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Department of Political Science, Law, and International Studies

Master's degree in *Human Rights and Multi-level Governance*

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**AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON AMERICAN
FOREIGN POLICY**

Master thesis written

under the supervision of

Prof. dr hab. Renata Duda

Double Degree Program - Wrocław, 2021-2022



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**AMERYKAŃSKA WYJĄTKOWOŚĆ I JEJ WPŁYW NA AMERYKAŃSKĄ
POLITYKĘ ZAGRANICZNĄ**

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ABSTRACT

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

The thesis aims to understand what the idea of American exceptionalism consists of and how it can manifest itself as an influential factor in American foreign policy. Adopting a constructivist perspective that explores American exceptionalism as a fundamental aspect of American national identity, the thesis also seeks to show how the idea, one loaded with symbolic-religious connotations, may end up compromising the ability of foreign policy makers to take judicious decisions, and how it can end up serving as a rhetorical instrument to gather domestic support for controversial international ventures. The administration of George W. Bush is used to exemplify these phenomena. The thesis argues that it would be of greater benefit to the United States if the idea could be contextualized historically and critically in order to avoid detrimental attempts to instrumentalize it.

Key words: American exceptionalism, American foreign policy, American national identity, American civil religion, Constructivism, George W. Bush.

ABSTRAKT

AMERYKAŃSKA WYJĄTKOWOŚĆ I JEJ WPŁYW NA AMERYKAŃSKĄ POLITYKĘ ZAGRANICZNĄ

Celem pracy jest zrozumienie, na czym polega idea amerykańskiego wyjątkowości i jak może się ona przejawiać jako czynnik wpływający na amerykańską politykę zagraniczną. Przyjmując konstruktywistyczną perspektywę, która bada amerykańską wyjątkowość jako fundamentalny aspekt amerykańskiej tożsamości narodowej, rozprawa stara się pokazać, w jaki sposób idea ta, obciążona symboliczno-religijnymi konotacjami, może wpłynąć na zdolność decydentów polityki zagranicznej do podejmowania rozsądnych decyzji, a także jak może ona posłużyć jako instrument retoryczny do uzyskania krajowego poparcia dla kontrowersyjnych przedsięwzięć międzynarodowych. Przykładem tych zjawisk jest administracja Prezydenta George'a W. Busha. Zasadnicza teza pracy argumentuje, że większą korzyścią dla Stanów Zjednoczonych byłaby historyczna i krytyczna kontekstualizacja tej idei w celu uniknięcia szkodliwych prób jej instrumentalizacji.

Słowa kluczowe: Amerykańska wyjątkowość, amerykańska polityka zagraniczna, amerykańska tożsamość narodowa, amerykańska religia obywatelska, konstruktywizm, George W. Bush.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 An exceptional concept

American exceptionalism has been a concept extensively studied in academia and commented on by pundits both in the United States and abroad. Additionally, a lot of attention has been dedicated to American foreign policy as a result of the unquestionably prominent, albeit highly controversial, role the United States has played in the global arena. Just as one can find different schools of thought on how to interpret American foreign policy, one can also find distinct prisms on how to understand American exceptionalism. An even more encompassing term than American foreign policy, given its multifaceted origins, dimensions, and interpretations, American exceptionalism is a concept that goes beyond the traditional realm of studies of international relations, posing a challenge to any author of that field that wishes to comprehend its particularities. Not only do we find disputation on what is the best way of comprehending it, but there is also no consensus on the best way to approach it. If one is to make sense of American exceptionalism one must try to dive into the historical, geographical, religious, cultural, and political dimensions associated with it. This manifold expression of the concept must be taken into consideration so that we can form a more thorough picture of what the idea consists of, how it evolved, and what are its expressions. It is also important to investigate the idea by probing what different branches of knowledge have to say about it, given their complementarity and how, for example, the religious and geographical facets of the United States become intertwined in forming the self-reinforcing belief of an exceptional country.

Furthermore, if we assume, as I will throughout this dissertation, that American exceptionalism is a notion that is inextricably connected with the domestic life of the United States we must pay attention not only to its exterior manifestations in foreign policy but also to the home instantiations of it. Public opinion in the United States is understood by some scholars to play a larger role in the development of foreign and security policy than in other countries around the globe ¹. This connection cannot be

¹ Costigliola, F. & Hogan, M. J. (2016). *Explaining the history of American Foreign Relations*. Cambridge University Press, p.165.

overlooked, and so to apprehend this proximity between the domestic and foreign world in the United States we have to analyze how American exceptionalism is an integral part of America's identity and its civil religion, influencing diverse aspects of American life. This will be done in the second chapter where, after understanding the origins and characteristics of the concept, examples will be provided related to the embodiment of exceptionalism in American life in its national myths, conventional wisdom, and political habits to understand the role it plays in forming the bigger picture of America. This will serve as a basis to illustrate and grasp how exceptionalism encircles almost every aspect of the nation. After doing so, one should be able to better observe how not only the general American public but also decision-making elites, aware of it or not, embrace different traits of American exceptionalism when dealing with internal and external affairs.

It should also become clearer how, by being so rooted in American national identity, American exceptionalism can be appropriated by foreign policy elite as a resource to try to validate, both domestically and internationally, foreign policy decisions that are controversial. Under this scenario, the belief that the United States is an exceptional nation can be instrumentalized to justify their involvement in foreign imbroglios as a right, and sometimes even as a duty. In this sense, American exceptionalism may be seen as a credo that possesses the possible propensity to instill in its believers the capacity to act in an imperialistic way. Colonel Andrew J. Bacevich's theory on America's three crises will be used as support to understand this phenomenon.

Finally, a case study will be put forward using George Walker Bush's tenures (2001-2009) to exemplify through the analysis of speeches, declarations, and official documents how critical decision-makers in the United States instrumentalize the ideas related to American exceptionalism to favor certain foreign policy objectives such as, in our specific examination, the invasion of Iraq. I hope to finally prove our point and demonstrate that American exceptionalism is indeed a key concept to understanding the decisions that are taken in the realm of foreign affairs. And that as an idea, it has been a powerful motor in shaping the worldview of American leaders and mainstream America, contributing to the adoption of foreign policies that find in the notion of American exceptionalism fertile ground to be disseminated and popularly embraced domestically.

In this sense, I hope to show that policymakers can and do exploit certain dispositions to be found in the American public that are attached to exceptionalism,

feeding into a mindset that might lead to calamitous foreign policy adoptions that could have turned out differently if both the public and authorities were more attentive to the distinct historical, socio-economic and cultural realities that exist in the world. And that if they recognized that the internal American experience, exceptional or not, cannot always serve as a reliable parameter to judge the manner other countries behave then their understanding of other countries' actions in the international arena would be improved. Therefore, a better approach would be to exercise a more critical appraisal of American national identity, and, hence, of American exceptionalism, and halt the inflation of a self-image that can be used by policymakers to nudge the country into contentious international involvements.

1.2 Research questions and limits

The two main questions this thesis tries to provide an answer to are (i) What is American exceptionalism? And (ii) In which ways does the idea of American exceptionalism influence American foreign policy? My principal aim throughout this work will be to indicate how the idea of an exceptional America constructs a national identity that directly affects American foreign policy. And that, in this sense, one can better interpret foreign policy decisions taken by the United States if we remit them to the concept of American exceptionalism and its encompassing influence. Hence, a constructivist perspective will be adopted to explore and explain how American foreign policy is influenced by this national identity which is essentially incarnated as the idea of American exceptionalism. I hypothesize that American exceptionalism is a comprehensive notion that permeates almost all of American existence, in societal and cultural terms, and, as such, it is a nuclear variable for policymakers in devising foreign policy. As Schonberg points out² the way America understands itself as a nation is a basis for the making and conduction of foreign policy. By making sense of how the nation holds itself in high regard as exceptional we should be able to better comprehend the manners in which it acts overseas.

It is not the goal of this thesis to present a complete historical, political or sociological reconstruction of the idea of American exceptionalism ever since the nation's

² Schonberg, K. K. (2009). *Constructing 21st Century U.S. foreign policy: Identity, ideology, and America's world role in a new era*. Palgrave Macmillan.

colonial times. Instead, this research will initially focus on reconstructing key aspects that are associated with the historical origins of the concept so that we have sufficient elements to define what fundamental facets of the idea are and what are some of its consequences for foreign policy. Doing so should allow us to apprehend the continuity of the concept in more modern days expressions, which shows us how American exceptionalism is a continuous element in America's existence since it was conceived. I will not try to create a typification of American exceptionalism by verifying all the disparate interpretations of it that might have existed across different offices, parties, or even academic literature, but rather opt for treating it as a uniform idea that possesses a set of stable characteristics that have been appropriated by distinct tenures according to each of their specific contexts and needs. In the last chapter, the administration of George W. Bush is selected to serve as an example so as to depict how a president epitomized the American national identity as an exceptional nation and passed foreign policy measures in accordance with this understanding.

Besides, it is also not my objective to exhaust how American exceptionalism affects American foreign policy. If American exceptionalism truly is an integral part of American existence as I assume, pervading the mindset of both population and decision-makers, then it is impossible to determine with precision all the specific externalizations of that idea. As an idea, it might influence the mental states and habits of the American people and politicians in conscious or unconscious manners. Even though we can never enter one's mental state we can, nevertheless, empirically apprehend, for example, recorded vocalizations and writings of these states, for instance, orations and published books, and find direct or indirect traits of acts that may have been influenced by specific ideas and mental dispositions. Even if not directly evoking American exceptionalism or wording it as such, it is still plausible to hypothesize that it has been a determinant element in shaping the American way of thinking, especially in foreign policy. But in order to make our task more manageable, this dissertation will be limited to examining episodes where the notion of American exceptionalism is present without reasonable doubt. The search for this unambiguous exemplification also explains why I opted to choose George W. Bush's terms for my case study since it provides us with countless conjurations of American exceptionalism verbatim to its most recognizable attributes.

1.3 Methodology and theoretical framework

For the research purposes of this thesis, the methodology consists of the analysis of primary and secondary sources, that is to say, transcribed presidential speeches, official government documents, reports by international organizations, and others for the former source. And, for the latter source, distinguished publications on the topic by commentators that belong to different fields such as historians, social scientists, ex-government officials and agents, philosophers, etc. Texts belonging to official government websites and data collected by research centers are also going to be used and referenced.

The theoretical framework adopted will follow the principles rendered by one of the three grand theories in international relations, namely constructivism. Social constructivism is a state-centric metatheory that assumes that international relations are guided by certain identities that are socially and historically built. It does not believe that we can find the explanation for the way actors will interact in the international scenario simply by exhausting the possible material and geopolitical power play factors involved in that interaction, but rather we must investigate what an identity consists of and what are the distinctions to be found between the identities of different agents. As a constructed element that integrates a country's reality, national identity is a basilar variable in shaping an agent's behavior and expectations, both it's own and the ones belonging to its peers. Making sense of the norms and values a country adopts as social constructs should help us to understand their logic in embracing a specific agency. One must note that given that those identities are socially and historically constructed, they are also subject to change, especially in the long run as social alterations may take place. It is, thus, proper to keep in mind that the agency of a certain state might, as a result of this constantly constructed identity, change with time as the elements that shape its identification also gradually shift.

In spite of the fact that identities are subject to possible change, one must also note that cognitive biases, inevitable components of human reasoning, might cause a certain identity trait, such as the belief in an inflated American exceptionalism, to be perennially reaffirmed if no revision exercises and tests are made to put into question the validity of that belief. As Hirshberg ingeniously puts it

*Citizens tend to hold positive, stereotyped conceptions of their own nations. Public perceptions of a nation's international involvements are guided by those patriotic stereotypes and serve to reify and perpetuate the stereotypes upon which they are based. The perpetuation of a positive national self-image helps maintain political order, public acquiescence and policy support*³.

As I too will argue, this seems to be the case with American exceptionalism, a property that has been long present in the history of the country as a guiding principle for the way both the people and the critical decision-makers organize their thinking about themselves and the world.

1.4 Outline of chapters

Chapter 1, “The history of the concept and its principles” will investigate the historical roots of the idea and how the geographical, religious, and political dimensions under which the United States was built contributed to the emergence and development of American exceptionalism and its belief in the distinction of the nation. Examining each of these fields will demonstrate how features that were present in the United States from the outset contributed to the credence that America has always been a *shining city upon a hill* destined to triumph in its endeavors. The innate geographic privileges, the Puritan settlers seeking religious freedom, and the liberalist unanimity were ingredients that all combined prompted the emergence of, and the belief in, American exceptionalism as a sustaining identity feature of the nation. As I will argue, this self-reinforcing vision of an exceptional nation results in principles that undermine sound judgment in foreign policy given its inescapable tendency to use the domestic experience as a fallible ruler to assess international situations. This discrepancy between the domestic experience of the United States and the ones of other countries is not corrected by American exceptionalism but, on the contrary, exacerbated, thus resulting in possibly inadequate foreign policy evaluations and actions.

Chapter 2, “Civil religion as an emanation of American exceptionalism” is going to scrutinize how the idea of American exceptionality is present in the domestic sphere

³ Hirshberg, M. S. (1993). *The Self-Perpetuating National Self-Image: Cognitive Biases in Perceptions of International Interventions*. *Political Psychology*, 14(1), 77–98. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3791394>.

of the United States, incarnated in the idea of America's civil religion and its traditional cult of certain symbols and ideals. It will be shown how this sense of patriotic religiosity can be connected to America's perception of the foreign world and the foreign policy that follows. When evaluating the national creed in its own greatness it ought to be clearer how the concept of American exceptionalism is connected to that of America's civil religion and how they can be explored to push for certain foreign policy decisions.

Chapter 3, "American exceptionalism and its potential imperial propensity" will present a critical view of interpreting the United States' involvement in foreign affairs, one which is put forward by Andrew J. Bacevich. Discussing his theory on America's triple crises helps to elucidate how American exceptionalism can render instrumental support for the promotion of foreign policies that can be characterized as imperialistic if it is assumed that the adoption of these ideas is done in a non-critical way.

Chapter 4, "George W. Bush's rhetoric and American exceptionalism" will peruse George W. Bush's administration through the analysis of selected speeches and official documents to demonstrate how American exceptionalism substantiates the formation of American foreign policy both in its devising among circles of decision-makers, and how it is used as an appeal for the general public to congregate support for these external policies. The terrorist attack of 9/11 and subsequent Iraq's invasion will be brought to attention as key events that fomented an ambient conducive to summoning American exceptionalism as an idea capable of mobilizing domestic popularity for the administration's decisions.

CHAPTER 1: THE HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT AND ITS PURPORTED PRINCIPLES

2.1 Geographical dimension

The United States is the third-largest country in the world by size after Russia and Canada ⁴. Although a solidified position nowadays, the conquer of land by the United States in the northern hemisphere happened through a series of episodes that took place since its independence. The territorial evolution of the country eventually led to the conquest of enough land to connect both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. This ability to access two important strategic oceans is just one of the remarkable characteristics of the American territorial might that contributed to the formation of a self-image filled with overwhelming confidence as American exceptionalism dictates.

In colonial times, during the 17th and early 18th centuries, the vast availability of land represented a great contrast to the European reality, and the need for settlers to acquire land became a strong motivation that led Europeans to travel across the Atlantic in search of a new beginning. From then onwards, American territory gradually increased its extensiveness and richness in resources, notably to the expense of decimating many Native American tribes as the westward expansion took place in the 19th century supported by the doctrine of manifest destiny ⁵. Motivated by the abundance of formerly scant populated land, manifest destiny was an idea that announced that the triumphant expansion of America was destined to take place regardless of any difficulties to be found on the way. As a “*philosophy of territorial expansion*” ⁶, it incarnated a sense of inevitability in favor of America’s territorial augmentation across the North American continent, supported by the idea of divine providence

[...] other nations have undertaken to intrude themselves ... in a spirit of hostile interference against us, for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and

⁴ Central Intelligence Agency. (2022). *The World Factbook: United States*. Cia.gov. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/united-states/>.

⁵ Library of Congress. (2020). *Westward Expansion: Encounters at a Cultural Crossroads*. Loc.gov. <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/westward-expansion-encounters-at-a-cultural-crossroads/>.

⁶ Pratt, Julius W. (1927). *The Origin of “Manifest Destiny”*. The American Historical Review. Volume 32. Issue 4. Pages 795–798.

hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions. ⁷

Despite the fact that western expansion came at the cost of employing enough firepower to wipe out the indigenous peoples that offered resistance to this goal, the environment under which the United States aggrandized its territory was “*mostly free from significant and continuing threats from other states*” ⁸. For instance, the country’s first and largest territorial acquisition, the Louisiana purchase, which acquired a major part of the central area of the country, was completed in 1803 by President Thomas Jefferson ⁹ as a result of the “*contingencies of the long war between revolutionary France and its enemies*” ¹⁰ during the Napoleonic era. The country’s second-largest addition of land, the Alaska purchase, was obtained from the Russian Empire in 1867 during the aftermath of the Crimean War. In this sense, geographical isolation from major foes ¹¹ is a unique feature of the United States when compared with other European superpowers not only at that time but also in the present day. This physical division that prevails between the homeland and other countries has contributed to the development of an egocentrically perspective that places the United States in the position of an unreachable country enjoying a strategic and privileged situation on the terrestrial globe that is thought of as being unparalleled. It is clear that this distancing from imminent threats stemming from other countries helped the United States secure a position of favored development, especially in historical periods where major wars plagued the European continent as can be noted during the already mentioned period of the Napoleonic wars or, in a more recent

⁷ O’Sullivan, John. (1845). *Annexation. The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. Volume 17. Pages 5-6.

⁸ Pillar, P. R. (2018). *Why America misunderstands the World: National Experience and roots of Misperception*. Columbia University Press, p. 25.

⁹ Office of the Historian. (2013). *Louisiana Purchase, 1803*. History.state.gov. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1801-1829/louisiana-purchase>.

¹⁰ Hodgson, G. (2010). *The myth of American exceptionalism*. Yale University Press, p.20.

¹¹ The Mexican-American War (1846-1848) was the only war the United States had to face against another state that borders the mainland. It resulted in a grand victory for Americans. Mexico, a military unprepared country, was stripped of half of its area whilst the United States received the territories of what is today Texas, New Mexico, California and others.

past, of both world wars, where superpowers found themselves entangled in territorial disputes of great proportions affecting home soil.

By the same token, the material plentifulness to be found in the mostly unchallenged geographic extension of the United States is also a fundamental root of American exceptionalism. The opulence of resources found in a large landmass paired with the geographical distance from substantial threats by other states helped to generate, from the historical outset of the United States, a sense of unbeatability that shaped the idea of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism. This creed in the unshakeable successful future of America, based on the terrestrial privileges we have pointed out, contours a few of the consequences of American exceptionalism in foreign policy. For example, it may hamper the capacity of policymakers to raise doubts about the fallibility of America's plans given the faith in the inevitability of its providential success. In this sense, this material plenitude that has been a constant for the overwhelming majority of periods of American history contributes to desensitizing one's appreciation of the necessary harsh choices that must be made by other countries when they find themselves in a situation of extreme resource scarcity. Decision-makers in this scenario might have difficulty attempting to understand the rationale of other countries when acting rashly as a result of the undersupply of vital assets since the American historical experience, albeit possessing sparse moments of critical economic shortage such as the great depression, never faced a long-lasting recession that was motivated by military coups or wars fought against other states on home soil for example. By watching the world through the lenses of its own advantaged position, that is, as an affluent moat protected by both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, and by believing in its own exceptional reality, the United States might fail to see the needs and struggles other countries have to endure. As a result, it might also miscalculate how to best approach a situation given this gap between its own experience and the incapacity to comprehend the experience of others that do not enjoy the same fortunate geographical status both in terms of relative territorial insulation and material plentifulness.

Moreover, this lack of geographical hardships, dictated either by the presence of bordering hostile states or unfortunate natural conditions, partly seems to explain the American obsession with individuality and the ascription of economic failure or success to the individual level, a trait that could also be identified as a tendency to individualism.

Failure to progress in economic terms is openly treated in American culture as a problem of individual responsibility¹². The favorable external circumstances and events across American history have fostered a mindset that attributes an enormous weight to the individual whilst not accounting for unfavorable extrinsic variables. In this sense, America's image as an exceptional, individually gifted, nation constantly reassures itself of its own eminence as an extraordinary country amidst lesser parts that are so due to their meritocratic incompetence. This can also generate a misperception in foreign policy where a nation's economic backwardness is attributed to cultural or religious differences, such as supposedly inferior individual work ethics, rather than uncontrolled economic constraints to growth like a severe and lasting drought. Overlooking or underestimating factors like an exploitative colonial past or a present-day embargo when accounting for national economic underdevelopment might engender partial or incorrect assessments when devising a foreign policy that aptly captures other nations' conditions and intentions, deforming the course of action to be taken. Besides, diminishing the role that the aforementioned variables play in the level of economic prowess of a nation can also be considered an insensitive attitude in diplomatic situations, making it harder for representatives of the United States to elicit support for their causes.

In conclusion, the good geographical conditions that the United States has encountered since its formation are not representative of the national experiences of most countries. The implication is that the American national identity finds it difficult to understand and deal with the reasoning of nations that have had to face very different geographical developments. Motivated by the uniqueness of its condition, American exceptionalism may end up failing to recognize that the extraordinariness not enjoyed by other countries is the result of chance rather than the willingness of its people. As a result, a self-image that tends to be self-congratulatory may fail to take notice of the geographical serendipity it enjoys and be led to ascribe its achievements to a higher, heavenly cause.

¹² Brint, S., Karabel, J. (1989). *American education, Meritocratic ideology, and the legitimation of inequality: The Community College and the problem of American exceptionalism*. Higher Education, 18(6), 725–735.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00155663>.

2.2 Religious dimension

Parts of the exceptionalist narrative about the United States like to attribute the country the status of a “*religious refuge*” for the seventeenth-century European settlers¹³ as a sort of promised land. It portrays the nonconformist puritans facing religious persecution in the old continent arriving in New England hoping to be able to freely profess their faith in newfound soil. Under this optimistic context, the iconic sermon “A Model of Christian Charity” written by Puritan leader John Winthrop was delivered in 1630.

*We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, “may the Lord make it like that of New England.” For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God’s sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God’s worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going.*¹⁴

This sermon is arguably one of the most iconic pieces of literature that shaped American exceptionalism and, as such, of American national identity itself. It has been ceaselessly referenced by notorious Americans, including presidents like Ronald Reagan¹⁵ and John F. Kennedy¹⁶, often as a prophetic text to what was to become the destiny of

¹³ Library of Congress. (2001). *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*. America as a Religious Refuge: The Seventeenth Century, Part 1. Loc.gov. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel01.html>.

¹⁴ Winthrop, J. (1892) *A Model of Christian Charity*. A Library of American Literature: Early Colonial Literature, 1607-1675, Edmund Clarence Stedman and Ellen Mackay Hutchinson, p. 304-307.

¹⁵ Reagan, R., & Roberts, J. C. (1989). *A city upon a Hill: Speeches by Ronald Reagan before the Conservative Political Action Conference, 1974-1988*. American Studies Center.

¹⁶ Kennedy, John F. (1961), *Address of President-Elect John F. Kennedy Delivered to a Joint Convention of the General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, The State House, Boston, January 9, 1961*. JFK Library.

the United States and its perpetual mission to be an exemplary entity according to the wishes of God. Sermon advocates see in Winthrop's words the support for defending the cause of an exceptional America capable of overcoming any adversity with the support it has been bestowed upon it by God. It is seen as a prophetic premonition of the victorious and noble future that America was destined to fulfill. Such a powerful idea became one of the strongest pillars of American exceptionalism and helped to imbue in American national identity an accentuated sense of piety as it will be shown in more detail in the following chapter.

However, as a critic of American exceptionalism journalist and historian Godfrey Hodgson points out, this exceptionalist conception fails to grasp what the author probably had in mind when professing the sermon. Winthrop was in fact not an American since America did not exist back then but was a century and a half away from its foundation. Winthrop was, indeed, an Englishman who later registered to be a "*loyal subject of the English king, and that the colony he helped to found was, by his wish, subject to the laws of England*"¹⁷. As such, he could not possibly be patriotically preaching to Americans about the future of the United States because the country did not exist at that time. So, according to Hodgson, it seems at the very least anachronistic to use the sermon as a pretext to illustrate what was the prophesied history of the United States. Attempting to dismantle the exceptionalist interpretation of the sermon, Hodgson additionally points out that the set of values Winthrop supports, namely, the defense of freedom and justice, were not exclusive American values just recently invented. Instead, they could be traced back to earlier struggles in Europe against the prevailing notion at the time that religious uniformity was to be imposed by civil authorities with the use of force. The author concludes that if we turn our attention to the historical timeline, the values defended in the sermon could not have been inaugurated by an American tradition, much less be used to indicate the early seeds of an allegedly unique American consciousness, given that they are, in reality, connected to, and explained by, the historical processes that were taken place in the old continent. What Hodgson attempts to do with this is demonstrate that, despite the efforts of embracers of American exceptionalism in trying to historically isolate the United States from its European roots so as to create a sense of uniqueness and

¹⁷ Hodgson, G. (2010). *The myth of American exceptionalism*. Yale University Press, p.2.

novelty for the country that validates its alleged exceptional identity and ambitions, the history of the United States, and the values that permeated its development, are not as exceptional as some would like to think it is. He points out that for a more complete understanding of the history of the country one must take into account the indissoluble connection it carries with the events that were taking place on the other side of the Atlantic.

Either way, being exceptionally American or not, this set of values inaugurated certain tendencies in American foreign policy that cannot be overlooked. The quest for the free profession of religion contributed to the high esteem religiosity enjoyed in American society since its beginnings. This phenomenon of amply embracing religion, especially Christianity, as a societal good contributed to a certain moralization of foreign policy that can be recognized, among other expressions, in the manner certain politicians and foreign policy elites have communicated their understandings of foreign affairs to the masses. The last chapter of the thesis will be dedicated to exemplifying this trend with more precise examples. For now, one must note that the religious discourse that permeated the creation of the United States, and that still is present today where 70.6% of the population are self-proclaimed Christians¹⁸, affects the way in which Americans perceive the forces it rallies against internationally. The prophetic division between good and evil that provides a base for religiously defined ethic parameters also affects how Americans tend to separate the world in a manichaeistic fashion when dealing with adversaries in the foreign sphere, viewing opponents not merely as contenders with different strategic goals but, instead, as groups that incarnate evil itself. This creed in the sacred destiny of America as the land of the chosen people to rage heaven-sent battles against the evildoers of the world prompts the emergence of an overestimated confidence and optimism in the victory of whatever enterprise the United States decides to launch against its evil foes. This idea that the nation is carrying out God's will may lead to a miscalculation of the difficulty of a military operation, for example, prodding officials to turn a blind eye to these challenges in the name of the predestined course to be fulfilled. Even though the idea might sound reckless or hard to be accepted firsthand by an

¹⁸ Pew Research Center. (2022, March 31). *Religious landscape study*. Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. Retrieved May 15, 2022, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study>.

experienced strategist, we must not overestimate how this creed can end up contributing to individuals being more optimistic than what is prudent. This is true in particular under a circumstance where combat is fought under the pretext of what could be painted as a modern type of holy war as we will see later on.

In closing, the American propensity to credit the inevitable success of its endeavors to divine will makes the country more prone to overestimate risks. Moreover, this idea may also end up contributing to the adoption of dogmatic posturing in international relations along the lines of Romans 8:31 "*If God is for us, who can be against us*". This background promotes the adoption of simplified and Manichean narratives that are typical of American exceptionalism. Those can lead to a troubling assessment of a situation of international friction. The inordinate confidence in American causes as exceptional, and supported by the divine, is also exacerbated by the idea that the country's political order and ideas are closer to perfection than other alternative political systems and ideologies.

2.3 Political dimension

The religious freedom looked for by settlers also was accompanied by the wish to obtain political freedom. Puritans that arrived in New England sought to construct a society of religious tolerance and liberty as a response to the repression faced in Europe, and this search became a type of leitmotif for the emergence of the United States as an independent nation during the struggle for the American Revolution that was finally triumphant when the Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4th, 1776, where the ideas of freedom and providence are notably espoused.

*We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States [...] And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.*¹⁹

¹⁹ United States Congress. (1776). *Declaration of Independence*. Archives.gov. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

Challenged with the task of authoring the fundamental law to an afresh nation, the founding fathers stamped in the Constitution of the United States political ideas that can be traced back to the ideals of the enlightenment. The Constitution harbors core ideas of liberty, equality, and democracy. It is also marked with the aspiration to realize a specific kind of government the founding father had envisioned, one distinguished by the so-called “*seven basic principles*”: checks and balances, federalism, limited government, popular sovereignty, republicanism, the separation of powers, and individual rights.

These foundational grounds undoubtedly were prosperous in setting the roots for what was to become one of the most powerful liberal democracies in the world. Remarkable, among other things, by its longevity, the American Constitution has had long-lasting worldwide influence in other democracies, even serving as a model for what was to be other newfound democracies as it happened in Brazil for example²⁰. The liberal democracy cultivated in the United States since its independence has solidified itself as part and parcel of American identity, and, as such, of American exceptionalism as well. From the outset, liberalism and democracy played a nuclear role in being the guiding elements for political structuring in the United States. And as each administration changed, consensus and respect for the way the government is ordained did not falter as the political tenets of liberal ideas reign supreme. This uniformity begs the question of how a country could stand strong for so long supporting the same set of political precepts when others in the western and eastern world faced more or less profound political alterations.

Renowned sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset identifies as one of the main features of American exceptionalism the lack of class struggle in the history of the United States as opposed to the class warfare and ideological unrest that took place amidst industrial societies in the old continent²¹. The absence of a significant socialist movement or labor party in the United States induced a seemingly unchallenged unanimity among American citizens around the fundamental principles of liberal democracy. This is partly explained, according to Lipset, by the fact that the United States developed without the

²⁰ Rosenn, K.S. (2010). *Conflict Resolution and Constitutionalism: The Making of the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 Framing the State in Times of Transition: Case Studies in Constitution Making*. United States Institute of Peace Press, p. 436.

²¹ Lipset, S. M. & Marks, G. (2001). *It didn't happen here: Why socialism failed in the United States*. W.W. Norton, p. 292.

presence of a feudalistic or aristocratic division, maturing, instead, as a society that was not stratified. Such a reality was opposed to what could be observed in Europe where socialism appeared as an ideologic response to this deep class division and rampant inequality. Not having a feudalistic or aristocratic past spared the United States from having to deal with the extreme socio-economic inequity and the agitations that followed it, particularly after the industrial revolutions took place.

Although one can put into question how much of this narrative is accurate, given the existence of noteworthy working-class movements in the United States, and the historical stratified racial division that still echoes to this day persistent inequality against blacks and other minorities, the assumption that the United States has erected a virtually unchallenged tradition of liberalism seems on point. This consistency in supporting liberal stances, as opposed to political positions that emphasize matters of social justice, for example, is key to comprehending American exceptionalism. This characteristic can be connected to the proneness we mentioned to assign economic adroitness to an individual whereas circumstances not in the control of the individual are depreciated.

The absence of witnessing revolutionary social convulsion taking place on home soil seems to reflect in the form Americans have trouble making sense of the political struggles that happen elsewhere in the globe. Missing the domestic experience of undergoing severe political unrest due to socio-economic reasons precipitates American exceptionalism to not properly recognize foreign political conflicts, particularly if they might be motivated by aspirations that do not exactly match the classic aspirations of liberalism that are so recognizable to the American people. For example, the idea of freedom is familiar to most Americans as positive liberty, *i.e.*, the freedom to act according to one's free will such as the freedom to acquire private property. But for many societies around the world, especially the ones still facing unrelenting inequality or dictatorial regimes, the word freedom is primarily understood in its negative expression, that is, freedom from external constraints such as oppression or hunger. Although a seemingly simple differentiation, this gap of discernment is possibly responsible for several missteps in foreign policy where elites guide themselves according to the exceptionalist understanding of their own domestic experience and political aspirations, failing to acknowledge how different historical, geographical, religious, and political circumstances engender distinct ways of thinking and behaving. The liberalist lenses

adopted by the majority of American society are not the only tools to guide political action in the world. Each society understands its political identity in a peculiar manner, and some countries have had to face the changing of regime types more than once in their lifetime, resulting in a complex national political spectrum range that is still subject to volatility as time passes. The remarkably high degree of complexity of these experiences demands a broader and more empathetic treatment of other people's experiences to be able to understand them. Using only liberal lenses to guide the reading of these situations impoverishes, if not completely misleads, the judgment about them

To exemplify how this exceptionalist trait of not being able to realize the disparity between political ideals of foreign nations we can turn to the Vietnam Conflict and the testimony of Robert McNamara, secretary of defense from 1961 to 1968. Having the benefit of hindsight, he commented on how the United States failed at that time to judge how deep and serious the ideological separation between communist North Vietnam and capitalist South Vietnam truly was.

We viewed the people and leaders of the South Vietnam in terms of our own experience. We saw in them a thirst for- and a determination to fight for freedom and democracy. We totally misjudged the political forces in the country. We underestimated the power of nationalism to motivate a people (in this case, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong) to fight and die for their beliefs and values. Our misjudgments of friend and foe alike reflected our profound ignorance of Vietnam's history, culture, and politics, plus the personalities and habits of its leaders. ²²

Lacking the proper understanding of a nation's identity, their expectations and behaviors, can result in misjudgments about what is the best course of action to take in face of disruptive events that involve that nation. American exceptionalism is permeated by the belief that the United States has unquestionably demonstrated, according to its own experience, how liberal democracy is the best form of government of all because of its capacity to generate stability and consensus, and, as such, that it is within the best interest of peoples that it should be pursued alike by other governments. But this presumption

²² MacNamara, R. S., & VanDeMark, B. (1996). *In retrospect: The tragedy and lessons of Vietnam*. Vintage Books, p. 322.

tries to universalize the singular experience of a country that, as we have seen, retained a series of particularities that are not enjoyed by any other countries, at least not in the same coupling and with the same intensity as they do in the United States. By doing so it misses the fact that other countries have heterogeneous political understandings that can be further or closer to liberalism, but that they do not entail the same aspirations such as the insatiable quest for freedom in the negative sense of the term as we have seen.

2.4 Final remarks

Many are the aspects that could be highlighted to retrace the history of the concept of American exceptionalism. One could underline anthropological or biographical dimensions for example. But three properties, geographical, religious, and political, deserve special attention for the intense way in which they heavily influenced the formation of certain principles associated with the idea. As much as they have been covered in different subchapters, I have also tried to demonstrate how they have influenced each other in a codependent way, reinforcing the general belief that the United States is an exceptional nation.

Geographically, the abundance of resources and the distance from possible antagonists are a particular advantage that has benefited the formation of the country and the idea of its exceptionality. Religiously, the strong influence exerted by the Puritans, who saw their arrival in America as a fertile ground to freely practice their beliefs, contributed to the fact that religion played a prominent role in the American society that was being formed. In particular, the belief in God and in the predestination of the success of the colonists' endeavor imprinted in the American national identity the notion that the country is God's chosen nation. Politically, the ability to maintain virtual unanimity on the form of government, that is, on the liberal democracy, proved to be a singular factor in the country's development. Developing in an unchallenged way, the unparalleled success of the American political project contributes as a witness to reinforcing the notion of the country's uniqueness.

Finally, it has also been observed that the purported principles of American exceptionalism can end up misleading its adopters when they are confronted with situations that escape the American national development experience. In the field of foreign policy, the attempt to use the ruler of American exceptionalism to evaluate

circumstances different from those enjoyed on American soil hinders the ability to adequately judge the experience of other countries.

CHAPTER 2: CIVIL RELIGION AS AN EMANATION OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

2.1 America's civil religion

American anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his "Religion as a Cultural System" provides his definition of religion as

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivation in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

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Let us first try to understand if the United States as a nation can be tested against these criteria. The United States does have (1) a system of symbols. The American flag, also known as the Star-Spangled Banner, is perhaps the most iconic of these symbols and we will later get back to it for further analysis. Other symbols worth mentioning are the Statue of Liberty, Uncle Sam, the Liberty Bell, and the bald eagle, but many others exist. They are readily recognized by any American as typically American symbols that incarnate the meaning of America and of what supposedly being an American is. Additionally, (2) do these symbols influence Americans' moods and motivate them? They do since they are the motives behind ongoing polarization and controversies surrounding their sacredness which is a recurrent topic discussed in the Supreme Court ²⁴ as we will see. They also seem to have the power to propel Americans to act in a certain way, that is, in accordance with what is allegedly expected to be American. (3) Do these symbols provide order to American existence? Yes, they are stamped in the national currency, proudly exhibited in government buildings (sometimes being the government building itself) and are expected to be revered with the utmost respect by officials and the public alike. (4) Is the comprehension of American symbols presented as a given fact? They are. The initial phrase enshrined in the Declaration of Independence "*We hold these truths to*

²³ Geertz, Clifford. (1993). *Religion as a cultural system*. In: The interpretation of cultures: selected essays. Fontana Press, pp.87-125.

²⁴ United States Courts. (1989). Facts and Case Summary - Texas v. Johnson.
www.shorturl.at/bcimY.

be self-evident” is the most quintessential element of this assumed factuality. They attempt to illustrate the nuclear characteristics of America as being indisputable and abiding. Finally, (5) do the dispositions animated by these symbols seem uniquely real? American symbols seem uniquely real by invoking the immense power of certain features of American life and ideals, and they are presented as symbols that surpass individuality by uniting a collectivity into a people with a common identity.

We should, thus, consider the United States as a country that harbors this system of symbols that affects Americans in manners that are usually reserved for religion. As a part of a religion, they determine holidays, create ritual expectations about decorum, create heroes, and deem it appropriate for citizens to pay respect to martyrs. They represent the myths Americans hold about themselves. Not only are they powerful icons, but they are also useful tools. If one is able to comprehend how American civil religion, a domestic phenomenon, is created, professed and followed we will better be able to make sense of American exceptionalism and its repercussions on foreign policy.

American sociologist Robert Bellah, a personal friend of Clifford Geertz, is the best-known author on civil religion. In his 1967 essay “Civil Religion in America” he attempts to demonstrate how the political realm in the United States is indelibly associated with a religious realm. According to the author, religious elements have

*[...] played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling the American civil religion.*²⁵

This connection between religious and political aspects of the communal life serves to legitimize the political order within the country, where sovereignty, although attributed to the American people, implicitly rests within the idea of God and its transcendence. That being the case, political authorities in the country have obligations not only toward the people who have democratically elected them but also towards a higher force that supersedes earthly wishes. Therefore, the designs of God might differ from the will of the people from time to time when judging what is right and what is

²⁵ Bellah, Robert N. (1967). *Civil Religion in America*. In: Daedalus, Winter, 1967, Vol. 96, No. 1, Religion in America, p.3.

wrong. Thus, a statesman might understand himself as a self-proclaimed representative of a higher order and claim American ideals as heavenly inspired. Political authority and religious legitimacy are, in this sense, intertwined in the United States. To Bellah, this is a “*theme that lies very deep in the American tradition, namely the obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out God’s will on earth*”.

This tradition can be traced back to the early works of the Founding Fathers, who gave the tone of the civil religion that has been inherited by American statesmen and the American public ever since. Washington’s Inaugural Address of 1789 overtly displays the close relation the newborn republic was developing with religious conceptions ²⁶:

[...] No People can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the Affairs of men more than the People of the United States. Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency. And in the important revolution just accomplished in the system of their United Government, the tranquil deliberations and voluntary consent of so many distinct communities, from which the event has resulted, cannot be compared with the means by which most Governments have been established, without some return of pious gratitude along with an humble anticipation of the future blessings which the past seem to presage. [...] Since we ought to be no less persuaded that the propitious smiles of Heaven, can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right, which Heaven itself has ordained: And since the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty, and the destiny of the Republican model of Government, are justly considered as deeply, perhaps as finally staked, on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.

The inaugural address, which was delivered to a joint session of Congress in New York City, the capital of the nation at the time, albeit not directly containing the word God nor the now-famous slogan “*God Bless America*”, which in fact only came into

²⁶ Washington, George. (1789). *Washington’s Inaugural Address of 1789*. Archives.gov. https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/american_originals/inaugtxt.html.

existence in 1885 when it was coined by an Englishman ²⁷, makes numerous references to the divine. Despite not being required by the Constitution, every single president since George Washington has delivered an inaugural address. That was not the sole tradition initiated by him. As Washington, successors to the presidency also pay homage with piety to the role the divine has played, currently plays, and will play in the fate of the American nation. Skillful American statesmen understand the importance of evoking this joint relation between politics and religion, especially in public ceremonies like presidential addresses and concession speeches. They do so without having to flag a personal preference for Catholicism or Protestantism, since a more prudent move is to make direct or indirect reference to God as a divine symbol that is capable of unifying Americans, not segregating them. Bringing forth a specific branch of Christianity, and, nowadays, even any of the other Abrahamic religions, would not serve the purpose of uniting Americans under common credence. The all-encompassing notion of God, or other similar references to the divine that are not necessarily named this way, is a more embracing approach and has the potential to cover the totality of Americans. It is no wonder that the United States is yet to witness a president that is openly declared agnostic or even atheist. Dismissing religion is not a shrewd attitude in American politics for the reasons we have been pointing out. Bernie Sanders, a senator from Vermont and a major candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in both 2016 and 2020, is maybe the most well-known politician in recent years that considers himself unaffiliated with religion. Nevertheless, he still claimed multiple times that his Jewish upbringing had helped shaped his values ²⁸. However religiously apathetic an aspiring statesman in the United States may be, it is still wise for his political career that he makes reference to the symbols of American civil religion in order for him to have a real chance of conquering an electorate, and this means, sooner or later, touching the idea of God and religion as edifying elements. Apart from paying lip service for pragmatical gains in a Christian majority country, these instantiations of American civil religion are key to

²⁷ Kaskowitz, Sheryl. (2015). *“God Bless America” in the New York Time (1885-1930)*. Global.oup.com.

<https://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780199919772/ref/>.

²⁸ Scott, Eugene. (2020). *Bernie Sanders, America’s most prominent ‘unaffiliated’ politician, still says religion shaped his values*. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/02/07/bernie-sanders-religion-values-how-both-shape-his-politics/>.

comprehending American society and point to one of its deepest traits. As Bellah wrote when analyzing JFK's inaugural speech in 1961

*[...] we know enough about the function of ceremonial and ritual in various societies to make us suspicious of dismissing something as unimportant because it is "only a ritual". What people say on solemn occasion need not be taken at face value, but it is often indicative of deep-seated values and commitments that are not made explicit in the course of everyday life. Following this line of argument, it is worth considering whether the very special placing of the references to God in Kennedy's address may not reveal something rather important and serious about religion in American life.*²⁹

Two critical events in American history, *i.e.*, the Independence and the Civil War, have helped to deepen this civil religion, fortifying the ideas of divine providence, chosen people, manifest destiny, promised land, sacrifice, and rebirth – all of which, needless to say, incarnate strong Biblical archetypes. For example, the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln's most famous speech delivered during the American Civil War in the Gettysburg National Cemetery in 1863, distinctly summons the theme of sacrifice and rebirth, painting the well-known idea that fallen soldiers have not sacrificed themselves in vain, but have done so rather for a greater purpose

*It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.*³⁰

Remarkably, President Lincoln himself became one of these fallen soldiers when he was assassinated less than two years later after his speech. Proponents of American

²⁹ Bellah, Robert N. (1967). *Civil Religion in America*. In: Daedalus, Winter, 1967, Vol. 96, No. 1, Religion in America, p.6.

³⁰ Lincoln, Abraham. (1863). *The Gettysburg Address*.
<https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm>.

civil religion may argue that he himself ascended to this sacred place where “*the dead shall not have died in vain*”, and, with this, he became a potent symbol of American civil religion. Arguably his position as a martyr contributed to his posthumous ascent, surpassing even George Washington, as a television poll that took place this year indicated that “*Americans would prefer to meet Abraham Lincoln by a measure of almost two to one*”³¹ In its over 240 years of history, the United States has had four presidents assassinated: Abraham Lincoln, James A. Garfield, William McKinley and, more recently, John F. Kennedy. Each of them generated enormous amounts of commotion as only a martyr, someone who is killed because of their religion or beliefs, would. These historical beings still live on in American society today and, as it seems, are going to be perpetually remembered as exemplary, if not wholly sanctified, figures³².

³¹ CBS News. (2022). *Poll: More Americans would rather meet Lincoln than Washington*. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/americans-rather-meet-lincoln-than-washington-opinion-poll/>.

³² Here I allow myself a small digression to make a personal observation about the power of American symbols and their significance for everyday Americans. Just recently I had the chance to spend a couple of months in the United States in the company of a friend. My stay there, which was meant to be much longer, was cut short for reasons beyond my control. Nonetheless, I had the opportunity to observe and learn from my abbreviated visit. My friend lives in Dallas, Texas. President JFK was assassinated while riding in a motorcade close to Dealey Plaza in November 1963. Although I was aware of this event, as most people who had the chance to learn about American history have, I could not really comprehend the extent of its impact on America’s collective consciousness, on its identity, and behavior. The realization of the gravitas associated with this tragedy came to me when I first entered his apartment, situated in downtown Dallas, not far from Dealey Plaza. In his living room, he had no family pictures whatsoever. But he did have a framed picture on a desk. Not of himself or some close friend, but of JFK. Right next to a black and white framed photo of a smiling JFK was a sculpture of the Twin Towers. These two objects were sitting right next to each other, occupying a small portion of a relatively large desk that did not have anything else on it. Coincidence or not, right across the desk, on the other side of the living room, was a bookcase with different Buddhist books, a statue of Budai, and a meditation cushion. In a way, both of these spaces in his home were sacred and demanded to be treated with due respect and reverence. They each carried a symbolic significance and exuded an aura of seriousness capable of affecting whoever looked at them. Although one corner carried symbols that originated in Ancient India somewhere around the late 6th century BC and the other carried symbols that emerged in the 20th and 21st century AC in the United States they both shared powerful religious significances.

2.2 American symbols

Carved in the public education through the celebration of holidays loaded with symbolism such as Memorial Day or Independence Day, civil rituals function to maintain the communal creed in these ideas. Many rituals in the United State, albeit “secular”, resemble the traditional level of formality, respect, and dogmatism of religious traditions. Some of these patriotic actions involve having parades to honor fallen soldiers, removing hats, standing up, and resting hands over hearts during the national anthem. These attitudes are oriented toward specific sacred symbols, and they render specific expectations that are very much alike to religious expectations, despite the official secular nature of the United States government.

For example, the now ubiquitous sentence “*In God We Trust*” was mandatorily inscribed in American currency and officially designated as the country’s national motto in 1956 by President Eisenhower. “In God We Trust” comes from the fourth verse of Francis Scott Key’s poem “Defence of Fort M’Henry” which later received the musical arrangement and became the national anthem “The Star-Spangled Banner” under President Herbert Hoover. We read in that verse: “*Then conquer we must, when our cause is just. And this is our motto: In God is our trust!*”³³. Just recently in 2019, the motto was a source of controversy when southern states passed legislation allowing, or sometimes even requiring, schools to display the phrase³⁴. This fixation with the phrase displays how the idea of patriotism is connected with piety in the United States. If America’s civil religion points out to the United States as God’s favorite nation, then “true” patriots must signal their righteous belief in God. In this regard, profound, religious-like reverence is a core aspect of American patriotism.

These civil religion symbols are widely spread across the history of American political rhetoric. If we go back to the origins of the motto in the 50s, we can better grasp another narrative associated with the maxim. During that era, politicians used the sense of religiosity imbued in Americans as a manner to counterpose it to the country’s

³³ Key, Francis Scott. (1814). *Defense Of Fort M’Henry*.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47349/defence-of-fort-mhenry>.

³⁴ Swaak, Taylor. (2018). *'In God We Trust': Several States Pass Bills Requiring (Or Allowing) Motto's Display In Schools*. Forbes.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/the74/2018/09/01/in-god-we-trust-several-states-pass-bills-requiring-or-allowing-mottos-display-in-schools/?sh=1df8a90d145d>.

adversaries at the time, namely the “godless” USSR and the communist ideology. By associating the United States with God and associating the USSR with an atheist country a statement was also being made that the first was inherently good whilst the second was inherently evil. In this sense, being an atheist was, and one can argue that it is nowadays still considered by some, as an offensively unamerican, unpatriotic, posture. This inflamed rhetoric was fundamental for McCarthyism, the period of time when shady tactics were used by the United States government to expose the supposed communist infiltration inside the country. On June 2, 1950, Joseph R. McCarthy in his “Speech Explaining the Communist Threat” flamboyantly declared to his countrymen that

Many of you have been engaged in this all-out fight against communism long before I came on the scene. You have been engaged in what may well be the final Armageddon foretold in the Bible, that struggle between good and evil, between life and death, if you please. At the start, let me make clear that in my opinion no special credit is due those of us who are making an all-out fight against this Godless force, a force which seeks to destroy all the honesty and decency that every Protestant, Jew and Catholic has been taught at his mother's knee. It is a task for which we can claim no special credit for doing. It is one which we are obligated to perform. It is one of the tasks for which we were brought into this world, for which we were born. If we fail to use all the powers of mind and body which God gave us, then I am sure our mothers, wherever they are tonight, may well sorrow for the day of our birth. ³⁵

This deep connection between American officials and God is lengthy across the history of the United States. Also, during the 50s, President Eisenhower's first words in his inaugural ceremony were, in fact, a prayer:

My friends, before I begin the expression of those thoughts that I deem appropriate to this moment, would you permit me the privilege of uttering a little private prayer of my own. And I ask that you bow your heads: Almighty God [...] May cooperation be permitted and be the mutual aim of those who, under the

³⁵ McCarthy, Joseph. (1950). *Explaining the Communist Threat, June 2, 1950.*
[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Explaining_the_Communist_Threat,_June_2,1950.](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Explaining_the_Communist_Threat,_June_2,1950)

*concepts of our Constitution, hold to differing political faiths; so that all may work for the good of our beloved country and Thy glory. Amen.*³⁶

There are also countless examples where American music, in its turn, evokes these powerful symbols. As we showed, they are associated with the nation's first documents and other important pieces of literature across American history. These symbols are used as a source of inspiration and are present in patriotic songs such as "America the Beautiful" ("*America, America, God shed his grace on thee*"), "Hail, Columbia" ("*With equal skill, with God-like pow'r*"), and "God Bless America" ("*God Bless America, land that I love*"). All of these are not far from the opening words we find in the Declaration of Independence "*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...*"³⁷. The tone of these foundational documents influenced the manner American civil religion is organized around the idea that its people are divinely chosen and that piety is an essential feature of the American nation.

Another great example is the United States Capitol, the iconic building of the American Congress, which harbors the Senate and the House of Representatives. William Thornton, the original designer of the building, based some of its design on the French Panthéon, which was at first constructed to serve as a church but was later secularized by the French revolution. The distinguishable Corinthian columns in its façade were modeled after Roman and Greek religious temples in line with the trending neoclassical style at the time. The Capitol's dome interior is filled with rich iconographic scenes related to the foundational myths of the United States. Perhaps the most fabled of them is the fresco at the top of the dome named "The Apotheosis of Washington" which contains the clear intention to elevate Washington to godlike status

In the central group of the fresco, Brumidi depicted George Washington rising to the heavens in glory, flanked by female figures representing Liberty and Victory/Fame. A rainbow arches at his feet, and thirteen maidens symbolizing the original states flank the three central figures. (The word "apotheosis" in the title

³⁶ Eisenhower, Dwight D. (1953). *Inaugural Address*.

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/inaugural-address-3>.

³⁷ United States Congress. (1776). *Declaration of Independence*. Archives.gov.

<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

*means literally the raising of a person to the rank of a god, or the glorification of a person as an ideal; George Washington was honored as a national icon in the nineteenth century.)*³⁸

Perhaps one of the strongest symbols that epitomizes the sacredness associated with the United States as an entity is the American flag. According to the U.S. flag code, during the rendition of the national anthem when the flag is being displayed

*persons present should face the flag and stand at attention with their right hand over the heart, and men not in uniform, if applicable, should remove their headdress with their right hand and hold it at the left shoulder, the hand being over the heart; and when the flag is not displayed, all present should face toward the music and act in the same manner they would if the flag were displayed.*³⁹

This code is but a code of etiquette and has no legal capacity to prescribe penalties to individuals that do not comply with the norm. It is, thus, not against the law in the United States to sit out during the national anthem, but it can be highly controversial and reprobable in the eyes of compatriots. In 2016, San Francisco 49ers quarterback (the most important position on a football team) Colin Kaepernick shocked stadium goers when he stayed seated as a form of protest against racism and police violence while the national anthem was playing⁴⁰. He did not conform to what was expected of him to perform. He did not follow the rite nor treated with deference an American civil religion symbol.

The levels of disturbance generated by Kaepernick's action are not unwarranted if we consider American history. One does not need to go further than a few decades ago to start making sense of why that happened. For instance, in *Texas v. Johnson*, 491 U.S. 397 (1989) the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated prohibitions on desecrating the American flag. Such prohibitions were outlawed on the grounds of sustaining free speech. But apart from the court's verdict, it did not impede judges from emitting the following opinion

³⁸ Architect of the Capitol. (2020). *Apotheosis of Washington*. Aoc.gov.
<https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/apotheosis-washington>.

³⁹ United States Code. (2006). *36 U.S. Code § 301 - National anthem*.
<https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/36/301>.

⁴⁰ Payne, Marissa. (2016). *Colin Kaepernick refuses to stand for national anthem to protest police killings*. The Washington Post.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2016/08/27/colin-kaepernick-refuses-to-stand-for-national-anthem-to-protest-police-killings/>.

*The American flag, then, throughout more than 200 years of our history, has come to be the visible symbol embodying our Nation. It does not represent the views of any particular political party, and it does not represent any particular political philosophy. The flag is not simply another "idea" or "point of view" competing for recognition in the marketplace of ideas. Millions and millions of Americans regard it with an almost mystical reverence regardless of what sort of social, political, or philosophical beliefs they may have.*⁴¹

The flag is, therefore, revered in numerous ceremonies in the United States. In some rites, where any sort of oath is involved, it is combined with the phrase “*So help me God*” such as the Presidential oath, the Oath of Allegiance, the Enlistment oath, and others. The flag and its stars, together with a vow towards God and country, are the national icons, the focal points, of those rituals.

For example, the Pledge of Allegiance, repeated daily in so many schools across the United States where students have to stand in front of the American flag in reverence, determines enunciators to vow: “*I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.*” The presence of the sentence “*one nation under God*” in the Pledge of Allegiance also became the object of contention in the American Supreme Court. In *Elk Grove Unified School District vs Michael Newdow et. al.* (2004) a parent disputed the religious affirmation in the pledge as interfering with constitutional secularism. The Supreme court disagreed with the claim. Justice O’ Connor stated that the reference to God was an example of “ceremonial deism”. In other terms, even if the statement was formerly conceived with religious purposes, it lost its once religious character with the passing of time and its constant repetition in patriotic-secular contexts. In his words

This category of “ceremonial deism” most clearly encompasses such things as the national motto (“In God We Trust”), religious references in traditional patriotic songs such as the Star-Spangled Banner, and the words with which the Marshal of this Court opens each of its sessions (“God save the United States and

⁴¹ United States Courts. (1989). *TEXAS, Petitioner v. Gregory Lee JOHNSON*.
<https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/491/397>.

this honorable Court”). [...] These references are not minor trespasses upon the Establishment Clause to which I turn a blind eye. Instead, their history, character, and context prevent them from being constitutional violations at all. ⁴²

There are other cases in the Supreme Court ⁴³ where the general understanding of the magistrates is that public display or recitation of religious symbols, of Christian symbols that is, cannot be synonymously understood as advocacy for these same symbols. Reciting or displaying these religious symbols in public atmospheres is not understood as actively or directly promoting or endorsing Christianity. They are rather, according to this specific “ceremonial deism” understanding, a public exhibition of historical symbols that can carry an educational purpose in teaching citizens about American traditions.

However, issues still constantly rise about the topic demonstrating that the American civil religion still occupies a place of friction in legal disputes. The Supreme Court had in 2019 to articulate, once again, the presence of Christian symbols in public spaces. Judges upheld the display of a World War I memorial in Bladensburg, Maryland, shaped in the format of a cross ⁴⁴. The consensus at the time was that even if the monument was built like a cross, having a religious intent, the purpose of the monument was non-religious. Legally it is still an unresolved question of how to formulate a definition that is capable of indisputably framing the display or recitation of a certain religious symbol as having a religious intention or conversely, as merely being a secular demonstration. One must also note that the verdicts handled by the Court are also associated with the individual political and religious alignment of magistrates currently occupying its seats. Undeniably, the Supreme Court, as well as courts belonging to lower instances in the United States, play a pivotal role in shaping the discussion given the manner they categorize and define religious intent. Regardless of the legal framing of how strictly secular or somewhat religious the occasion for the presence of these symbols is, they are esteemed by Americans as fundamental American symbols.

⁴² United States Supreme Court. (2004). *ELK GROVE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT and DAVID W. GORDON, SUPERINTENDENT, PETITIONERS v. MICHAEL A. NEWDOW et al.* <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/02-1624.ZC1.html>.

⁴³ United States Courts. (1984). *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465. U.S. 668. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/465/668/>.

⁴⁴ United States Courts. (2018). *American Legion v. American Humanist Association*: 588 U.S. https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/18pdf/17-1717_4f14.pdf.

It is, then, mind-boggling to think of how the American flag, if such a symbol that evokes the “embodiment” of the Nation as the Supreme Court described in *Texas v. Johnson*, is nowadays stamped in all sorts of salable merchandise, from t-shirts to underwear. The aforementioned U.S. flag code states that “*the flag should never be used for advertising purposes in any manner whatsoever*”⁴⁵. If in a flagrant violation of the code, and, worse, if it disrespects the “mythical reverence” that millions of Americans have towards it, how can it be fetishized like that? It is no doubt that the flag is a symbol of American civil religion. Nonetheless, as a symbol, it is subject to disputing interpretation stemming from the views different citizens might have about it. Stamping the flag in vendible items can be seen as patriotic by some or unpatriotic by others just as sitting out the National Anthem may be an applaudable or unpardonable act to distinct spectators.

Here, constructivism as a social theory can aid us in understanding the mutable nature that national identities have. Norms and values are part of a country’s identity and, as such, they are socially and historically construed. When American symbols are appropriated and reappropriated by different actors under distinct contexts, they help to engender the ongoing discussion, and, hence, construction, of the American identity, what the nation stands for, and what makes the United States...the United States. The manners under which Americans live and revere their symbols change but are, at the same time, already framed by the way social life and the expectancy towards civil religious symbols in the United States currently works. Hence the difficulty for the Supreme Court in having to legally capture the dynamics under which American civil religion symbols are involved. Let us remember that the formulation of “conceptions of a general order of existence”, the third element in Geertz’s definition of religion, albeit representing a general social and religious agreement over the nature of reality, is subject to potential rethinking. Individuals in the United States act and treat each other according to certain sets of expectations, ideas, and agreements, that according to them make the United States...the United States. This structure of beliefs is alterable as the treatment of the American flag demonstrates to us. Choices of how these icons are to be interpreted and

⁴⁵ United States Code. (2006). *36 U.S. Code § 301 - National anthem*.
<https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/36/301>.

revered are arbitrary at some level, and, as such, can suffer alterations. Even if possibly suffering modifications, their importance in the everyday life of Americans is a constant.

Altogether these symbols form this fundamental aspect of American exceptionalism that is the religious dimension associated with America's uniqueness. As we have seen, as a shared faith they have proven to be a useful resource for politicians in order to mobilize individuals in favor of supporting national goals they have set. As a political tool that can come in handy, it explains the constant effort of state authorities in evoking and revalidating these creeds to gather public approbation (especially when we consider the president, as we will also see in more detail with George W. Bush next chapter). Inevitably, civil religion becomes a double-edged sword as it can be summoned in a discretionary fashion to rally support for debatable causes, domestically and internationally.

Robert Bellah also highlights how especially pernicious it can be for American leaders to appropriate the ideas behind civil religion in the domain of foreign policy:

*With respect to America's role in the world, the dangers of distortion are greater and the built-in safeguards of the tradition weaker. The theme of American Israel was used, almost from the beginning, as a justification for the shameful treatment of the Indians so characteristic of our history. It can be overtly or implicitly linked to the idea of manifest destiny which has been used to legitimate several adventures in imperialism since the early nineteenth century. Never has the danger been greater than today.*⁴⁶

American exceptionalism and American civil religion walk hand in hand. The latter serves to substantiate the former as one of its core substratum. A domestic understanding of a national identity that is sacred is a nuclear element in defending America's uniqueness in the world and in justifying its foreign actions. After all, even if these actions extrapolate the current established international norms, the United States can, according to this idea, understand itself as a nation beyond mere human rule, subject, in fact, to a higher, divine, order. Thinking of itself as God's chosen people, and ritualizing in accordance with such an idea as we have seen, the United States has engaged

⁴⁶ Bellah, Robert N. (1967). *Civil Religion in America*. In: *Daedalus*, Winter, 1967, Vol. 96, No. 1, Religion in America, p.14.

in controversial international enterprises across its history. Even if dodging the utilization of terms such as “imperialism”, “colonialism”, or “neo-colonialism” to characterize some of its more polemical undertakings, some pundits recognize in America’s foreign policy attitudes precisely this sort of tendency. We will investigate in the next chapter how some authors identify in America’s behavior in the international scenario the sort of propensity to carry out strategies that are, name it as one may, imperialistic, and how American exceptionalism paired with American civil religion serve to back these ventures and reinforce already existing tendencies.

2.3 Final remarks

American civil religion is, as the name implies, a religion. That is, a set of symbols that more than being simply revered, serve to organize and maintain beliefs and ideas that factually structure the social fabric and that are shared by Americans as common.

The religious dimension is a readily recognizable characteristic of American national identity. As a highly religious society, the reverence paid to the supreme is not only focused on the figure of God, but on the American nation itself. There are many examples where this kind of reverence can be attested. When it is not followed, that which is considered disrespectful tends to be met with disapproval. The respect required for this piety is a matter of discussion in the political and legal arena, where the boundaries of what is religious and what is not are still the object of much argument.

American civil religion is a domestic emanation of American exceptionalism. The idea of exceptionalism needs to be affirmed internally so that it can be projected externally. Domestically, it takes the form of civil religion and helps reinforce the belief in America's uniqueness. In this sense, a people can only be exceptional to the extent that they believe in their own exceptionality. Cultivating symbols and cults that bolster this belief is fundamental to the affirmation and maintenance of the idea. A powerful idea with an enormous capacity for national mobilization. An idea that may, as will be discussed, end up being appropriated unmindful of its consequences.

CHAPTER 3: AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND ITS POTENTIAL IMPERIAL PROPENSITY

3.1 Exceptionalism, crisis, and imperialism

The United States' involvement in global affairs is, needless to say, extensive and has far-reaching consequences. Many are the narratives that try to interpret American engagement in the world. Some carry visions that extol the role of the country as a force for good while others stress the more negative aspects of this involvement. At present, this chapter will explore a narrative that is strongly critical of the role that the United States has played on the international stage in recent decades. It will try to understand how American exceptionalism can contribute to foreign policy decisions that are controversial if one were to assume it can reinforce a certain propensity for actions that may be regarded as imperialistic since they heavily rely on the use of military force to achieve its ends.

Professor of international relations, and retired Colonel of the United States Army, Andrew J. Bacevich Jr. in “The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism” discusses in depth the topics of American imperialism and American decay. When discussing America’s involvement in the war of terror, a “*never-ending war*”⁴⁷ as he puts it, Bacevich writes

The impulses that have landed us in a war of no exits and no deadlines come from within. Foreign policy has, for decades, provided an outward manifestation of American domestic ambitions, urges, and fears. In our own time, it has increasingly become an expression of domestic dysfunction – an attempt to manage or defer coming to terms with contradictions besetting the American way

⁴⁷ With the final withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan on 30 August 2021 some have started to discuss the possible beginning of the end for the war on terror. I believe it is still too early to conclude that it is indeed finished. On July 31, 2022, for example, a U.S. strike killed Ayman al-Zawahiri the hitherto al-Qaeda leader, demonstrating that the policy still has vigor.

of life. Those contradictions have found their ultimate expression in the perpetual state of war afflicting the United States today. ⁴⁸

He identifies three main reasons for the United States' maladies. A threefold crisis: a crises of profligacy, a political crisis, and a military crisis. Let us attempt to understand each of them to better make sense of how these domestic impulses, backed by American exceptionalism, impel the United States in the direction of constant engagement in what, as many authors believe, is imperialistic behavior through its foreign policy.

3.2 A profligate tendency

The first of them, a crisis of profligacy, was already partially touched by us when commenting on how the American flag, a holy symbol in American civil religion, is nonetheless commercially stamped in all sorts of apparel and gizmos. The United States is the birthplace of modern-day capitalism, and, consequently, of modern-day consumerism. It has become a truism that the ecological footprint of the United States is vastly superior to that of other nations. Calculations indicate that it would take 5.1 planet earth to feed the American lifestyle if it were adopted by everyone around the globe ⁴⁹.

Different cultures around the globe readily recognize and associate the American way of life with conspicuous consumption. Not only that, some Americans themselves seem to take pride in mottos such as "the bigger the better". Interestingly, the phrase "everything is bigger in Texas" is adopted fondly by some Texans. If the phrase was originally intended to refer to the enormous geographical expanse of the state, which is the second largest of the contiguous 48 states, it is now also associated with the size of cars, food portions, and so on. Some residents of the state take pride in the phrase, displaying it on bumpers and T-shirts. Anecdotally, it is also not news that the portions in the fast-food chains in the United States are incrementally larger than the same portions

⁴⁸ Bacevich, Andrew J. (2005). *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*. American Empire Project. Holt Paperbacks, p.5.

⁴⁹ Earth Overshoot Day. (2021). *How Many Earths? How Many Countries?* <https://www.overshootday.org/how-many-earths-or-countries-do-we-need/#:~:text=Here's%20how%20we%20calculate%20that,it%20everyone%20lived%20like%20Americans>.

in the same restaurants distributed in other parts of the world such as Europe or South America.

American cars are also known to be much larger than their counterparts produced by European or Asian companies. As a general rule, Americans feel obliged to downsize their possessions solely when the economic situation deteriorates. If in the 1950s and 1960s Americans were concerned with making cars longer, heavier and more gas-guzzling, the 1970s changed this when the fuel crisis affected the entire nation. In the headline of the New York Times of April 7, 1974, we read in a whining tone "The Energy Crisis Spurs Demand for Small Cars..."⁵⁰. At the time, smaller and less oil-consuming imported vehicles gained the upper hand over the uneconomical national automobiles. But this limitation of consumption is not adopted without the feeling of resentment and protest.

This ever-increasing desire to acquire bigger, better, and cheaper products is a constant in the history of modern American society, especially among the enormous middle class that emerged in the United States from the economic growth that followed the victory of the Allied powers in World War II⁵¹. The vast contingent of newborns, known as the baby boomers, was readily integrated into the growing mass of American consumers as they aged and dreamt of finding a stable paying job that would allow them to acquire a car, a suburban house, and all the wonderful new consumer goods that were emerging thanks to the technological outbreaks spearheaded by scientists in wartime. This marvelous prospect of unceasing economic growth at the time propelled millions of Americans to buy more and more. But for the demand to be met, supply had to be available at the same level.

It is common sense that once an action is repeated often enough it is incorporated by the individual and becomes a habit. Every habit, if difficult to construct, is equally difficult to deconstruct. And so it happens that when the economic bonanza that blessed the United States during the 50s and 60s ceased, a fundamental dilemma presented itself

⁵⁰ Flint, Jerry M. (1974). *The Energy Crisis Spurs Demand for Small Cars...* The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/04/07/archives/the-energy-crisis-spurs-demand-for-small-cars-not-a-passing.html>.

⁵¹ Castañeda, Jorge G. (2020). *America through foreign eyes*. Chapter 1: America sameness, or the world's first middle class. Oxford University Press, pp.6-30.

before the American nation. Either the newly benefited families with increased purchasing power would step on the brakes and reduce their consumption to cope with the economic downturn affecting the country, or they would demand of their rulers that they be able to circumvent the problem and ensure that consumer goods and the price of oil remain low enough to stay affordable. The path taken at this fork in the road was the second. Possibly believing in the exceptionality of the American people and their glorious destiny as representatives of God on earth, that is, as the people destined to triumph regardless of momentaneous adversity, the popular pressure exerted demanded rulers to somehow make it possible for everyday Americans to maintain the sacred right to consume.

This choice is not surprising. Father of modern sociology, Max Weber, in his *magnum opus* "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism"⁵² already identified the close relationship between the Protestant doctrine, which as we have already pointed out notably influenced the early American settlers, and the praise of wealth in modern-day capitalism. It is no accident that a nation with deep puritanical religious influences infused in its myths and its history later became the cradle of modern-day capitalism. Logically, the country sought to protect its economic wealth tooth and nail when it felt economically defied. This staunch defense of material prosperity is accentuated in scenarios where other international actors seem to stand in the way of the United States and its exceptional belief in the predestined character of its success. To maintain its economic opulence becomes, under this exceptionalist framework, a divine task. The fact that the United States, from its inception, enjoyed ample territory and resources to develop, eventually becoming the number one economic power on the globe, is understood as a divine blessing to be protected. Likewise, in embracing American civil religion, it becomes an American duty to make sure that this blessing is not lost.

A critical juncture that helped cement the role of a top priority for maintaining economic prosperity in the country took place in 1979. President Jimmy Carter delivered on 15 July a television speech named "Crisis of Confidence". A jolt appearance at the

⁵² Weber, Max. (2002). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism: and Other Writings*. Penguin Classics.

time, it is now regarded as an ill-fated effort to elevate the “American spirit” during the striking energy crisis that plagued the United States. Carter boldly told Americans that

In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose. The symptoms of this crisis of the American spirit are all around us.

*[...] We are at a turning point in our history. There are two paths to choose. One is a path I've warned about tonight, the path that leads to fragmentation and self-interest. Down that road lies a mistaken idea of freedom, the right to grasp for ourselves some advantage over others. That path would be one of constant conflict between narrow interests ending in chaos and immobility. It is a certain route to failure.*⁵³

His speech was not well received, and President Carter failed to get a second term. Symbolically, the defeat of the idea he vocalized represented the public's rejection of his criticism of the American way of life. Conversely, the adoption of the path criticized by him helped to inaugurate what Bacevich calls the "*profligacy crisis*." That is, the constant effort to maintain the American way of life, cost what it may.

The collective capacity of our domestic political economy to satisfy those appetites has not kept pace with demand. As a result, sustaining our pursuit of life, liberty and happiness at home requires increasingly that Americans look beyond our borders. Whether the issue at hand is oil, credit or the availability of cheap consumer goods, we expect the world to accommodate the American way of life.

⁵³ Carter, Jimmy. (1979). *Energy and the National Goals – A Crisis of Confidence*.
<https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jimmycartercrisisofconfidence.htm>.

The resulting sense of entitlement has great implications for foreign policy. Simply put, as the American appetite for freedom has grown, so too has our penchant for empire. The connection between these two tendencies is a causal one. ⁵⁴

According to him, this inclination to form an empire overseas in an attempt to ensure access to affordable consumer goods, cheap credit, and, more dramatically, abundant oil, propelled the United States to launch controversial ventures in foreign policy. Instead of finding and effectively selling to the public creative solutions to mitigate the growing energy dependency of the United State, presidents that succeeded Jimmy Carter, most notably Ronald Reagan, and later George W. Bush, invested in the United States military as a powerful tool to guarantee access to oil. The author summarizes that

American profligacy during the 1980s had a powerful effect on foreign policy. The impact manifested itself in two ways. On the one hand, Reagan's willingness to spend without limited helped bring the Cold War to a peaceful conclusion. On the other hand, American habits of conspicuous consumption, encouraged by Reagan, drew the United States ever more deeply into the vortex of the Islamic word, saddling an increasingly debt-ridden and energy-dependent nation with commitments that it could neither shed nor sustain. ⁵⁵

In other words, Ronald Reagan made sure to formulate and disseminate to the public the idea that hard power could sustain the lavishing usage of oil that was taking place in the United States. The Middle East then began to become a familiar stage for American military operations whose primary objective was to ensure the free flow of petroleum from the region to the United States. The national security strategy for the Middle East was solidified to prevent any national or supranational groups from interfering with access to oil. Consuming large amounts of oil while only possessing a small fraction of the world's oil reserve was a calculation that did not add up. Furthermore, for Reagan, making sure that the United States could get all the oil it needed was also a critical strategic decision amid Cold War tensions. The American meddling with the Iran-Iraq War, the Iran-Contra affair, the covert CIA operations in Afghanistan,

⁵⁴ Bacevich, Andrew J. (2005). *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*. American Empire Project. Holt Paperbacks, p.8.

⁵⁵ *Idem*, p.44.

the American peacekeeping forces in Lebanon, the strengthening of relations with Saudi Arabia, the open economic and diplomatic support for Israel, and the overall search for dominance in the Persian Gulf are all events in foreign policy that can be read under this larger prism. The consequences of these projects echo to this day. In the next chapter, we will come back to it and recapitulate how the attitudes assumed by the American foreign policy during this period had repercussions on September 11th and the subsequent invasion of Iraq.

The point at issue for Bacevich is that since President Regan, American presidents have tended to pin their hopes on American military might as a way to circumvent the irremediable American need to sustain their way of life and the high levels of resource usage it requires. If the U.S. military budget is known worldwide as being more than astronomical (the NASA budget only takes a tiny percentage of the federal budget when compared to the military budget ⁵⁶), this is in part explained by the fact that there is a widespread idea that investments in defense are vital for achieving U.S. domestic and international economic objectives. In simple words, the military is capital to sustain the American way of life. This profligacy tendency can be potentially strengthened by the notion that the United States is an exceptional country with a divine right to act in this way, even if it means trumping international law. In this sense, American exceptionalism can act as a catalyst for the profligacy crisis.

Richard A. Falk, an American professor of international law, also a harsh critic of the form the United States disregards international law to, instead, act in unilateralist ways that rely on hard power to maintain the perceived American leadership of the world. Described as incapable of self-criticism, and too blind to see the imperialistic nature of its own project, Falk denounces the American aspiration to be the world's hegemon under its banner of the enlightened exceptional nation:

The United States, claiming the right to exercise control over the entire world, has invested in the capabilities and invented legitimating rationalizations to make this a somewhat plausible project, at least among its American supporters. It

⁵⁶ Marinho, Fernando & Orwig, Jessica. *Here's what NASA could accomplish if it had the US military's \$600 billion budget*. Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/what-nasa-do-with-us-military-budget-2017-7?r=US&IR=T>.

proclaims for itself unconditional sovereign right while claiming an exemption from the constraints of international law binding on normal states, so that it can violate the sovereignty of other nations. ⁵⁷

If this self-entitlement to dismiss international law is real, it may end up being fed by the narrative that the country is exceptional in its right to defend its economic prominence through whatever tools it has at its disposal.

To illustrate how there is possibly a connection between the need to achieve military might so that economic opulence can be maintained, we can turn to 1982's documentary "The Atomic Cafe" where one can watch newsreels and other filmed footage from the 40s and 50s showing how skillfully designed propaganda helped to shape the American reality at that time. The documentary shows how a campaign to glorify the United States and the American way of life, while denigrating the communists, took place during the Cold War period. Several videos signal the American patriotic sense that the United States is a superior nation, "the best country in the world" as the patrioteering affirmation goes. In one footage we can see a man setting back the pointers of a clock, a symbol of doomsday. He briefly introduces what will be the theme of the video: the perils of communism. But first, in a rather anticlimactic way, he announces:

I'd just like to say that it gives me a great deal of satisfaction to represent two outstanding shopping centers in California: the shopping hub of the Saint Gabriel valley in West Arcadia and the Whittier Quad shopping center in Whittier California because they are concrete expressions of the practical idealism that built America. When you visit these two fine shopping centers, you'll find more than four score beautiful stores with sparkling assortments and attractive atmosphere and, of course, plenty of free parking for all the cars that we, capitalists, seem to acquire. Who can help but contrast the beautiful and practical settings of the Arcadia shopping hub and the Whittier Quad with what you'd find under communism? ⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Griffin, Ray David *et. al* (2006). *The American Empire and the Commonwealth of God*. Westminster John Knox Press, p.48.

⁵⁸ Rafferty, Kevin *et. al*. (1982). *The Atomic Café*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IF0r1OdDIME&ab>.

This little piece of film taking place in the atomic era shows how propaganda was an integral part of social life then. But it can also be seen as a testimony to the connection between consumerism and military power in the United States. Between capitalist fetishism and propagandist war narratives. Between economic advancement through consumption and economic advancement through bellicose power. Between the rhetoric of materialism and the oratory of warfare. Between American exceptionalism and American foreign policy. Both of these dimensions are possibly connected, and, within the American context, they might feed off each other in a mutually reinforcing way. In this sense, if we assume the premise that this connection is veridic, the American way of life is not only that of consumption, but also that of war. It is the so-called American way of war, known for its industrial and technological approach to war ⁵⁹. If real, then the entire narrative surrounding American exceptionalism potentially serves to deepen these two dimensions and legitimize the connection that exists between them. The belief in American uniqueness, in its self-asserting character geographically, religiously, and politically, may serve as a ground to advance the idea that American triumph is not only a right but also a duty. A duty before the American soil, before God, before the Founding Fathers and ancestors. A duty to American national identity itself. One that must, under this narrative, be revered and pursued by every American, public, and politician alike. Although a rather grim scenario, one that should be taken into account, nonetheless.

3.3 Foreign policy elite and the road to militarization

The second crisis diagnosed by Bacevich is of political nature. It can be summed up to a few points of interest. The author identifies that since 1940 the federal government has amassed ampler responsibilities and power when compared to the state and local authorities. This has created the possibility for federal authorities to augment the prerogatives they can act upon, contributing to what Bacevich names an “*imperial presidency*” ⁶⁰ that has ample freedom of action in matters related to national security. This expansion of the executive branch to the detriment of the legislative was followed by a perception amidst the presidency that the national security apparatus, namely the

⁵⁹ Mahnken, Thomas G. (2006). *UNITED STATES STRATEGIC CULTURE*. Prepared for: Defense Threat Reduction Agency & Advanced Systems and Concepts Office. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA521171.pdf>.

⁶⁰ Bacevich, Andrew J. (2005). *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*. American Empire Project. Holt Paperbacks, p.69.

institutions like the CIA, are not of assistance but rather serve as an impediment in critical decision-making. Although these institutions are nominally subordinated to the executive power, they are perceived in the White House as competitors, each seeking its own agendas. This has led presidents to rely “*increasingly on a small circle of presumably trusty advisors rather than on a leaky, obstreperous bureaucracy*”⁶¹, hence curtailing the range of foreign policy debate and decision-making. This overdependence on singular minds, the “*wise men without wisdom*” as Bacevich characterizes it, may partly help to explain the reason why the United States has accentuated its militarization. Decision-making in the United States became ever less formal whilst simultaneously the amount of people involved in the process has gotten reduced as decades went by. According to the author, one specific character and one specific document played a huge role in toning up the American propensity to bellicosity.

A document concluded in 1950 named “NSC 68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security”⁶², whose one of the principal contributors was Paul Nitze, working in tandem with the State Department, Defense Department, the CIA, and other agencies, is a text that represents a historical milestone in American history, incarnating one of the great turning points in American foreign policy during the Cold War. As I will argue in tandem with Bacevich’s clarifications, the effects of this document were not only significant for the historical moment of the time, but it also influenced certain trends in American foreign policy that can be observed to this day. The secret document seeks to present in a rather alarmist tone the degree of vulnerability that the United States supposedly found itself in the face of the perceived military power of the USSR and China. Throughout the entire length of the document, several pessimistic expressions are used for effect such as: “*the integrity and vitality of our system is in greater jeopardy than ever before in our history*”; “*every individual faces the ever-present possibility of annihilation*”; “*the risks we face are of a new order of magnitude*”; “*the destruction not only of this Republic but of civilization itself*”; and others.

Today, in retrospect, one can possibly argue that the apocalyptic timbre that permeates the document blew out of proportion not only the military might of the USSR

⁶¹ *Idem*, p.101.

⁶² Nitze, Paul *et.al.* (1950). *NSC 68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security*. <https://www.citizensource.com/History/20thCen/NSC68.PDF>.

but also the belief that international ideological communism was organized and monolithic. Emboldened by the USSR's recent nuclear tests at the time, as well as Mao's coming to power in China, the document cast ominous lightening over future prospects. These events were of course not trivial. However, one can argue that NCS 68 makes a poor assessment of the situation by painting the Soviets and Maoists as evil forces driven by their blind rage against American ideals of freedom and democracy rather than calculating agents with opposing goals. Communists were not seen as rational actors.

Hence, the Manichean approach envisioned the escalation of the armaments race against the communists as the only plausible solution. In order to curb the American adversaries, it would be necessary to promptly intensify investments in defense. It conceived, therefore, that the national security issue would become the one of most concern, and that, consequently, domestic expenditures in certain areas would have to be reassigned so as to allow rearmament to take place. To Bacevich, “*this ‘Nitze Doctrine’ offered a recipe for the permanent militarization of U.S. policy*”⁶³.

Surprisingly, the proposal to increase defense spending and decrease domestic spending also anticipated an effect other than the defeat of the U.S. adversaries. According to the plan, increased spending on armaments would also mean increased economic prosperity. The NSC argued that increased security spending would have a direct positive impact on the material wealth of the United States:

*From the point of view of the economy as a whole, the program might not result in a real decrease in the standard of living, for the economic effects of the program might be to increase the gross national product by more than the amount being absorbed for additional military and foreign assistance purposes. One of the most significant lessons of our World War II experience was that the American economy, when it operates at a level approaching full efficiency, can provide enormous resources for purposes other than civilian consumption while simultaneously providing a high standard of living*⁶⁴

⁶³ Bacevich, Andrew J. (2005). *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*. American Empire Project. Holt Paperbacks, p. 110.

⁶⁴ Nitze, Paul *et al.* (1950). *NSC 68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security*. <https://www.citizensource.com/History/20thCen/NSC68.PDF>, p.33.

To Bacevich, the promise announced in the document was adopted as a dogma within the American foreign policy elite. The idea that defense spending is offset by the economic stimulus that enables and enriches the American way of life became paradigmatic.

Perhaps by a stroke of luck, Nitze and his proponents witnessed not long after the publication of the NSC the beginning of the Korean War when North Korea invaded South Korea in 1953. In the eyes of Washington officials, the invasion of South Korea by its northern communist counterpart seemed to serve as evidence of the gruesome red picture predicted by the NSC. The aggression appeared to signal positively to the document's idea that USSR strategists were dictating the next steps in the grand international plan for communist domination. The document's influences on American foreign policy became even more profound.

Bacevich concludes how pernicious the adoption of this garrison mindset has been repeatedly appropriated throughout recent American history:

*In the years since its promulgation, the Nitze Doctrine has become a model to which members of the national security elite have repeatedly turned. Even today, the methods pioneered by Nitze in 1950 retain value. He demonstrated the advantages of demonizing America's adversaries, thereby transforming trivial concerns into serious threats and serious threats into existential ones. He devised the technique of artfully designing "options" to yield precooked conclusions, thereby allowing the analyst to become the de facto decision maker. He showed how easily American ideals could be employed to camouflage American ambitions, with terms like peace and freedom becoming code words for expansionism. Above all, however, Nitze demonstrated the inestimable value of sowing panic as a means of driving the policy-making process. When it came to removing obstacles and loosening purse strings, the Nitze Doctrine worked wonders.*⁶⁵

This doctrine collaborated to refurbish and inaugurate trends within American exceptionalist thinking and its impact on foreign policy. Demonizing adversaries while

⁶⁵ *Idem*, p.113.

sanctifying American interests, defending the ideals of freedom and democracy as a justification for conflict, placing the United States in the role of savior leader, and other assumptions of exceptionalist nature are present in the NSC. A simple count shows us that the word “freedom” is present 32 times in the 66 paged document. Readers will notice that the text takes care to paint the Soviets, not as international agents who have distinct goals within a different, but rational and cohesive, reasoning from the Americans. Instead, they were treated as the incarnation of evil forces that has to be stopped at any cost given that their advance was taking hold and that only hard power measures could prevent the realization of their diabolical intentions. Communists were painted as godless adversaries: “*The system becomes God, and submission to the will of God becomes submission to the will of the system*”⁶⁶. Abdicate on the belief in God, as we have seen, is also understood according to the tenets of American civil religion as a grave sin.

Essentially, what the NSC 68 arguably did was to inflate to alarmist proportions the level of the military threat posed by the USSR, fomenting a highly ideological interpretation of their policies while, at the same time, dismissing alternative courses of action that fell within the purview of national security concerns for the Soviets. The document presented to the National Security Council, and by extension, to the president of the United States at the time (Harry S. Truman) although concluding in favor of a rapid arms build-up also mentioned the possibility of launching a preventive war against the communists or of adopting an isolationist posture as a response to the perceived threat. Both were sidelined as non-viable.

The point in question is that this sort of “scaremonger analysis” nudged high-profile decision makers into contemplating the situation only through limited lenses, removing the decision authority from the president and transferring it to the authors of the memo. By painting the situation with this narrow line of interpretation, drafters were able to corner decision-makers, giving them the impression that only one plausible solution, that of increasing American military power, was on the table while, at the same time, disregarding an ampler range of possibilities by presenting two virtually inept responses, that of preemptive offensive and that of isolationism. Authors of the document would most likely not believe it if they were told that a little over half a century after its

⁶⁶ *Idem*, p.4.

publication the United States would let go of the taboo of preventive wars and launch a preemptive attack against another sovereign country. The belief in unchecked American exceptionalism, and its consequences on foreign policy, reached new highs under George W. Bush as we will see. But its seeds were long before planted and watered.

Just over a decade after the NSC was published, on January 17, 1961, President Eisenhower, himself a high-ranked military officer, in his final televised address, dedicated his last words as President to issuing a solemn warning to the American people. Watching this speech is still a phenomenal exercise in helping us to make sense of how American militarization gained so much ground among the national security elites in the United States and how it was already then foreseen by some, like Eisenhower himself, as a detrimental outlook that could change American society for the worse. As a matter of fact, as early as 1953, Eisenhower had already overly displayed his acknowledgment and resentment over the costs of intensive armament: “*This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities.*”⁶⁷. In an interview he had once also famously painted the recent increase in defense spending as a necessary evil: “*I don’t believe we should pay one cent for defense more than we have to*”⁶⁸.

In his 1961 farewell speech on TV, Eisenhower mentions the development of the American military establishment as a new and striking episode in the history of the United States. The words chosen by the president to describe this fact indicate the mournful tone in which he laments this development: “[...] *we have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions*”⁶⁹. According to the Cambridge dictionary, “compelled” is an adjective that means “*having to do something, because you*

⁶⁷ Eisenhower, Dwight D. (1953). *Chance for Peace*. <https://eisenhowerlibrary.org/the-chance-for-peace-speech/>.

⁶⁸ Eisenhower, Dwight D. (1961). *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower*. Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration, p. 198.

⁶⁹ Eisenhower, Dwight D. (1961). *President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Farewell Address*. Archives.gov. <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-dwight-d-eisenhowers-farewell-address>.

are forced to or feel it is necessary”⁷⁰. This regretful stress on the inevitability of such creation is significant and positions Eisenhower, and the United States as a whole, as mere responders to an external threat, and not as an initiator of contention, helping to generate a narrative that is biased.

President Eisenhower was not the first, and will certainly not be the last, foreign policy maker that perceives himself as a merely well-intentioned respondent to other states’ ill-intended actions. The issue at hand is that Nikita Khrushchev, sitting with his advisors in the Grand Kremlin Palace on the other side of the Pacific, also anticipated his own actions as benign in contrast with the malicious resolve of other international contenders. This situation is well-known in the studies of international relations and carries the name “security dilemma”. The concept was coined by American realist John H. Herz. Writing under the context of the Cold War and the phantom of the nuclear threat that hovered over the heads at the time, he describes it as “[...] *a dilemma which human societies have had to grapple since the dawn of history*”⁷¹. It can be observed in the modern international system of Westphalian sovereignty given the state of anarchy that is found in the international arena, that is, the lack of a superior entity that monopolizes the use of force. Since no entity is capable of assuring perpetual peace, singular states see themselves in need of promoting actions that improve their survival and security such as constructing better defense systems. However, these same actions that were set in motion by one state as a form of defensive self-help are identified by another state as a potential threat. This triggers a power competition fueled by uncertainty and consternation at how, for example, these defense systems can be readapted to operate as tools for offensive operations. States then start to race against each other in a dynamic of action and reaction where more powerful actors start to emerge, but less security is achieved. The ripple effect generated as a result is, therefore, self-defeating when it is contrasted with the original purpose of a state’s plan to enhance its security.

⁷⁰ Cambridge Dictionary. (2022). *Meaning of compelled in English*.

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/compelled>.

⁷¹ Herz, John H. (1950). *Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma*. In: World Politics, Vol. 2, No.2. John Hopkins University Press.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2009187>.

Of course, there are other minutiae to the phenomenon, but it is not my present objective to extensively describe it. It suffices to say that the security dilemma offers an interesting perspective in understanding how states see themselves and their actions in a good light and how discrepant this self-view may be from the one held by its peers. By framing the arms buildup in the United States as a “compelling” event, in other words, one that is not possible under full control of Americans because he suggests the Soviets were the ones who started it, Eisenhower is trying to partially excuse himself and his compatriots of the detrimental consequences such a buildup entails for the nation.

Eisenhower then proceeds in his final address to announce, in a prophetic and fearful mood, one of the most epochal statements in modern American history. One that anticipates a grave consequence of an arms buildup:

This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence-economic, political, even spiritual-is felt in every city, every state house, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society.

*In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.*⁷²

3.4 The military-industrial complex

This is what professor Bacevich names the third, and final, crisis in the United States: the military crisis, one deeply associated with the overproportioned clout exercised by the military-industrial complex over American society. Although a commonly used concept nowadays to refer to the powerful and influential American military establishment and the industries associated with it that produce military armaments, the term was, as a matter of fact, coined and firstly used by President Eisenhower in the

⁷² Eisenhower, Dwight D. (1961). *President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Farewell Address*. Archives.gov. <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-dwight-d-eisenhowers-farewell-address>.

aforementioned speech. To Bacevich, the national identity of the United States is heavily influenced by the activities of this complex. The military crisis is, thus, reflected in the state of perpetual war the United States seems to find itself in and in the dysfunctional belief that the United States military is a panacea to all American afflictions.

Instigating a sense of vulnerability, of perpetual danger, is fundamental to upholding the belief that a powerful well-funded military is a national priority. The military-industrial complex instigates this sense of fear through different fronts, exercising pressure, lobbying, and acquiring the “unwarranted influence” Eisenhower was scared of. This complex is made of three main groups that get strong benefits from keeping the United States tangled in war according to scholar Christopher A. Preble ⁷³. First, there are American companies that manufacture military goods. The most notable companies operating in this sector are Lockheed Martin, Raytheon Technologies, Northrop Grumman, Boeing, and General Dynamics ⁷⁴. They are constructed and operate like any other private company and aim to maximize profits. They’re also known as defense contractors. Second, congressional candidates get financial support for their electoral campaigns via constituencies that are employed by these arms manufacturers. Third, is the defense bureaucracy, whose main representative is the Pentagon, which tries to augment its prestige and budget. These three groups depend on war to sustain and further increase their power. They seek to engrain their activities in the fabric of society so that they can continue operating. Eisenhower had foreseen how the entanglement of capitalist, political and military interest entailed dangerous consequences such as policies benefiting corporations as opposed to what benefits the citizens. Over the decades, the American political system has become warped in service of this complex, and there is no shortage of examples to prove it. For instance, the involvement of Dick Cheney former vice president of the United States and former CEO of military contractor Halliburton ⁷⁵ is one of the most iconic examples of this inappropriate meshing between business,

⁷³ Preble, Christopher A. (2019). *Peace, War, and Liberty: Understanding U.S. Foreign Policy*. Libertarianism.org Press.

⁷⁴ Defense News. (2021). *Top 100 for 2021*. <https://people.defensenews.com/top-100/>.

⁷⁵ Friedersdorf, Conor. (2011). *Remembering Why Americans Loathe Dick Cheney*. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/08/remembering-why-americans-loathe-dick-cheney/244306/>.

politics, and the military. But many other episodes can be located from the 1950s onwards.

On October 9th, 2012, CNN published a news piece the title of which was “Army to Congress: Thanks, but no tanks”⁷⁶. It told the story of how more than 2.000 tanks were sitting idle in the California desert because of a disagreement between Congress and the Army. Apart from the manifestation of the Army’s chief of staff to Congress that it was not necessary to allocate a slice of the Defense Department budget to produce and pay for the maintenance of these tanks Congress begged to differ, deciding to issue the order to continue producing more tanks despite the chief of staff’s evaluation. The absurd nature of the situation is explained by how the military-industrial complex work. In this case, General Dynamics played a role in influencing the congressional decision.

*[...] General Dynamics certainly has a stake in the battle of the tanks and is making sure its investment is protected, according to research done by The Center for Public Integrity, a journalism watchdog group. What its reporters found was General Dynamics campaign contributions given to lawmakers at key times, such as around congressional hearings, on whether or not to build more tanks. "We aren't saying there's vote buying" said Aaron Metha, one of the report's authors. "We are saying it's true in pretty much all aspects of politics - but especially the defense industry. It's almost impossible to separate out the money that is going into elections and the special interests. And what we found was the direct spike in the giving around certain important dates that were tied to votes."*⁷⁷

Business Insider published an article in 2021 discussing how “At least 15 lawmakers who shape US defense policy have an investment in military contractors”⁷⁸. This questionable liaison between politicians and contractors is extensive and amply documented and reported by news outlets. Yet, even if generating periodical outcries from

⁷⁶ Griffin, Drew & Johnston, Kathleen. (2012). *Army to Congress: Thanks, but no tanks*. CNN Security Blogs. <https://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/10/09/army-to-congress-thanks-but-no-tanks/>.

⁷⁷ *Idem*.

⁷⁸ Rojas, Warren *et. al.* (2021). *At least 15 lawmakers who shape US defense policy have investments in military contractors*. Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/congress-members-are-trading-defense-stocks-while-shaping-military-policy-2021-12?r=US&IR=T>.

the public, it still goes on mostly unchallenged. This indicates how the association between these institutions can be seen as deep-rooted in the United States. It can be traced back, once again, to the conflict environment Eisenhower and his successors governed under.

Military spending during the Cold War was immense. No direct fighting between the two super potencies was happening, leading to massive stockpiling of weapons in the United States given its attempt to outspend the USSR's armament budget. The end of the Cold War and the prospect of not having to face any eruption of conflict paradoxically did not end the huge military spending taking place. In fact, it did continue in the face of renewed U.S. involvement in conflicts happening in countries far from the homeland and the spread of American military bases throughout most of the globe. Military expansion abroad, in its many forms, implied economic gains for domestic companies and increased political influence for certain individuals willing to keep feeding the complex, and of course, directly benefiting from it. This cycle fomented continuous military expansion across the globe. This expansion is necessarily rooted in the assumption that the United States has to perpetually defend itself from external foes. If no considerable threat is in sight, then suddenly the need to invest in increasing and improving weapons, expanding military bases, and increasing the military contingent seems no longer reasonable. Getting involved in external crises, and, just as vital, advertising their purported dangerousness internally to the American public, both under matters of homeland safety and of defending the assumed vital American interest, becomes of the essence for the maintenance of this cycle.

As we have repeatedly seen, strategies that characterize American exceptionalism such as the demonization of enemies become a paramount tool in fostering fright against groups perceived as aliens while, simultaneously, inspiring a sense of patriotic uniqueness that is based on an alleged divine preference. This is done so as to rally domestic support for specific foreign policy actions. These policies contribute to the dynamics of expanding influence and power to be found in the military-industrial complex, which, in its turn, bolsters the involvement, even if unwarranted, of the United States in matters of international affairs, generating a feedback loop. Both the legislative and executive branches can concoct strategies that benefit from this type of activity.

Although a common notion for most Americans, foreigners might wonder why the president of the United States is referred to in the media as “commander-in-chief”. This title is not merely a synonym for the position of the highest head of the executive. This is a legal title that all presidents of the United States possess, because besides being chief executives they are also, according to Article II, Section 2, Clause 1 of the Constitution ⁷⁹, heads of the highest military authority in the country. Being the supreme authority in the line of command of the armed forces, the commander-in-chief yields the power to decide when and how to wage war. However, only Congress possesses the authority to declare war and to decide on the military and civilian budgets that will be employed for that purpose. Throughout the history of the U.S., only five presidential requests have been filed. World War II was the last one in the register. All other military actions carried out by the U.S. since then have been done through the congressional approval of the use of force, and not via the declaration of war against another sovereign nation. Although this may sound like a mere technicality, the difference between declaring war and authorizing the use of military force is significant. A declaration of war automatically triggers certain statutory authorities that grant the President special powers while the authorization to use force should not. However, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 2001, the executive argued that the events triggered these war powers ⁸⁰ in trying to amass even more prerogatives to act in what Bacevich calls the “*imperial presidency*”. This helped the government at the time to put in place the measures thought to be necessary to initiate the “war on terror”, an endless war as we will also discuss next chapter.

When discussing the military crises the United States faces, Bacevich is categorical to emphasize that the United States tends to wrongly place too much faith in the military as a tool capable of resolving problems. This is accompanied by the tendency

⁷⁹ The President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the Militia of the several States, when called into the actual Service of the United States; he may require the Opinion, in writing, of the principal Officer in each of the executive Departments, upon any Subject relating to the Duties of their respective Offices, and he shall have Power to grant Reprieves and Pardons for Offences against the United States, except in Cases of Impeachment. For more, *vide* <https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/article-2/section-2/clause-1/>.

⁸⁰ Boon, K. & Lovelace, D. (2012). *Terrorism Commentary on Security Documents*. In: Volume 126, The Intersection of Law and War. Oxford University Press, p.12.

to blame poor military performance in certain operations on not enough armament development rather than on bad, interventionist, foreign policy choices.

*Events have exposed as illusory American pretensions to having mastered war. Simply trying harder – investing ever larger sums in even more advanced technology devising novel techniques, or even improving the quality of American generalship – will not enable the United States to evade that reality. By extension, the presumption of U.S. military supremacy that achieved such broad currency during the years following the Cold War is completely spurious. The exercise of military power will not enable the United States to evade the predicament to which the crisis of profligacy has given rise.*⁸¹

Much of this “exercise of military power” is done under the idea of freedom. An idea that is part of the larger creed of American exceptionalism. As we saw in the last chapter, Americans, both policymakers and the public fall into the confusion of assuming that the idea of freedom, an idea that, as we concluded in the previous chapters, was constructed according to the particularities of the American historical social context, a context that is not shared by any other country in the world, can be automatically extended to the rest of the world. But the move to extend this quest in defense of freedom to different nations, believing that the aspirations of other societies are harmonious with American aspirations, cannot be done without incurring patent contradictions. Furthermore, the American discourse around the word freedom, used to appease the masses in the domestic environment as dictated by the American civil religion, might end up falling into vices such as propagating double standards and self-attributed exceptions in the international arena. This kind of practice tarnishes the international reputation of the United States. They may lead foreign observers to tag American actions abroad as imperialistic, and, as such, subject to harsh criticism. Even if they are diminished internally as “blowbacks”, clumsy and contradictory actions in the foreign policy field not only undermine the possibility of succeeding in achieving the proposed goals but also bequeath a dangerous legacy that may come back to haunt the nation in the future. For instance, it is common ground among historians that the military actions of the United

⁸¹ Bacevich, Andrew J. (2005). *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*. American Empire Project. Holt Paperbacks, p.168.

States in the Middle East in the second half of the last century contributed to the emergence of terrorist activities that struck the country in 2001.

3.5 Final remarks

As much as there are distinct, sometimes diametrically opposed⁸², interpretations of the United States' actions in the foreign policy arena, I have chosen to approach a patently critical view of the country in an attempt to understand how the idea of American exceptionalism can be misappropriated in order to serve as support for controversial international entanglements.

In this context, Bacevich's contributions serve to help navigate certain economic, political, and military aspects of the United States that can be seen as detrimental to the nation. Deep marks were left by episodes such as the writing of NSC 68 that contributed to a profound militarization of American society. The concentration of power in the executive branch and the disposition for consumerism were also factors that ended up leading to what the author calls the triple crisis of America. This crisis may end up leading to the adoption of international actions that are labeled by some authors as imperialistic in that it propels the United States in sedimenting its economic primacy through military superiority.

This strategy comes at the cost of possibly tarnishing the American image on the international stage, especially when it merges with the rhetoric of American exceptionalism. This happens because, by seeking to appropriate some of the lofty principles that characterize American exceptionalism, such as the defense of freedom, the country ends up incurring in contradictions and double standards when it insists on military and unilateral actions to achieve its objectives.

⁸² Cheney, Dick. & Cheney, Liz. (2015). *Exceptional: Why the World Needs a Powerful America*. Threshold Editions.

CHAPTER 4: GEORGE W. BUSH'S RHETORIC AND AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

4.1 A war on a tactic

The presidency of George Walker Bush took place for two terms. The first from 2001 to 2004 and the second from 2004 to January 20, 2009. His first term, more important for the purposes of the present chapter, was marked by two key episodes: the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. These events inaugurated what the Bush administration deemed appropriate to coin the “war on terror”. The repercussions of this sort of policy, needless to say, are extensive not only for the United States but also for the whole world. When at the beginning of the century one of the world’s superpowers decided to declare war against “terror”, a non-defined agent, many were left wondering the reasons for a such metaphorical and vague denomination of policy. As I will argue, the rationale behind this choice was purposefully crafted to allow policymakers to instill in Americans the sentiment of fear and uncertainty and, by the same token, exploit the themes sustained by the creed of American exceptionalism in order to rally support for the administration’s decisions.

It is first worth clarifying that the announcement of a war against “terrorism” is but a misnomer. Terrorism is not a delimited threat, a more or less contained agent, such as a sovereign state or even a terrorist organization. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, terrorism consists of “*the systematic use of terror especially as a means of coercion*”⁸³. Rather than a palpable enemy, terrorism, in reality, comprises a species of tactic that can be used to achieve certain goals. Drawing attention to a tactic instead of an agent helps to exaggerate the perceived threat given that a tactic can be employed by multiple foes and can never be fully contained because enemies may always resort to it. Selling to the public the imagery of war fought against a tactic rather than a well-defined actor inflates the sense of danger, especially because “terrorism” is commonly understood as a type of attack that can happen anywhere, at any time, coming from just about anyone. Additionally, this vagueness in the use of terminology contributes to the public being confused and having difficulty understanding clearly what the goals of the policy are. The

⁸³ Merriam Webster Dictionary. (2022). *Definition of terrorism*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/terrorism>.

conceptual obscurity also increases the policy makers' leeway to interpret the terms as they see fit since the policy's lack of initial clarity makes it easier to justify it *a posteriori*.

Since it is semantically illogical to fight a battle against "terrorism", it becomes necessary that some entity or some subject embodies the figure of the perpetrator of this tactic. The agents of terror, the "terrorists," therefore become the enemies against whom the war is waged. Labeling different enemies, with different strategic interests, as terrorists make it easier to lump together those who are perceived by the administration as the enemy. The term terrorist is not, like the term American, a demonym to indicate an individual's belonging to a sovereign state. "Terrorist" is a noun that can be applied to anyone who uses a specific tactic, just like it can be used as an adjective to characterize that tactic. This indiscriminate grouping under one word makes it more complicated to understand the plurality of groups and people who might use the tactic and what their political goals are. If not treated with due nuance, the cultural, political, and economic differences of the groups that use this tactic may end up impoverishing the creation of policies to contain it. This also facilitates the process of demonizing the adversary. As we noted in previous chapters, the belief in American exceptionalism tends to group those who oppose American interests as malevolent individuals who go against ideals such as freedom for example. This process of demonization, explicit or implicit, purposeful or accidental, further increases the negative symbolic power associated with the word. The term then becomes susceptible to weaponization since it can become a quick way to discredit opponents and deplete them of any rationality or humanity and, therefore, of any possibility of diplomatic treatment. The symbolic meaning of the word "terror" and "terrorist", and its counterpoint to assumed American ideals, was widely exploited by the administration in the aftermath of September 11.

4.2 Freedom, freedom, freedom

On September 20, 2001, President Bush addressed the nation in a joint session of Congress in what is considered one of the crucial inaugural moments of the war on terror. The word "freedom" is mentioned by Bush 13 times in his speech.

Tonight, we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. Our grief has turned to anger and anger to resolution. Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done. [...] They hate what they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government. Their

*leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other. [...] This is not, however, just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.*⁸⁴

The usage of the term freedom, in its different forms and shades, is strategic. Its systematic repetition, especially in the more dramatic moments of the speech, is not there for no reason. President Bush deliberately puts the word "freedom" in the spotlight to capitalize on the emotional charge that the term carries in the history of the United States and Americans. The symbolic significance of the term is appropriated by the president in order to instill in the interlocutors a sense of loftiness for the enterprise that is about to be launched. The idea that the American nation unites for the defense of freedom is, as we have seen in the previous chapters, a powerful motor to captivate popular opinion in favor of policies. The concept of freedom, and its defense at any cost, is one of the bulwarks of American exceptionalism. The defense of freedom is thus understood as a task that is not only domestic but also international in nature. If internally the American civil religion reveres the idea of freedom as a patriotic dogma, the belief in American exceptionalism makes the United States feel that it is the guardian of freedom around the globe. And that in occupying this role, the country is entitled to engage in international conflicts with other sovereign states, terrorist groups, or even an abstract noun, that insists on not respecting the sanctity of freedom as it is comprehended by the tradition of the American national identity and its experience.

The comprehension of the idea of freedom in this way is typically American. It was formed and developed according to the experiences of the American people within a very particular context. A context that cannot be compared with the formation of other national states, and, just as importantly, of other national identities that have taken place on different continents and have been led by other people facing different obstacles and having different priorities and ideals. In the end, no matter how much policymakers like

⁸⁴ Bush, George. W. (2001). *President Bush's address to a joint session of Congress and the nation*. The Washington Post.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html.

Bush try to inflate the American experience, and its perpetual aspiration for freedom, so as to make it look like a universal pretension desired by all, the particularity of its development and the circumscribed understanding of its meaning is a deterrent for other countries and people to empathize with the all-American cause. The distance between the American understanding of freedom and the understanding of other peoples is remarkable and can be visualized not only in its political but also in its religious, cultural, and economic dimensions. This gap helps explain why it may be difficult at times for the United States to garner international support for its foreign policy entanglements. Especially when these policies are heavily based on abstract narratives involving American aspirations and the claim to universalize these ideals. Of course, this kind of justification raises suspicions not only about the legitimacy of the undertaking but also about the possibility that the purported nobility of the narrative is being constructed to serve less lofty purposes of a highly militarized nation with avid economic interests.

It comes as no surprise when the administration of the United States had difficulty finding international allies to join its undertaking. With the overwhelming support of Congress ⁸⁵, the United States decided to invade Iraq in March 2003 despite the United Nation's disapproval ⁸⁶. Few countries were willing to integrate into the “*coalition of the willing*” – the name used by the administration to refer to the nations that supported the invasion. The list included some relevant countries such as the United Kingdom or Japan, but most of the 49 countries had little or no infrastructure to seriously contribute to the project: Micronesia, Solomon Islands, Rwanda, the Marshall Islands, and Uganda were some of the names listed. The absence of other militarily and economically prominent countries such as France or Germany demonstrated how the invasion of Iraq was approved only by a minority of the international community. Although virtually the entire Western world, and even a considerable portion of the East, showed solidarity with the American people in view of the September 11 attack that received widespread media coverage worldwide, this sentiment alone was not able to make others approve of the invasion of Iraq. Opposition to the invasion was expressed early on by authorities of other

⁸⁵ United States Congress. (2002). *H.J.Res.114 - Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002*. Congress.gov.
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/house-joint-resolution/114>.

⁸⁶ British Broadcasting Corporation. (2004). *Iraq war illegal, says Annan*. BBC.com.
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3661134.stm.

countries, as well as by civil movements of the most diverse sorts. One of the reasons for the absence is the aforementioned distance between the American appraisal of its own freedom fighters and the reality of peoples of other nations pursuing what they considered more down-to-earth goals. Another reason is the extremely controversial decision to start a preventive war against Iraq which was named “Operation Iraqi Freedom”.

4.3 The Bush Doctrine

In the previous chapter, we saw how NSC 68 had mentioned the idea of starting a preventive war against the soviets but dismissed it as unacceptable. Morally this notion was treated at the time as unacceptable because it would be compared to an inexcusable act of aggression, one whose consequences would be nuclear. However great the danger, initiating a confrontation against another sovereign state, even with the excuse that its nature was preventive, was unacceptable not only to policymakers but also to the general public. The Bush administration was the first one in American history to let go of that taboo. Some of the key names responsible for formulating this doctrine, applying it, and attempting to sell it to the public were:

Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense (2001 – 2006)

Paul Wolfowitz, U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense (2001 – 2005)

Colin Powell, U.S. Secretary of State (2001 – 2005)

Condoleezza Rice, U.S. National Security Advisor (2001 – 2005)

Dick Cheney, Vice President of the U.S (2001 – 2009)

Together with the president, they helped to cement the so-called “Bush Doctrine”. It carried three fundamental principles: preventive war ⁸⁷, unilateralism, and regime change. Employed by the administration as an axiom, the idea of defending freedom was used relentlessly to underpin these three principles. The past moral imperative not to launch an aggression against a sovereign nation except in self-defense, *i.e.*, as a reactive rather than preventive action, gave way to the conviction that events like September 11

⁸⁷ Some authors distinguish preventive war from preemptive war. The former is characterized by the initiation of a war against a threat while the threat is still forming in order to prevent its materialization. The latter is characterized by starting a war against a threat when the threat is already developed enough to be launched. Contrary to what the United States believed; Iraq did not possess weapons of mass destruction. Therefore, according to the definition I am following, the war against Iraq was preventive and not preemptive.

opened the way to a new sense of justice and morality in foreign policy. The shock generated by the destruction of the twin towers was powerful enough to shake the moral foundations of American foreign policy. Now a precautionary attack was not only recommended but necessary so that other terrorist attacks on domestic soil like that of September 11 would never happen again. That means embarking on the war even if the United States had to act without the support of other international peers. Unilateralism in foreign policy became a constant that allowed the administration to sustain its counterterrorism campaign even without the approval of other partners. Bush's fashioned unilateralism was translated into the famous phrase repeated with variations on multiple occasions: "*Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists*"⁸⁸. It served to foster the already polarized environment in which only a single choice was possible for true Americans, that is to say, to fully support the administration. And, in which failure by other countries to take an international stand of compliance with the United States' actions in its war on terror was perceived as an affront. Finally, the belief that regime change was necessary so that long-lasting peace could be achieved in Iraq and Afghanistan became an adamant solution that would purge the homeland of possible attacks. The belief was that it was necessary to establish a democratic regime in middle eastern countries once dictatorship was swept away so that other threats could no longer find fertile soil in the region.

Bush's televised address to the nation on March 19, 2003, announcing the beginning of military operations was marked by evoking the defense of freedom and democracy as reasons to wage war against Saddam Hussein in Iraq. The rhetoric employed by the president was similar to that used in his speech to Congress two years ago. He soberly declared: "*We come to Iraq with respect for its citizens, for their great civilization, and for the religious faiths they practice. We have no ambition in Iraq, except to remove a threat and restore control of that country to its own people.*"⁸⁹. He ended his

⁸⁸ Bush, George. W. (2001). *President Bush's address to a joint session of Congress and the nation*. The Washington Post.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html.

⁸⁹ *Idem*.

appearance by stating in a confident manner “*We will defend our freedom. We will bring freedom to others and we will prevail*”⁹⁰.

Bacevich names the ideological struggle of Bush’s administration as the “*freedom agenda*”. He proposes two types of interpretations of this agenda, linking them with traditional figures in American history in an effort to understand how and why the administration was building its case. One associates the administration’s decisions with US-led internationalism as intended by Woodrow Wilson while the other associates them with the confident imperialism of Theodore Roosevelt.

*Time and again, for example, President Bush insisted that in Iraq, the United States was fighting not simply to protect itself or its interests, but to ensure the spread of democracy and human rights. There were two ways to interpret this so-called freedom agenda. The first interpretation took the president’s words at face value: He saw war as a vehicle for deliverance and liberation. Through violence, either threatened or employed outright, the United States aimed to bring entire nations into conformity with Western, liberal values. This was Bush channeling Woodrow Wilson via Paul Wolfowitz. The alternative was to see the freedom agenda as purely cynical, providing a tissue of moral legitimacy to a strategy of naked aggression. Here, the belief was that force would produce hegemony. Coercion, starting with Iraq (but not ending there), would enable the United States to subjugate the Greater Middle East. This was Bush channeling Theodore Roosevelt, as interpreted by Dick Cheney.*⁹¹

Although seemingly contradictory to one another Bacevich mentions that for Bush “*the two schools in all likelihood merged*”⁹². In truth, it is not possible to know what the president’s innermost convictions really were, but it is indeed, probable that for the president himself it was possible to harmonize both sets of rationales. The adoption of the exceptionalist rhetoric of American defense of freedom and democracy to cover political and economic interests does not necessarily discredit the original belief in America’s

⁹⁰ Bush, George. W. (2003). *President Bush Addresses the Nation*. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030319-17.html>.

⁹¹ Bacevich, Andrew J. (2005). *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*. American Empire Project. Holt Paperbacks, p. 160.

⁹² *Idem*.

unique position in the world as an agent heavenly destined to spread its principles. On the contrary, it is possible for an individual to think that precisely because the United States occupies such a privileged position, it has the right to take unilateral action, or even engage in disputable undertakings like launching preventive wars, as an enlightened agent that carries the burden of the civilizing mission. The belief in the exceptional character of the United States is, as I am trying to show, real and decisive. Although it is used as a rhetorical element to rally support for public opinion, it is not merely a rhetorical element. It is a real belief, a narrative that is deeply rooted in the American national identity and the experiences it has gone through. It pervades the minds and hearts of Americans as an effective, legitimate, and true idea that serves as the basis for Americans to understand who they are and how they should navigate the world.

Perhaps one of the best episodes to make my case is Bush's words at the press conference given on October 11, 2001. When asked about the hatred that some Islamic countries harbored toward the United States, Bush promptly replied in a frank tone

*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, and we've got to do a better job of making our case.*⁹³

The mismatch between Bush's image of the United States and that harbored by individuals and countries belonging to other national identities demonstrates just how entrenched American exceptionalism is. President Bush, like many Americans, finds themselves incapable of understanding the anti-Americanism that others cultivate precisely because of the fact that the self-image they nurture makes it impossible to see their own nation with unkind eyes. How can a nation and people that have been chosen by God, blessed by natural resources abundance, and political prosperity, be perceived by others with such blind hatred? America's self-perception as an exceptional nation contributes to the fact that some of the individuals belonging to it are unable to understand the negative feelings that others have about the United States. It also makes Americans more prone to blame foreigners' understanding of America as inadequate rather than

⁹³ Bush, George. W. (2003). *President Holds Prime Time News Conference*.
<https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011011-7.html>.

reviewing Americans' understanding of America as idealized. And, just as importantly, it stops them from revisiting under critical lenses the history of American foreign policy and some of the actions that led to the emergence of this hatred. The result is this mismatch between the self-perception of American national identity, idealized through the beliefs of American exceptionalism, and the perception that foreigners have about it. “Americans see their country as a positive force in the world, but the rest of the world is decidedly ambivalent”⁹⁴ points out international relations professor Stephen Walt.

The moralization of foreign policy in quasi-religious terms, supported by the tradition of American exceptionalism, makes it difficult to have a rational, non-partisan understanding of other countries' actions, making it cloudy for foreign policymakers to generate adequate strategies and compromising the public's understanding through oversimplifications. As Central Intelligence Agency veteran Paul R. Pillar puts it

*A sense of righteousness, or lack of righteousness on the part of others, is a component of those perceptions. President George W. Bush again functioned as a spokesman for the outlook in question [...] after mentioning that “I was a sinner in need of redemption and found it,” Bush described the United States as a nation that was “sinned against”. This manner of looking at the international relations of the United States exacerbates tendencies to overlook actions by the United States – the perceived righteous side – that stimulate or provoke harmful actions by others. It also encourages the downplaying or overlooking of any legitimate grievances or understandable impulses among the “sinners”.*⁹⁵

Also, as a consequence, when foreign policies are perceived as unpopular among the international community, the focus of policymakers in the United States tends to become not so much on how to change the policy itself so that it is better perceived by peers, but instead how it is possible to adopt certain rhetoric that ought to be well received by the international community. A representative episode that demonstrates this is the speech of then Secretary of State Colin Powell at the United Nations Security Council on

⁹⁴ Walt, Stephen M. (2006). *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy*. W. W. Norton & Company. Chapter 2: The Roots of Resentment.

⁹⁵ Pillar, Paul. (2016). *Why America Misunderstands the World: National Experience and Roots of Misperception*. Columbia University Press, pp. 86-88.

February 5⁹⁶ in an attempt to convince the other members that Iraq was on the verge of producing weapons of mass destruction. Today, in retrospect, it is known that American intelligence failed and that, in reality, Saddam Hussein's government did not possess such weapons⁹⁷. But, at the time, Secretary Powell used every possible tool to convince the other representatives that it was imperative for the United Nations to offer support to the American cause. He cited human rights violations being committed on Iraqi territory and even presented a small vial containing a white substance that he claimed was anthrax - a biological weapon allegedly in the dictator's possession. Secretary Powell certainly didn't think it possible to revise American foreign policy, or even adopt any of the suggestions made by the other council participants, but instead tried, without success, to make his point and defend the United States' unwavering view on the issue hoping to convince the other members about the absolute necessity of the American cause for international security.

This self-congratulatory posture is detrimental to the United States itself. It is not difficult to go from believing in the exceptionality of one's nation to also believing that this nation is better than others in its ability to gather intelligence and devise foreign policy. When a crass mistake occurs, as was the case with the alleged presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the country ends up isolating itself internationally and has to take questionable unilateralist postures. These postures are then severely discredited, domestically and internationally once the error is exposed, damaging the reputation of the country and of those who erred either in propagating the error or in not fixing it in time for even more errors to be perpetuated. Not to mention the catastrophic consequences for the nations that turn out to be the target of this sort of foreign policy that lack the feasible basis for its initiation and maintenance. The number of civilian casualties since the 2003 United States invasion is estimated to be somewhere between 184.382 and 207.156⁹⁸.

⁹⁶ Powell, Collin. (2003). *Secretary Powell at the UN: Iraq's Failure to Disarm*. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/disarm/index.htm>.

⁹⁷ Roberts, William. (2021). 'Blot' on Powell's record: Lies to the UN about Iraq's weapons. Aljazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/18/stain-on-powells-record-lies-to-the-un-about-iraqs-weapons>.

⁹⁸ Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs. (2021). *Iraqi Civilians*. Brown University. <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/civilians/iraqi>.

President Bush also embodies very clearly how religion and politics, agitated by the belief in American exceptionalism, get mixed up in the United States. How the belief in America as God's chosen land and people is not treated as fiction but as a fact. In 2004 in a presidential debate with democrat John Kerry while defending the necessity to have troops to fight in Afghanistan he stated

*I believe that God wants everybody to be free. That's what I believe. And that's one part of my foreign policy. In Afghanistan I believe that freedom there is a gift from the Almighty. And I can't tell you how encouraged I am to see freedom on the march. And so my principles that I make decisions on are part of me. And religion is part of me.*⁹⁹

Bush did not hesitate to demonize his opponents. He used terms such as “axis of evil” to refer to Iraq, Iran, and North Korea¹⁰⁰. On that occasion, in a State of the Union address in 2002, he expressed in a prophetic tone

*We've come to know truths that we will never question: Evil is real, and it must be opposed. Beyond all differences of race or creed, we are one country, mourning together and facing danger together. Deep in the American character, there is honor, and it is stronger than cynicism. And many have discovered again that even in tragedy—especially in tragedy—God is near.*¹⁰¹

Like his father, George H.W. Bush¹⁰², he also made suggestions comparing Saddam Hussein to Hitler in trying to associate the enemy with the worst ever vilified threat against the United States¹⁰³, opposing good versus evil in biblical-like terms.

⁹⁹ Bates, Stephen. (2011). *God's Own Country: Religion and Politics in the USA*. Hodder & Stoughton.

¹⁰⁰ Bush, George W. (2002). *State of the Union Address (January 29, 2002.)* <https://web.archive.org/web/20111011053416/http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/4540>.

¹⁰¹ *Idem*.

¹⁰² Raum, Tom. (1990). *Bush Says Saddam Even Worse Than Hitler*. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/c456d72625fba6c742d17f1699b18a16>.

¹⁰³ Jackson, Derrick Z. (2004) *A fatal distraction*. Boston.com <https://www.smh.com.au/world/middle-east/saddam-the-new-hitler-bush-tells-europeans-20021122-gdfum6.html>.

Bush also committed across the years what have been coined "Bushisms". Phrases that, besides being mere gaffes, may also be considered revealing paraphrases. Here's a list of some of them

*Our enemies are innovative and resourceful, and so are we. They never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people, and neither do we.*¹⁰⁴

*I'm telling you there's an enemy that would like to attack America, Americans, again. There just is. That's the reality of the world. And I wish him all the very best.*¹⁰⁵

*Well, I mean that a defeat in Iraq will embolden the enemy and will provide the enemy—more opportunity to train, plan, to attack us. That's what I mean. There—it's—you know, one of the hardest parts of my job is to connect Iraq to the war on terror.*¹⁰⁶

*The decision of one man, to launch a wholly unjustified and brutal invasion of Iraq. I mean, of the Ukraine. Iraq too. Anyway.*¹⁰⁷

*See, free nations are peaceful nations. Free nations don't attack each other. Free nations don't develop weapons of mass destruction.*¹⁰⁸

These Freudian slips, even if they are not part of the official narrative of the administration, serve to illustrate the contradictions that exist beyond the formal and scripted explanations that were used to sell the war on terror. They also lay bare how the belief in American exceptionalism causes the use of doublespeak to be perceived as

¹⁰⁴ Bush, George W. (2004) *George W. Bush 1946–American Republican statesman, 43rd President 2001–9*.
<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191843730.001.0001/q-oro-ed5-00002381>.

¹⁰⁵ Bush, George W. (2009). *Final Presidential Press Conference*.
<https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbushfinalpressconference.htm>.

¹⁰⁶ Bush, George W. (2006). *Transcript: President Bush, Part 2*. CBS News.
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-president-bush-part-2/>.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, Michael. (2022). *George W. Bush compares Zelenskyy to Churchill, calls Iraq invasion unjustified in gaffe* The Dallas Morning News.
<https://www.dallasnews.com/news/2022/05/18/george-w-bush-compares-zelenskyy-to-churchill-mistakenly-calls-iraq-invasion-unjustified/>.

¹⁰⁸ Bush, George W. (2003), *President Bush Discusses Economy, Small Business in Wisconsin*. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/10/20031003-4.html>.

innocuous. It is ironic how, in the last example given, Bush is unable to realize that by describing Iraq as a non-free nation, he is also characterizing the United States. The United States not only possesses weapons of mass destruction, but it was the first country to test a nuclear bomb and drop one on another nation ¹⁰⁹. If Bush sought to be consistent with his criteria of a free nation, it would be impossible for him to portray the United States as a defender of freedom. Instead, inspired by the belief in American exceptionalism, he blindly excuses the actions of his own nation while condemning those same actions as long as they are perpetuated by those considered to be the enemy. He thus falls into double-speak, an inconsistency of speech and values setting, since the parameters used to judge others is not the same as those used for oneself. Irreverent as Bush sometimes communicated himself, one can point out that was talking the talk but not walking the walk. As blatant as this difference may be to the eyes of non-American observers, the contradiction and inconsistency seem unable to affect the American self-image. This is because American exceptionalism precisely guarantees exceptionality for the United States to act beyond. Beyond the norms of international law, beyond multilateral institutions, beyond common practice, beyond even the high moral standards that the United States advocates for. The United States is exceptional because it acts in exceptional fashion, and because it acts in exceptional fashion it becomes exceptional. Herein lies the circularity of the belief in exceptionalism, a circularity that can become perverse when mobilized to justify external policies that are unfoundedly employed.

4.4 Final remarks

George W. Bush's administration is exemplary in providing instances in which American exceptionalism is strongly present in the manner the United States thinks of its position in the world as unique and, therefore, capable of justifying foreign policy even if it contradicts international consensus. Bush's administration demonstrates how American exceptionalism is embraced as a tangible idea that not only can but should, according to this creed, be used to build strategies that defend American interests, regardless of whether a policy is popular among the international community or not.

For as long as it remains saleable at home, that is, as long as the American people believe in its own exceptionality in an acritical manner, policymakers will be able to rely

¹⁰⁹ International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. (2020) *The road to a world free of nuclear weapons*. https://www.icanw.org/nuclear_weapons_history.

on the use of exceptionalism as a way to take foreign policy decisions that do not need clear substantiation to be accepted by the domestic public. A more salutary approach would be to promote a historical-contextual understanding that critically approaches the idea of exceptionality and that seeks to situate foreign policy actions not in a religious way, but rather in a rational and conscious manner.

CONCLUSION

The notion of American exceptionalism has permeated the formation of American national identity from its earliest days. Factors such as, but not limited to, the large geographical size, the influence of Puritan settlers, and the success of the liberal democratic project have all contributed to the construction of a self-perception and a self-understanding that sees the American nation and its people as exceptional. That is, as a country and a population that enjoys a position of uniqueness in the world.

Throughout American history, the unique character of its formation and development, one of unmatched successes, has been justified via a narrative of strong religious influence. This narrative attributes the success of the American endeavor to special providence, installing in the heart of the American national identity a sense of piety that is a fundamental part of American civil religion. The various traditional symbols that make it up require reverential treatment because they are understood precisely as symbols that represent the exceptionality of the American people. They symbolically carry the great deeds and the high principles of the nation, focusing on its exceptional character. American civil religion can be considered, hence, as an emanation of American exceptionalism. One that also functions in a way that reinforces this original belief that the United States is exceptional. It is reproduced domestically to keep alive the idea that the country will always be a *shining city upon a hill*.

The belief that the United States is an exceptional country may also end up serving as fuel to drive certain foreign policy decisions that are not necessarily in accordance with the lofty principles and ambitions that purportedly underlie the belief. On this point, it is important to take into consideration the most critical interpretations of the American record in foreign policy. A range of authors takes a censorious view when approaching some of the rationales used to set in motion controversial decisions made by the foreign policy-making elite that ended up also affecting the general American public at large. The idea that the country is exceptional and therefore has the right and even the duty to act unilaterally in disregard of international law can be instrumentalized to garner popular support for international interventions. This kind of dynamic makes the country emphasize a military character that, if accentuated rampantly, can damage its international reputation and result in other detrimental consequences. Thus, American

exceptionalism can potentially be used to propel the country into what some authors consider imperialistic endeavors since they rely heavily on militaristic, one-sided, actions.

It has also been argued throughout the thesis that the belief in American exceptionalism may end up negatively affecting the ability of decision-makers to critically evaluate the decision-making of other countries. The attempt to extend the American experience to the reality of other countries, that is, to use American metrics to measure the reality of others, only serves to render the judgment of international situations partial and incomplete. The epitome of this phenomenon is the insistence of politicians in the United States on the idea of freedom. The American lexicon seems to find in the idea of freedom the culmination of its ideals. However, even though the word exists in different languages and can be readily translated, its meaning can be quite different if we take into account the socio-economic context of each people. By using the term as if it is comprehended equally by different nations the result is a gap between what one thinks is being understood and what actually is. This problem is reinforced whenever the belief in American exceptionalism ends up hampering one's ability to see different realities through a lens other than their own.

Finally, the presidency of George W. Bush offers a number of examples where it is possible to see the influence of the belief in American exceptionalism in making high-level decisions. The president's rhetoric is notably marked by the idea that the United States is a unique country, and that, therefore, it has the prerogative to act in an equally exceptional manner. Even if this implies launching international ventures that are viewed disapprovingly by the rest of the international community. In placing its belief in American exceptionalism as a way to bolster the justification for its foreign policy actions, the administration was criticized for incurring doublespeak and double standards. It is also possible to see in the Bush junior administration how the religious character that permeates American exceptionalism affects decisions in foreign affairs. The moralization of foreign policy through the demonization of enemies and the sanctification of the United States possibly impairs sound judgment in international situations insofar as it erases the threatening agent in his condition as a rational being who has delimited objectives that can be apprehended and duly annulated to, on the contrary, put in its place an evil entity that must be eradicated at any cost.

The influence of American exceptionalism on the foreign policy of the United States is extensive. This notion is an integral part of American national identity. But just as it can be employed to propel the country toward the formation of a *more perfect union*, it can also be potentially instrumentalized to compel the country to support foreign policies that lack the proper empirical foundation.

The position that the United States occupies in the international arena is one of enormous importance and maximum responsibility. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the decisions made there resonate throughout the rest of the world. The American belief in its exceptionality is an element of great importance for the country and its foreign policy. But if adopted in a dogmatic way, it may end up undermining the very uniqueness it purports to represent. Understanding the notion of American exceptionality in a discerning way is an imperative task for one of the world's most powerful nations. It is important for the American people to understand their history through an enlightened reading that contextualizes the idea of their exceptionality in order to contrast it with the historical episodes in which it was appropriated to carry out endeavors that arguably did not hold true to the founding principles of the nation. Especially through education, it is possible to prevent attempts to appropriate the narrative as an easy way to gain popular support for pseudo-good international endeavors that contradict the principles that should be guiding the country's actions. Further research could be developed to shed light on how a critical narrative of the idea could be constructed and subsequently disseminated in order to retain what is best about the notion while at the same time warning against the temptation to use it as an easy way out to avoid self-criticism and to prevent its use for the reduction of complex situations to simple Manichean confrontations.

Every country has the right to believe that it is special. This belief is an important part of maintaining the identity and unity of a nation. But if over-inflated, it can turn against the country itself. It can, in the field of foreign policy, impair one's ability to put oneself in another's shoes and try to see events from a different point of view than one's own. Tempting as it may be for some to resort to oversimplification or blind partiality about their own history or the history of others, about the motives of self and of others, the simplest explanation path is not always the one that leads to understanding. The law of parsimony seems to be, in this case, exceptionally not true.

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