and Joseph E. Stiglitz, “The Reckoning: The Iraq War Will Cost Us \$3 Trillion, and Much More,” *Washington Post*, March 9, 2008, B01.

Unilateral action, preemptive war, extraordinary rendition, torture and the permanent holding of certain foreign nationals as enemy combatants are only a few of the policies that resulted from the Bush administration's quest to protect "our freedoms" via the war on terrorism. These policies have not been welcomed by the community of nations-states around the globe. Furthermore, these actions have led to a loss of the trust in the United States. The good will toward America that was so apparent in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> has been frittered away because of policies that might not have been necessary but for our collective myopic world view.<sup>192</sup>

#### The Purpose of this Critique

This critical analysis of Bush's rhetorical approach to the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> can serve as a springboard to a broader critique of the Bush Doctrine in general and the Iraq War in particular. However, for the purpose of the specific inquiry into presidential rhetoric, I have endeavored, for the most part, to sustain a relatively narrow focus upon the period immediately following the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

I have opted to maintain this particular focus because I believe that it is essential to understand how the war on terror is discussed within the American polity. I am confident that a better understanding of how average citizens have been spoken to by their leaders and how these same citizens discuss issues of war and peace among themselves will make a small contribution to a more sophisticated understanding of the

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<sup>191</sup> Jean-Marie Colombani, "We Are All Americans," *Le Monde*, September 12, 2001.

<sup>192</sup> Nat Hentoff, "Getting our Reputation Back," *Village Voice*, January, 22, 2008.

current state of foreign affairs for three major reasons.

First, presidential rhetoric on any subject should be critically examined as a means to discourage attempts on the part of our chief executive to obfuscate the inconsistencies in his or her policy formulation and implementation. Peter Slevin cites an example of a significant shift in Bush's foreign policy priorities that is difficult to reconcile. This inconsistency is more difficult to evaluate if one is completely sold on the rhetoric of the war on terrorism. Back in the 2000 presidential campaign, then-candidate George W. Bush criticized his opponent Al Gore and the Clinton administration for their focus on the practice of "nation building" and their downplaying of traditional strategic defense policies.<sup>193</sup>

In recent years, Bush has made the mission of spreading procedural democracy a critical component of his foreign policy strategy. By the 2004 election, Bush was touting the goal of building a functional democracy as a major justification for the war in Iraq. Apparently, between 2000 and 2004 he abandoned his strong objections to the practice of "nation building." However, he has yet to articulate the specific rationale for such a drastic change from his original foreign policy leanings.<sup>194</sup>

Second, the president's rhetoric must be examined critically because it encourages

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<sup>193</sup> Slevin, B01.

<sup>194</sup> Among others, see George W. Bush, "Remarks by President Bush and Senator Kerry in the First 2004 Presidential Debate," The Whitehouse, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/10/20041001.html> and George W. Bush, "Remarks by President Bush and Senator Kerry in the Third 2004 Presidential Debate," The Whitehouse, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/10/20041014-1.html>.

Americans to adopt a shallow and simplistic approach to understanding the place of the United States in the global political order. Bush's rhetorical stance allowed him to address international opposition to American foreign policy with meaningless statements such as the one below:

(W)hen I see that in some Islamic countries there is vitriolic hatred for America? I'll tell you how I respond: I'm amazed. I'm amazed that there is such misunderstanding of what our country is about, that people would hate us. I am, I am -- like most Americans, I just can't believe it. Because I know how good we are.<sup>195</sup>

While the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> were wholly and completely unjustified, some voices well beyond the narrow confines of radical Islam assert that those attacks on America represented an illegitimate means to address justifiable grievances against a country that posits itself as the supreme and unilateral world power. One does not need to agree with these detractors to realize that it is not rational to instantly dismiss criticism levied against the United States on the grounds that America is too good and noble to be guilty of implementing a self-serving foreign policy.<sup>196</sup>

Since the end of the Second World War, the record of the United States in global affairs is complex. During the second half of the twentieth century, the United States earned the praise of some in the global community and the legitimate condemnation of

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<sup>195</sup> George W. Bush, "President Holds Prime Time News Conference," The Whitehouse, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011011-7.html>.

<sup>196</sup> See particularly Noam Chomsky, *9-11* (New York: Seven Stories, 2001); Stephen R. Shalom, "Confronting Terrorism and War," *New Politics*, Winter 2002; Bill and Kathleen Christison, "The 9/11 Report and Its Weak-Kneed Consensus," Counterpunch, <http://www.counterpunch.org/christison07272004.html>.

others. To provide for true security, U.S. foreign policy makers and the American people themselves must, at least, recognize the existence of these complexities.

Third, the rhetorical patterns used by President Bush must be critiqued because such absolutist discourse can lead to the justification for and the popular support of practically any action taken by this government, so long as it can be associated with the preservation of “good” and the defeat of “evil.” As James Carroll notes:

What is permitted to be done in the name of ridding the world of evil? Is lying allowed? Torture? The killing of children...the militarization of civil society? The launching of dubious wars?<sup>197</sup>

Since September 2001, the United States has had to address serious questions regarding torture, extraordinary renditions, the compromising of civil liberties and pre-emptive war. Each of these issues along with other concerns that stem from the war on terrorism are truly controversial questions that should be debated intelligently rather than settled with platitudes containing absolutes about “good” and “evil.”

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<sup>197</sup> James Carroll, "Bush's War Against Evil," *Boston Globe*, July 8, 2003, A18.

## CHAPTER 5

### WHITHER EXCEPTIONALISM?

In the previous chapter, we saw that the Bush Administration's rhetorical reaction to the terrorist attack of September 11<sup>th</sup> was very much in line with exceptionalist discourse. However, if the discourse surrounding September 11<sup>th</sup> is exceptionalist, it is not quite the traditional exultant exceptionalism of Hofstadter, Boorstin and Hartz.

International Relations Professor David MacDonald asserted that the United States is now experiencing a "new form of exceptionalism" in the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> era. MacDonald claimed that "traditional forms of exceptionalism have been positive and triumphalist for the most part," with the United States cast in the role of the noble and strong leader of the world. The "new form of exceptionalism," MacDonald notes, portrays "America as a vulnerable and persecuted target of globalized and irrational hatreds."<sup>198</sup>

The attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> were obviously disturbing and painful because of the overwhelming loss of life; they also represented a traumatic collective experience because they exposed American vulnerability. The terrorist attacks marked the first direct assault on the American homeland by an outside enemy since the British invaded the United States during the War of 1812.

Moreover, this enemy was something beyond foreign - it also lurked in the

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<sup>198</sup> David MacDonald, "America and the New Exceptionalism: The War on Terror and the Righteous Victim" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Chicago, IL, United States, February 28, 2007), 1.

shadows. The largest nuclear arsenal in history and the most technically sophisticated military force in the world could not defend the United States homeland from nineteen men on a suicide mission. The United States was exposed and appeared helpless in the face of an enemy for the first time since the early decades of the Republic.

This position is contrary to the mythology surrounding the victorious and dominant United States of the twentieth century. During World War I, according to this myth, the United States reluctantly stepped up and lent its might to the cause of freedom before returning to its own hemisphere in the style of the Roman general Cincinnatus. The myth picks up a few decades later during World War II when, once again, a reluctant giant is forced from its slumber by a sneak attack. After securing freedom for the second time, the giant remains on the scene, not for its own benefit, but only to defend the hard earned freedom from yet another dangerous foe.

There is one glaring constant throughout this questionable telling of history – the United States is depicted as strong, victorious and beneficent. Placing America in the role of the victim who needs help from others is simply not part of the script with which Americans are familiar and comfortable. John Edwards states that the humiliation of being attacked struck at the heart of our exceptionalism.<sup>199</sup>

Yet, the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, no matter how devastating, did not lead America to disengage from its historic exceptionalist self-identity. Simply, Americans collectively absorbed the feelings of victimization into their political discourse and did not allow this

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<sup>199</sup> Edwards, 162.

drastic change to prevent them from feeling special and set apart from the remainder of the world.

In fact, Americans continued to feel privileged and superior all other countries; so superior that they were collectively convinced that their country should have a free hand to confront and destroy the dark forces behind the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. As Professor Paul McCartney claims, “the American people desperately needed to have their goodness and purpose reaffirmed after suffering 9/11’s senseless onslaught.”<sup>200</sup>

Of course, the prevailing exceptionalist mindset portrayed the United States, as the unrivaled champion of liberty and freedom. Yet another important component of this dominant twentieth century myth is the belief that the United States is a constant source of good in the world. No matter if the actual historical record is much more mixed, the myth provides the dominant lens with which many Americans view foreign policy disputes. If the United States is considered the quintessential example of good, then anyone who would seek to do it harm must be the root of all evil. For many, the campaign against the evil ones was something that needed to be fought vigorously and without much restraint on the part of the U.S.

The leaders of the United States sought and were granted permission by the collective consciousness of the American citizenry to seek “justice” unburdened by the standard rules of international engagement. Such regulations were crafted for others,

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<sup>200</sup> Paul McCartney, “The Bush Doctrine and American Nationalism” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, MA, United States, August 28-September 1, 2002), 25.



who are not as obviously good as the United States. The prevalence of the above attitude in the days following the terrorist attacks is a clear testament to the resilience of American Exceptionalist thought among the citizens of the United States.<sup>201</sup>

#### A Contrasting Theory to American Exceptionalism

Some might say that the staying power of American Exceptionalist thought patterns is the hallmark of our true exceptionalism. Several authors in the chapters above, most notably Lipset, acknowledged that the United States is not the only polity which looks or has looked upon itself as a unique entity. From time to time, in the modern era, Germans, Japanese and Britons (to name a few) all held strong to the belief that their respective cultures and societies were unique and superior to all others. The difference between these nations and America is that, at some point, the populations in each of these countries were disabused of their claims to superiority and possibly even their feelings of distinctiveness. A paradigm shift occurred in these nations when material conditions became incapable of sustaining such philosophical arrogance.<sup>202</sup>

By contrast, Americans appear to stubbornly maintain a collective sense of both uniqueness and superiority in the face of practically any material conditions to the contrary. As discussed in the above section, American Exceptionalism has proven to be a thoroughly adaptable and self-reinforcing paradigm over the years.

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<sup>201</sup> McCartney, 38.

<sup>202</sup> For a comparison between American Exceptionalism and "Japanese Uniqueness," see Lipset 1996, 211-266.

As Lipset and Marks asserted, there is nothing magic about American Exceptionalism. Exceptionalism in the United States is simply a foremost example of the reinforcement of a set of political norms within a specifically defined people. During the course of two centuries, norms developed within the American polity; as they developed, these norms had a profound affect upon American institutions. In turn, the institutions influenced the adoption of norms in subsequent generations. By implication, this cycle can potentially last forever until something atypical disrupts the pattern of reinforcement from one generation to the next.<sup>203</sup>

In his recent book, *Blessed Among Nations*, history professor Eric Rauchway noted that “the workings of history tend to disabuse people of their national myths... ..(e)xcept for the United States – so far.”<sup>204</sup> However, Rauchway asserted that clinging to a national myth too long is detrimental to the development of a nation-state. He concluded his book with the observation that since material conditions no longer support the existence of American uniqueness and superiority “the habit of being unusual is leading Americans into unfortunate fallacies.”<sup>205</sup>

Rauchway’s thesis primarily concerns the United States economic position vis-à-vis the rest of the world, but it can easily be applied to our discussion of the United States in the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> milieu. Unlike most writers on the subject, Rauchway argued

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<sup>203</sup> Lipset and Marks, 265.

<sup>204</sup> Eric Rauchway, *Blessed Among Nations: How the World Made America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 167.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

that American Exceptionalism began, not with the Puritans or the Framers but with the Industrial Revolution. For him, the critical moment in American development was the time period between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of World War I. The great hallmark of this era was rapid industrialization and economic expansion in an environment of relative isolation from the other developed countries of the world.<sup>206</sup>

Rauchway claimed that the United States, during the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, reaped the tremendous benefits of massive amounts of foreign capital investment and a large influx of cheap immigrant labor. He further stated that at the same time the United States had the luxury of building an empire mostly within its own borders. In almost neo-Leninist fashion, Rauchway asserted that the building of an American Empire on the Western frontier provided incipient capitalists affordable and easy access to both raw materials and markets for finished goods. The United States Army's subjugation of the native population on the American frontier required some financial outlay, but the U.S. internal empire certainly did not equal the colossal cost commitment of the empires administered by European nations. By contrast, Europeans were required to build and fund ubiquitous governmental structures to conquer and maintain far-flung colonies around the world.<sup>207</sup>

Rauchway's conclusion was that the vast difference in material conditions facilitated an American development that was dramatically divergent from European

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 10-12.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 14-17.

development. Guided by Rauchway's work and the information provided in the previous chapter, we can offer a developmental theory that contrasts with doctrine of the American consensus.

The United States did not end up with both a comparatively weak and limited central government and citizens who in Hartz's words were "irrational Lockean" because a hyper-liberal philosophy was an integral part of the very fabric of society. By contrast, both a citizenry enamored with the myth of the rugged individual and a national government that was much more limited than any of its counterparts in Europe developed in the United States because of the strikingly distinct material conditions that existed during the industrial revolution in America.

Surely, the economic factors discussed are not the only dynamic that effected ideological and governmental development in the United States. The attitudinal observations of Tocqueville and many others certainly indicate that there was something unique about the socio-political character of the United States before the Industrial Revolution. For example, decentralizing influences can be found in the United States Constitution; some examples of decentralized elements include federalism, checks and balances and the Senate. Part of the reason that the national government in the United States is relatively weak is due to the constitutional factors that retarded the growth of governmental power in the past century.

Yes, the United States is different politically and socially. Furthermore, there are numerous reasons for the significant divergence between the U.S. and the rest of the world. However, Rauchway's theory helps us to overcome the very attractive, yet

obviously fallacious myth that implies American Exceptionalism was akin to a product that could be breathed in through the very air and ingested through the water that flows within the borders of the United States. Of course, the previous statement is somewhat hyperbole; yet, as we found in our examination of the recent history of American Exceptionalism, several of its adherents presumed that the Creed had an almost supernatural impact on the American land and people.

Rauchway's thesis places American Exceptionalism squarely in middle ground between an unremarkable national narrative that collapses once key material conditions change and an insuperable meta-theory that continues to exist in spite of dramatically changing material conditions. He stated that while exceptionalist attitudes have served Americans "noticeably less well" after World War I, many people within the United States have still chosen to "cling to their old adaptations in new environments."<sup>208</sup>

He advanced the argument that contemporary Americans can little afford to indulge themselves in such mythology and he predicted that the dominance of the exceptionalist narrative would not last forever. However, Rauchway appeared to be pessimistic about our ability to discard exceptionalism and embrace a new paradigm. To adopt and paraphrase the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, Rauchway claim is effectively that "American Exceptionalism is dead; but given the way of Americans, there may still

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<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

he caves for thousands of years in which its shadow will be shown.— And we—we still have to vanquish its shadow, too!”<sup>209</sup>

We will never know for sure, but perhaps the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> initiated an eventful moment in which the specter of American Exceptionalism finally proved to no longer be an accurate lens with which to understand the role of the United States in the world. Surely, the president used exceptionalist rhetoric as a tool to rally Americans around two prolonged military operations that led to two sustained military occupations. However, more than seven years after the devastating attacks, fewer Americans appear to be impressed by the argument that the preservation of our freedoms requires us to fight wars against nation-states accused of terrorist activities. One wonders if the president could effectively use the same exceptionalist rhetoric today to justify the initiation of hostilities somewhere in the world.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> The original quote can be found in Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University, 2001), 109. The original quote reads: “God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown.— And we—we still have to vanquish his shadow, too!”

<sup>210</sup> Gallup Poll, “War on Terrorism,” Gallup, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/5257/War-Terrorism.aspx>. Of particular note are two questions: 1) *Do you think the United States made a mistake in sending military forces to Afghanistan, or not?* In January 2002, the response was 93% no and 6% yes; in July 2004, the response was 72% no and 34% yes; in August 2008, the response was 63% no and 34% yes. While a majority still thinks that the war in Afghanistan was the proper strategy, the decline in support is significant. 2) *Suppose the United States had actionable intelligence about terrorist operations in Pakistan, and the Pakistani government was not taking action against the terrorists. Would you favor or oppose the United States taking military action against the terrorists in Pakistan?* In August 2007, 52% favored the hypothetical action and 42% opposed it. Again, a majority supported expanding the war on terrorism in this hypothetical case, but the margin was fairly slim.

Moreover, one could conclude that the actions taken based upon the exceptionalist paradigm have been a failure. In a recent paper delivered at the convention of the International Studies Association, Didier Chaudet, a research fellow at the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), posited that the ongoing hostilities involving the United States were the brainchild of largely neoconservative policy planners in the Bush Administration who were motivated by the same exceptionalist assumptions that influence a majority of American citizens. Chaudet further claimed that the prevailing mindset based upon exceptionalist assumptions has led decision makers within the Bush Administration to make at least two serious miscalculations in the planning and implementation of their war on terrorism.<sup>211</sup>

First, Chaudet noted that while the early U.S. effort focused upon Afghanistan, a tremendous amount of this country's available military capacity and much of the strategic focus quickly shifted away from the "-stans" of Central Asia and toward the Arab and Persian world. By placing the focus on Iraq and Iran instead of Central Asia, the Bush Administration consciously directed attention away from the supposed prime targets of the war on terrorism (Al Qaeda and the Taliban). By relegating the engagement of terrorist cells in Central Asia to secondary importance, the administration successfully undermined its own stated purpose for initiating hostilities in the first place.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Chaudet, 12-13.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-17.

Of course, there is a strong possibility that such major policy priorities were so easily shifted because they were never genuine from the start. If we can believe the claims of former administration officials such as Richard Clarke, the war against Afghanistan was not the desired point of conflict for the President or his top advisors. However, the attack upon Afghanistan was initiated because it represented the military engagement that best fit his post-September 11<sup>th</sup> rhetoric.<sup>213</sup>

The two wars currently being prosecuted by the United States may best be explained as one implemented to fulfill the rhetorical claims made by the president in the days following the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> and another that strains the rhetoric of the war on terrorism but matches the long-term policy plans of the leading foreign affairs voices in the Bush administration.

This conclusion is complimented by Chaudet's second point. Chaudet claimed that the Bush Administration's neoconservative and exceptionalist inspired approach to the war on terrorism has simply served to blur "the debate on the roots of Islamist terrorism." Chaudet asserted that after September 11<sup>th</sup> Americans were "shaken by the horrible attacks" and "they wanted an answer to the question 'why do they hate us?'" Unfortunately, Bush and his primary spokespeople only "gave one wrong answer after the other."<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Julian Borger, "Bush Ignored Terror Threat, Claims Ex-aide," Guardian (UK), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/mar/22/iraq.usa>.

<sup>214</sup> Chaudet, 17-18.



For Chaudet, the “wrong” answers ignored the genuine grievances put forth by those who considered themselves to be Islamic nationalists. He presumed that as long as disputes such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remain unresolved, those choosing terrorism will have a basis to justify their actions, even if that foundation is merely a pretext hiding their true motivation.<sup>215</sup>

Of course, the “wrong” answers led to action – foreign military action and domestic policing measures were initiated by the United States on behalf of a population that generally supported the decision of its leadership (at least early on). These actions, of course, played into the hands of those who claimed to be engaging in extreme measures to protect the Islamic Nation. As Chaudet noted, the Bush Administration conducted the “War on Terror” in a manner that made it appear as a “War Against Muslims.”<sup>216</sup>

From an American perspective, the result of the policy decisions made by the Bush Administration is that the United States remains hopelessly immersed in both the occupation of Afghanistan and the occupation of Iraq. Meanwhile, Osama bin Laden, the self-confessed mastermind behind the attacks, remains free and continues to serve as a symbol of Islamic nationalist resistance.

The exceptionalist assumptions that contributed to the actions taken by the Bush Administration have not been reinforced in the seven years since the initiation of the war

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

on terrorism.<sup>217</sup> Might the growing dissatisfaction with the war on terrorism signal that Americans are on in a position where they might accept a new paradigm – one that explains material conditions better than the ideological yoke of exceptionalism?

Any answer, of course, would be merely speculative, especially considering the long-term dominance of exceptionalist thinking in the United States. Minus a crystal ball, such a radical paradigm shift is impossible to predict.

Frankly, the impact on the national political psyche of the policy prescriptions implemented in the past seven years will likely only be fully understood in subsequent generations. However, the possibility of a paradigm shift is worth considering at this time, if only to discuss alternative traditions that might rise in prominence over the old paradigm? We will address these questions in the final section of this chapter.

### The End of Exceptionalism?

At this point, I have discussed the impact of exceptionalist rhetoric on post-September 11<sup>th</sup> America. In the first and second sections of Chapter 5, I have also taken

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<sup>217</sup> Gallup Poll. Of particular note are two questions: 1) *Who do you think is currently winning the war against terrorism?* In January 2002, the response was 66% the U.S. and its allies, 25% neither side, and 7% the terrorists; in June 2007, the response was 29% the U.S. and its allies, 50% neither side, and 20% the terrorists. By June 2007, a significant majority of Americans believed that the war on terrorism was, at best, a draw. 2) *How satisfied are you with the way things are going for the U.S. in the war on terrorism?* In September 2002, 75% reported that they were either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied while 24% were either not too satisfied or not at all satisfied. In September 2008, 52% reported that they were either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied while 45% were either not too satisfied or not at all satisfied. Seven years after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, Americans were practically split in half over their feelings of satisfaction with the war on terrorism and the trend was moving toward higher levels of dissatisfaction.

a look at the possible impact of changing material conditions on the future of American Exceptionalism. I ended the previous section with the question, was September 11<sup>th</sup> the “last hurrah” for exceptionalism?

In his recent book, *The Limits of Power*, international relations professor Andrew J. Bacevich answered the above question with a resounding “yes.” In his book, subtitled *The End of American Exceptionalism*, Bacevich asserted that Americans must awake from their slumber and abandon exceptionalist patterns of thought or watch the United States decline in manner similar to other historic empires.

Bacevich stated that, in 2008, the United States faced the reality of its inextricable involvement in “an open-ended global war on terrorism.” Furthermore, he claimed that the consequence of this war has been the exacerbation of three related crises: one related to our declining economy and its connection to contemporary American culture, one of political leadership (more accurately, the lack thereof) and one involving the deterioration of military power.<sup>218</sup>

Of course, Bacevich placed a significant portion of the blame for the current crisis at the feet of George W. Bush and the “Wise Men” of his administration. However, he clearly stated that the three-pronged crisis, which is now reaching dangerous proportions, has been plaguing the United States for decades. For Bacevich, the contemporary war on terrorism launched by the Bush Administration in the wake of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks merely represents the capstone of a series of policy decisions and military actions that

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<sup>218</sup> Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008), 1-6.

have contributed to the decline of the United States in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>219</sup>

Bacevich asserted that two particular exceptionalist assumptions and attitudes have played an influential role in making the interrelated crises worse over the past few decades. The first is the mistaken belief among Americans that the world is theirs to rule and their nation-state's military power is preeminent and destined to remain that way in perpetuity. The second is the relentless pursuit of freedom, which has increasingly come to be defined as the right of absolute "self-indulgence" particularly in relation to wanton consumerism.<sup>220</sup>

According to Bacevich's argument, these two assumptions are mutually aggravating factors and prove harmful to the American body politic in at least four significant ways. First, these assumptions, particularly the first, leave the United States vulnerable and truly insecure. Second, the relentless pursuit for material happiness and "freedom" leads to profligate social behavior. The third detrimental effect, closely related to the second, is the faulty expectation that our profligate ways are sustainable. Finally, the irrational wants and expectations of the American people fosters the creation of a political Frankenstein monster – a bevy of politicians who continually makes matters worse by catering to the petty wants of Americans in exchange for the privilege of

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<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 and 101.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-9.

remaining in office. To fully understand Bacevich's conclusion, each of these tendencies require brief examination.

Bacevich asserted that the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> exposed a dangerous territorial vulnerability in the most powerful nation-state in the world. He claimed that the collective hubris of Americans was the main reason for this strategic vulnerability. The belief that the United States was ultimately secure within its borders allowed foreign policy shapers to focus practically all of their efforts on power projection around the globe rather than on internal defense.<sup>221</sup>

Of course, the preoccupation of American policy planners with the maintenance of empire was conditioned by the exceptionalist belief that global domination via the deployment of either "soft" power or the traditional "hard" power was an integral part of the national destiny of the United States. Inspired by the thought of philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr, Bacevich criticized this national arrogance – a trait that he claimed fostered a collective sanctimony among Americans as well as firm belief that the world should be remade over in our image and likeness.<sup>222</sup>

Aggravating the dilemma produced by American's collective feelings of hubris and sanctimony is the modern tendency to equate liberty and freedom with the attainment of material comforts. Discussing what he termed "the crisis of American profligacy,"

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 3-7.

Bacevich asserted that the post-World War II era has seen the philosophy of freedom becoming more often defined as self-gratification.<sup>223</sup>

In America's very consumerist culture, the quest for self-gratification almost always translates into materialistic desires. According to Bacevich, the imperial tendency, which is already strong thanks to our exceptionalist assumptions, becomes an essential component of U.S. foreign policy as leaders of the American polity seek to fulfill the wants and desires of millions of Americans.<sup>224</sup>

For Bacevich, a fundamental dilemma facing the United States grows as the increasing desire for self-gratification collide with the nation-state's decreasing ability to maintain the empire that allows for the fulfillment of American collective profligacy. Bacevich stated that while American's collective expectations of material comforts have increased, their mutual willingness to contribute and sacrifice for the sake of empire has decreased correspondingly.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-17. Perhaps this is the weakest portion of Bacevich's argument. I think that he too easily places the blame of American profligacy on average Americans. With only brief and passing exceptions, Bacevich neglects to discuss the role that U.S. based corporations have played in generating the overtly consumerist culture that becomes apparent in 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century America. He also fails to note that a significant portion of the population in our inner cities and rural areas have not experienced the material benefits of consumer culture to any great degree. Aside from this note that Bacevich's theory lacks an appropriate class analysis, I will refrain from arguing this point further so we can get to the relevance of Bacevich's conclusions and their impact on the subject of American Exceptionalism.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

In addition to the above tendency, Bacevich claimed that the costs of expansionism have increased over the decades since World War II. In sum, he asserted that by the twenty-first century, the formulaic expectation that expansionism will yield abundance no longer applies to the American empire. In fact, expansionism is beginning to cost the United States much more than it yields. Bacevich explained that the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> wars did not cause this erosion of American imperium, but they most certainly have exacerbated what he sees as the inevitable catastrophe ahead for the United States.<sup>226</sup>

For those looking for political saviors in the age of Obama, Bacevich offers little solace. He asserted that our political leaders, especially our presidents since World War II, have done little to quell the crisis of profligacy; in fact, they have mostly aggravated the crisis by implementing a foreign policy that has served to reinforce exceptionalist myths while gradually stretching the American military to the point of overextension.

One of the few leaders who Bacevich's claimed made a move against the "Empire of Consumption," was President Jimmy Carter. Carter's penalty for his honesty was to have his ideas rejected out of hand while he was in office; of course, he was also defeated for re-election by Ronald Reagan, who was more than willing to cater to the exceptionalist myth by giving "the American people what they wanted." Of course, the comfortable answers offered by most politicians came at a price – a growing national

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 62-66.

debt, increased trade deficits, and an almost unshakable reliance on (read: addiction to) foreign oil to name a few.<sup>227</sup>

These worsening conditions gradually led the country to its present situation, which Bacevich claimed was simply unsustainable. The attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the response by the Bush Administration have exacerbated the multi-pronged crisis and brought everything to a head, but Bacevich is clear in his assertion that the entirety of the blame cannot be cast upon George W. Bush and his Wise Men, as they were simply carrying out an extreme version of policies that have been in place for decades and supported by leaders from both major political parties.<sup>228</sup>

Nevertheless, Bacevich concluded that the exceptionalist assumptions which lie at the heart of our present crisis pose “an insurmountable obstacle to sound policy.” At the height of its power, Bacevich asserted, exceptionalism might have served a positive or at least non-harmful role in American policy making. However, he boldly stated that the country could now “no longer afford to indulge in such conceits.”<sup>229</sup>

In his conclusion, Bacevich followed up on his claim that the United States was following a policy path that was ultimately unsustainable for much longer. His prescription focused upon the purging of exceptionalist myths from our political discourse. He stated that Americans must consciously discard illusions such as the overly

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 29-43.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 58-63.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 121.



simplistic global binary struggle between good and evil in which the United States plays the guardian of righteousness juxtaposed against the perceived evil of the moment. Similarly, Bacevich claimed that Americans must recognize that “freedom,” particularly as it has been defined in recent decades, is simply not free; there is a cost, both material and philosophical to the relentless pursuit of self-gratification. Finally, he asserted that Americans must abandon the exceptionalist article of faith which posits that history is on the side of the United States and America is destined to serve as a permanent shining city on a hill for the remainder of time.<sup>230</sup>

As a replacement for the exceptionalist myth, Bacevich offers the doctrine of “enlightened realism,” which he defines in Niebuhrian terms. Enlightened realism is not a complete rejection of the parochialism endemic in exceptionalist thought, rather it tempers self-absorption with the recognition that providing for the self-interest of other state and non-state actors is the most effective means to achieve one’s own self-interest.<sup>231</sup>

While he offered the above prescription as a possible cure for the ills of post-September 11<sup>th</sup> America, Bacevich clearly believed that the likelihood of such a tectonic shift in political thought was low. He closed his book with an assertion similar to Rauchway: exceptionalist myths, while clearly outdated, have a powerful hold upon the American political psyche. He anticipated that the influence of exceptionalism would be

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 171-176.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 174-175.

unshakable and ultimately lead to the “willful self-destruction” of the, once great, American Empire.<sup>232</sup>

Bacevich’s assessment of the ongoing and deepening crisis of American power brought to a head by the contemporary war on terrorism is quite lucid, in spite of the absence of a significant consideration of class in his analysis. As the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq drag on without hope for quick resolution, the disconnect between expectations placed upon American power by its own citizenry (including its corporate denizens) and the actual ability of the United States to project its will around the world has appeared to grow into a wide chasm.

Clearly the expectations are impacted by exceptionalist myths. Most notably, there is a sense that history is on “our side” and ultimate victory is just around the corner. Other empires in history wrongly held fast to the same erroneous belief that they were immune to the factors that limit power in “lesser” countries – the fact that these empires no longer exist seems lost upon those smitten with the sense that America is special and set apart from the rest.

But is the exceptionalist myth may be all that Americans have to cling to in the United States. As revealed in the previous chapters of this dissertation, American Exceptionalist thought has had a tremendous impact on political actors in this country; from presidents to average citizens, the myth of American uniqueness has impacted social, cultural, economic and political behavior and the mores that perpetuate that

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid, 181-182.

behavior from one generation to the next. However, exceptionalism is *not* the only tradition that is apparent in the American polity.

As revelatory as Bacevich's conclusions are to understanding our contemporary political crisis, he remains silent on American political traditions, both positive and negative, that are non-exceptionalist in nature. He cannot imagine that a crisis of any proportion could shake the foundation of our exceptionalist myths, because he does not appear to acknowledge the historic existence of any alternative political conceptions.

However, for almost as long as theorists and historians have been discussing the pervasive nature of American Exceptionalism, other social observers have discussed alternative tendencies. These tendencies have appeared in American society and law across generations and, furthermore, they offer us examples of principles that contrast with the main tenets of American Exceptionalism.

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I will examine an example of a non-exceptionalist theory. I will argue that this theory presents us with the possibility that exceptionalism is not as pervasive and impossible to overcome as many hypothesize. If alternatives to exceptionalism have been historically noticeable in the American political discourse, then it might follow that such ideas *could* form the basis of a paradigm shift in American political thought as the dramatically changing conditions of our contemporary world make American preeminence and its supporting exceptionalist myths less and less materially viable.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSIONS

My goal in this concluding chapter is to introduce at least one pattern of thought that contrasted with the dominant paradigm of American Exceptionalism. My hope is to provide a convincing argument that the existence of alternative political traditions in United States history might indicate the possibility of the establishment of a non-exceptionalist paradigm in the future.

#### Multiple Traditions in American Politics

The theory that I want to examine in this concluding chapter was developed by Political Science professor Rogers Smith. Smith provided a vigorous challenge to the canon of American Exceptionalism in a groundbreaking 1993 article in the *American Political Science Review*. In that piece, Smith suggested that the great theorists who contribute to the development of American Exceptionalist thought, particularly Tocqueville, Myrdal and Hartz, were too quick to dismiss numerous examples of inequality and inegalitarian structures throughout American history. Smith asserted that the inequalities that were considered afterthoughts by the Exceptionalists were actually central to the American political narrative.<sup>233</sup>

Smith claimed that the liberal tradition was, indeed, very influential in American political development, but he further stated that American politics was never as superficially homogenous as the Exceptionalist School had presumed in their classic

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<sup>233</sup> Smith 1993, 556.

writings. Rather, Smith argued American political culture has been complex, inconsistent and, above all, conflictual in nature.<sup>234</sup>

Smith found multiple traditions present in American political discourse since the birth of the United States as an independent republic. Classical liberal and Madisonian republican political ideals were certainly present in every generation, but Smith asserted that material inequalities were also consistently justified through decidedly non-liberal and anti-republican traditions. These traditions upheld discrimination and the existence of permanent inequality in America by separating people based upon certain ascribed characteristics, such as race and gender.<sup>235</sup>

Smith concluded that, rather than unquestionably accepting the notion that the liberal tradition is insuperable in American politics, scholars of the American political system should responsibly “analyze America as the ongoing product of often conflicting multiple traditions.”<sup>236</sup> A few years later, Smith would expand his “multiple traditions” theory into a full length study of citizenship laws. His book, *Civic Ideals* discussed the decidedly non-liberal tendencies that existed in one aspect of the American political tradition - the conflict over who gets to participate fully in the American political arena, who gets to participate only peripherally and who does not enjoy any formal political participatory rights at all.

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 558.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 549-550.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 563.

Smith asserted that citizenship laws were a telling measure because, at its basic level, a polity is defined by who possesses the opportunity to participate in political life and who is denied that chance. Smith found that throughout American history, citizenship laws were crafted very illiberally and undemocratically; the frequent result was that large groups of people were denied participatory rights because of ascribed characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender and even religious practice.<sup>237</sup>

Smith's detection of a regular and repeated reliance upon ascribed traits to separate those deemed worthy of citizenship and those considered undeserving is important for our examination of American Exceptionalism for two reasons. First, it contradicts the notion that the United States is the home of a monolithic classical liberal polity by presenting a clear set of decidedly non-liberal policies implemented consistently over the span of the entire history of the American Republic. Second, it helps to explain the persistence of political myths such as American Exceptionalism. The second point requires further examination since initially it appears counterintuitive to the first point that variations to the exceptionalist predisposition exist in the American past.

Smith claimed that political myths are, in some ways, necessary in politics. To successfully preside over a population, rulers must convince those over whom they propose to rule that they are a single and united body politic. Smith stated that ascriptive myths worked exceptionally well as a means of achieving the above goal. Ascriptive myths, however, focus upon differences and therefore tend to unite a select group of

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<sup>237</sup> Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale, 1997), 1-2, 14 and 31.

people and anoint them as the “chosen ones” while separating this preferred populace from the “other” who is portrayed as different usually in some threatening and sinister way. In the long term, such perspectives facilitate the establishment of rigid and lasting social inequality with the privileged faction feeling justified in oppressing the out group.<sup>238</sup>

In the case of American Exceptionalism, the myth is the enduring legacy of an unmentioned but ubiquitous liberal tradition. That tradition is portrayed as a birthright for genuine Americans. By implication, the tradition is not something that is imbued within the “other.”

Seemingly contrary to this “divisive liberalism” that is the foundation of American Exceptionalism is classical political liberalism. Classical liberalism is philosophically broad-minded and cosmopolitan; its adherents reject employing distinctness as a means of bestowing privilege upon some inhabitants of a polity while marginalizing others.

I suggest that the one means of reconciling the discrepancy between these two definitions of liberalism is to recognize that the ideology of American Exceptionalism has always been rooted in the ascriptive tradition that Smith discussed at length in *Civic Ideals*. Of course, the language surrounding exceptionalism has, without fail, remained grounded in the tradition of classical liberalism.

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 6-9 and 31-34.

## Constructing a New American Narrative

Smith's argument in *Civic Ideals* represents a profound contribution to the deconstruction of American Exceptionalism. During the course of his study, Smith ascertained that the preferences of elites have historically dominated American political discourse. The preeminence of these elite preferences has been sustained by a variety of myths. The most often used and the most consistently effective myths are those that seek to divide Americans based upon ascriptive traits.

In the conclusion of his book, Smith attempted to lay the foundation for a new America narrative – one that is truly liberal (in the cosmopolitan sense) and rejects ascriptive myths. Smith suggested that national political identities should be crafted and maintained in a manner similar to the time-tested processes used to generate loyalty to political parties in pluralist democracies.<sup>239</sup>

Smith claimed that the party model would be effective but flexible enough to allow for the consideration of the many complexities of human social relations. He stated that studies of political party identification often found that party loyalty is powerful and relatively permanent, with few people ultimately rejecting a party affiliation that was ingrained in them from their youth.<sup>240</sup>

In spite of this, party membership is still widely acknowledged as a product of free choice. Therefore, party leaders cannot reasonably expect that appeals to blind

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 491.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., pp. 492-494.



loyalty will keep all members in the fold forever. Smith asserted that construction of a national political identity along these lines would force those who create and maintain identity narratives to provide a framework that gives people a strong sense of authentic belonging – a belonging that they can buy into without insulting baggage of mysticism and binary absolutes.<sup>241</sup>

Smith attempted to construct a mechanism that would provide a means for uniting the polity when necessary, while at the same time making room for a truly insightful process in which people voluntarily and reflexively develop a feeling of belonging to something that is higher, nobler and more timeless than them. His argument is both attractive and compelling but I question whether it can prevail in post-September 11<sup>th</sup> America.

As Smith explained, elites are often responsible for the construction and maintenance of political myths. They craft myths that convince a subject population that they are, indeed, a singular civil body politic and then further convince the now united polity that a particular set of elites represents the ideal choice for leadership. The elites, themselves, are hardly disassociated puppet masters. Rather, Smith pointed out that they often rank among the truest believers of their own mythology.<sup>242</sup>

Needless to say, political myth-making is an immense undertaking; guiding narratives are certainly not something that societies establish or change on a whim. Once

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 494-497.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 6 and 32-34.

a narrative has been constructed, deconstructing it and fashioning a new dominant myth is a herculean social task; one that surely would not be assumed unless there was a crisis of legitimacy facing the sitting political leadership.

We are likely to find either a group of elites re-fashioning a myth to maintain their position or a group of challengers attempting to assume power by convincing the polity to adhere to a new narrative at a time of crisis. Given the likely existence of profound crisis, it is not reasonable to assume that a non-ascriptive myth would be constructed and promoted under either of these circumstances.<sup>243</sup>

If a bold move to re-fashion or replace a guiding myth is unlikely to be proposed outside of a crisis situation and crisis situations are ideal moments for myths that rely on ascriptive differences and simplistic binary relationships of good and evil, then can we ever expect to find a window of opportunity for a non-ascriptive narrative to be forged and promoted to the public at-large? While such a prospect seems unlikely, it is apparent that the people of the United States are facing a time for sober reflection and reevaluation of our collectively preconceived notions.

Less than a generation ago, it was fashionable within both intellectual and non-academic circles to consider the possibility that world history was about to embark upon an American century (or perhaps, millennium). Now, it is difficult to imagine that such a flight of the imagination could have been considered possible by serious minded people.

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 502. Even Smith acknowledged that ascriptive myths tend to dominate during times of crisis.

Rather, it is becoming painfully obvious for even the strictest adherent to the exceptionalist ideal that the United States is no longer the sole arbiter its own national fate, let alone the driver of history for the entire global village.

In his post-September 11<sup>th</sup> book, *Who Are We?*, Samuel Huntington suggested that the “salience and substance” of American identity was at least partially “being shaped by America’s new vulnerability to external attack.”<sup>244</sup> In response, Huntington offered the argument that maintaining the foundational American Creed will become more, not less, imperative as Americans adjust to their newly discovered feelings of vulnerability. Here, Huntington allows himself to become trapped between his acceptance that “a creed alone does not a nation make” and his strong sense that the American Creed is the only valuable thing holding the fabric of American society together.<sup>245</sup>

The attacks of September 11, 2001 may have exposed something more than vulnerability in the strategic defenses of the United States; they might have uncovered a latent fear that the American century lie not ahead of us in the future, but behind us in the past. Huntington reflects a similar pessimistic fatalism in the first chapter of *Who are We?* He asserts that “(n)o society is immortal... ...In the end, the United States of America will suffer the fate of Sparta, Rome and other human communities.”<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Huntington, Samuel P. *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 336.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

While Huntington's prediction will surely come to pass eventually, the immediate decline of the United States is not inevitable nor is it solely dependent upon a single narrative like the exceptionalist myth. In contrast to Huntington, I believe that embracing multiple identities might be a source of great intellectual strength for Americans. Moreover, it may be the only alternative that allows the United States to continue as a major power (likely among several others).

The exceptionalist myth can no longer provide Americans with the answers they seek concerning their domestic political relationships. Furthermore, it likely hinders the ability of Americans to craft meaningful connections with "others" around the globe. Now may be the time for a new and more comprehensive narrative. I am unsure if the American polity is up to the task, but I am quite sure that it is a necessary venture as humankind moves forward into a century that will be marked by more and more complex and likely more and more conflictual identities.

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