



America and the World - 2017 and Beyond

"Donald Trump Versus American Exceptionalism: Toward the Sources of Trumpian Conduct"¹

Essay by Stephen Wertheim, University of Cambridge

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Is this how the *Pax Americana* ends? Since the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, countless commentators have answered in the affirmative. Four years after dismissing American decline as a myth, Robert Kagan now says he glimpses the “end of the 70-year-old U.S. world order.”² In the *New York Times Magazine*, Ian Buruma delivered an elegy for the Anglo-American partnership that won World War II and led the world ever since, until Brexit-Trump voters opted to “pull down the pillars” of the whole project and retreat to isolation.³ The liberal commentariat is sounding the alarm, warning that making America great again will actually make America small in the world.

Such dirges say less about Trump or his voters than about the limits of conventional wisdom. Trump never pledged to retract America’s global power. He did denounce nation-building and demand that U.S. allies pay more for protection, but so have many of his predecessors. What’s certain is that Trump will build up the

¹ The author and the H-Diplo editors thank *Foreign Affairs* for permission to publish this essay, which expands on Stephen Wertheim, “Trump and American Exceptionalism: Why a Crippled America is Something New,” *Foreign Affairs*, 3 January 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-01-03/trump-and-american-exceptionalism>. Thanks also to Kristen Loveland, Thomas Meaney, Samuel Moyn, Paul Sagar, Anders Stephanson, and Simon Stevens for their comments. This essay was written on 6 January 2017.

² Robert Kagan, “Trump Marks the End of America as World’s ‘Indispensable Nation,’” *The Financial Times* 19 November 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/782381b6-ad91-11e6-ba7d-76378e4fef24>.

³ Ian Buruma, “The End of the Anglo-American Order,” *New York Times Magazine*, 29 November 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/29/magazine/the-end-of-the-anglo-american-order.html>.

nation's supposedly depleted military, better funded as it is than its next seven competitors combined.⁴ And he identifies no shortage of enemies, starting with the expansive category of "radical Islamic terrorism" and not stopping there. When he launched his campaign, Trump declared China to be a "bigger problem" than the Islamic State, and he denounced China's military escalation alongside its trade practices.⁵ An isolationist he is not. If predictions of American retrenchment come true, it will more likely be despite Trump's intentions than because of them.

Yet observers are not wrong to detect in Trump a profound break from the precepts of U.S. foreign relations, a difference in worldview that transcends individual policies. In the one area in which Trump possesses an ample record—that of public discourse—the President-Elect has already discarded America's traditional identity in the world: Donald Trump does not speak the language of American exceptionalism.

Trump, that is, assigns no providential role to the United States and locates it far from the vanguard of world history. His pledge to "make America great again" has obscured this fact, but his full-throated nationalism could be uttered in almost any other nation, just by swapping the flags. It is a normal nationalism, extreme but not exceptional. Trump's America enters the international arena in order to square off against comparable competitors, each equally capable of becoming great. What will become of American foreign policy when greatness, no longer bestowed, must be seized?

A City in a Valley

"We shall be as a city upon a hill," proclaimed John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony. "The eyes of all people are upon us."⁶ Winthrop encapsulated what would come to be called exceptionalism, according to which the United States is a model for the world and exists in part to redeem mankind.⁷ Although so widely shared as to constitute a national ideology, exceptionalism does not prescribe a single course of action. Before World War II, it underpinned a policy of guarding America's unique experiment in liberty in the Western Hemisphere. Even as the United States fulfilled its "manifest destiny" to conquer territory and exercise hegemony in the virgin New World, it swore off political and military entanglement in the corrupting Old World. Centuries later, the nation reversed its posture of exemplary

⁴ Sam Perlo-Freeman, et al., "Trends in World Military Expenditure," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Fact Sheet, April 2016, <http://books.sipri.org/files/FS/SIPRIFS1604.pdf>, 2.

⁵ Donald Trump, Speech Announcing Presidential Candidacy, *Washington Post*, 16 June 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/06/16/full-text-donald-trump-announces-a-presidential-bid/>.

⁶ John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," 1630, in Alan Heimert and Andrew Delbanco, eds., *The Puritans in America: A Narrative Anthology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 91.

⁷ See, among others, Hilde Restad, *American Exceptionalism: An Idea That Made a Nation and Remade the World* (London: Routledge, 2015); Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Exceptionalism and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996).

separation in favor of one of global intervention, but its presidents still quoted Winthrop.⁸ The United States continued to imagine itself as leading the world, whether through the power of its example or the example of its power.

But the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 removed the totalitarian enemy against which the United States had defined itself as the leader of the free world. American policymakers suddenly had to explain why the United States remained the chief enforcer of world order and in fact pursued a more robust primacy than before. In hindsight, the crisis of exceptionalism began then. Yet through the 1990s, it proved easy enough to imagine world leadership as America's new manifest destiny, the spoils of its Cold War victory and the fruit of its superiority. Especially during the economic boom, few could doubt that America embodied the end of history: had not history itself "ended" in the triumph of American-style liberal capitalist democracy?⁹

After George W. Bush resurrected exceptionalism at its most messianic, Barack Obama seemed to repudiate it early in his presidency, when he professed to believe in American exceptionalism "just as I suspect the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism."¹⁰ As the President's critics hastened to note, genuine exceptionalism forbade such reciprocity; Obama implied exceptionalism was a relative value, not the one true way. Since then, Obama has learned to speak more conventionally. But the fact that "exceptionalism" became a ubiquitous term only during his presidency—Obama has uttered the word more frequently than any other president, always to affirm it¹¹—suggested that its truth was becoming less self-evident. The more Republicans accused Obama of denying exceptionalism, the more they reduced exceptionalism to a talking-point.¹² Having been named and politicized, exceptionalism could also be repudiated.

⁸ For example, John F. Kennedy, "City Upon a Hill" Speech, 9 January 1961, <http://millercenter.org/president/kennedy/speeches/speech-3364>; Ronald Reagan, Farewell Address, 11 January 1989, <http://millercenter.org/president/reagan/speeches/speech-3418>.

⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

¹⁰ Barack Obama, News Conference in Strasbourg, France, 4 April 2009, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/news-conference-president-obama-4042009>.

¹¹ Robert Schlesinger, "Obama Has Mentioned 'American Exceptionalism' More than Bush," *U.S. News and World Report*, 31 January 2011, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/robert-schlesinger/2011/01/31/obama-has-mentioned-american-exceptionalism-more-than-bush>; also see Jerome Karabel, "'American Exceptionalism' and the Battle for the Presidency," *Huffington Post*, 22 December 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jerome-karabel/american-exceptionalism-obama-gingrich_b_1161800.html.

¹² Greg Grandin, "The Strange Career of American Exceptionalism," *The Nation*, 6 December 2016, <http://www.thenation.com/article/the-strange-career-of-american-exceptionalism>

Enter Trump. On announcing his candidacy, Trump made the stakes clear: “We need somebody that can take the brand of the United States and make it great again.”¹³ During the campaign, Trump indeed began to rebrand America, to recast the image the nation presents to itself and others. While his rival, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, churned out position papers, Trump depicted the United States in speech after speech as a retrograde nation. “We’re like a Third World country,” he announced.¹⁴ Once great, America now had to claw its way back, first to first-world standards and then, perhaps, to preeminence. In place of the proud exceptionalism of the world’s mightiest country, Trump offered the brawling nationalism of a global victim.

As evidence of American backwardness, Trump pointed to the nation’s airports, sites not only of national infrastructure but also of international intercourse and international comparison.¹⁵ When travelers leave the glittering terminals of Dubai or China, he said, they land at LaGuardia or LAX and see rubble. “Our country is a laughingstock,” Trump repeated. “All over the world, they’re laughing.”¹⁶ Trump inverted the exceptionalist dogma that the United States is the “envy of the world,” as both Obama and his former challenger, Mitt Romney, repeated this year.¹⁷ To Trump, the whole world is still watching America, but only to mock it. Perhaps Trump’s dim view of America’s global standing explains his hard line on immigration. Trump may wonder why immigrants leave their own lands of opportunity to enter Third World America. Must they not be criminals at worst, incompetents at best?

Trump’s Normal Nationalism

¹³ Donald Trump, Speech Announcing Presidential Candidacy, *Washington Post*, 16 June 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/06/16/full-text-donald-trump-announces-a-presidential-bid/>.

¹⁴ Donald Trump, Press Conference after Super Tuesday, *Time*, 2 March 2016, <http://time.com/4245134/super-tuesday-donald-trump-victory-speech-transcript-full-text/>.

¹⁵ Transcript of the First Presidential Debate, *Washington Post*, 26 September 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/09/26/the-first-trump-clinton-presidential-debate-transcript-annotated>.

¹⁶ Michael Finnegan, “Trump’s Closing Argument: The U.S. is ‘the Laughingstock of the World,’” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 November 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/politics/trailguide/la-na-trailguide-updates-trump-s-closing-argument-the-u-s-is-1478540304-htmlstory.html>.

¹⁷ Barack Obama, Interview on *Fox News Sunday*, 10 April 2016, <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2016/04/10/exclusive-president-barack-obama-on-fox-news-sunday/>; Mitt Romney, Speech on Donald Trump, *New York Times*, 3 March 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/04/us/politics/mitt-romney-speech.html>.

Trump hardly contrived his image of America for the latest campaign. In 1987, flirting with a presidential run, he spent \$94,801 to publish a full-page open letter in three newspapers.¹⁸ The gist: “The world is laughing at American politicians as we protect ships we don’t own, carrying oil we don’t need, destined for allies who won’t help.” Trump did not once mention the Soviet Union, against which the ships, oil, and allies were ostensibly directed. Instead, he fixed his ire on free-world moochers like Japan, which he judged to have leaped to the “forefront of world economies” on the back of American largesse.¹⁹ Three decades later, his cast of antagonists had changed, with China taking over the lead role, but he ascribed to the United States the same lamentable standing in the world.

In fact, two months before launching his candidacy, Trump denounced American exceptionalism in no uncertain terms. Asked what exceptionalism meant to him, Trump told Tea Party activists in Houston that he had never liked the word. When Americans crow about their own exceptionalism, they are “insulting the world,” Trump objected. Russians and Germans did not want to hear that Americans were more outstanding than them. Trump had finally come across the one thing too offensive to say: that America was exceptional. More important, the boast also struck Trump as false, since America was “dying” while other countries were “eating our lunch.” Winning over the crowd, Trump explained that he would like to *make* America exceptional, by taking back what America had given the world. (Even then, he might not proclaim America to be exceptional, lest he “rub it in.”²⁰)

Here Trump disavowed the traditional meaning of exceptionalism, and used the term only by redefining it. Whereas previous presidents have taken it to be a permanent trait, intrinsic to American identity, the current President-Elect views it as a conditional state. A nation becomes “exceptional” by snatching up more wealth and power than others—in short, by winning. It can gain this status one minute and lose it the next. Thus Trump assumes that any nation can become great. Rather than reserving greatness for the United States, he recognizes an equality among nations that exceptionalism denies. Small wonder Trump has ruled out promoting democracy and liberty abroad, and categorically so: “I don’t know that we have a right to lecture.”²¹ When American leaders call their nation the incarnation of mankind, Trump hears how they patronize the rest of the world and flatter themselves. In his view, the United States is just another country.

But Trump rejects exceptionalism less because it insults others than because he thinks it paralyzes the United States. It prevents Americans from throwing themselves into the game of international relations, or

¹⁸ Michael Kruse, “The True Story of Donald Trump’s First Campaign Speech—in 1987,” *Politico Magazine*, 5 February 2016, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/02/donald-trump-first-campaign-speech-new-hampshire-1987-213595>.

¹⁹ Donald Trump, “There’s Nothing Wrong with America’s Foreign Defense Policy that a Little Backbone Can’t Cure,” Advertisement in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Boston Globe*, 2 September 1987.

²⁰ Donald Trump, Interview with Texas Patriots Political Action Committee, April 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72wM6cqPS-c>; see David Corn, “Donald Trump Says He Doesn’t Believe in ‘American Exceptionalism,’” *Mother Jones*, 7 June 2016, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/06/donald-trump-american-exceptionalism>.

²¹ Donald Trump, Interview on Foreign Policy, *New York Times*, 21 July 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/22/us/politics/donald-trump-foreign-policy-interview.html>.

international deal-making, and playing to win. In thrall to exceptionalism, Americans tolerate, even welcome, mutual gains and shared prosperity, so long as they continue to imagine themselves as blazing the path to freedom. Under the rubric of Cold War exceptionalism, which cast the United States as the leader of the free world, America rebuilt old enemies such as Germany and Japan, lavished dollars and troops on allies, and set up multilateral institutions. All were immediate sacrifices made for necessarily speculative long-term gains.

Now Trump asks Americans to put aside their fantasies of salvation over time. Instead he seeks victories in space, or at least in the here and now. Consider Trump's retrospective condemnation of the war in Iraq: it might sound dovish until one appreciates his signature objection, namely that the United States did not somehow "take the oil" before getting out.²² Either we take the land and assets or they do, just as the Trump Organization either acquires the Plaza Hotel or someone else does. A zero-sum short-termism is therefore the flipside of Trump's recognition of international equality. For Trump, states are identical because they compete for the same prize, a fixed pot of resources. If Trump manages to escape the hierarchical notion of American exceptionalism, he puts in its place a nationalism that is inherently conflictual.

A Looming Identity Crisis

Trump spurns exceptionalism because he wants to take things from the world, so he has little reason to retreat to isolation. Although Trump has adopted the slogan "America First," analysts err by likening him to the original America Firsters, who opposed U.S. intervention in World War II.²³ After all, they tended to be outspoken exceptionalists, convinced that the righteous New World had every reason to separate itself politically and militarily from the Old. For them, and for most of American history, exceptionalism furnished an argument *against* global intervention: if the United States was ahead already, or destined to come out on top, getting entangled in the world's squabbles could only reverse the march of progress. Trump, by contrast, believes America is behind and hasn't gotten its fair share. He seems set to intervene actively in the world in order to grab what he can.

The world should take seriously his threats to upend U.S. trade relations, his longstanding recipe for bringing wealth to America. Against non-Western powers, the danger is acute. Trump addresses them with the Orientalist brew of disdain for their unfriendliness and admiration for their cunning. He identifies with Western civilization.²⁴ This civilizational identity overlays his zero-sum nationalism and augments the risk of armed conflict with powers in Asia and the Middle East. Trump could win the backing of traditional exceptionalists for wars against Iran, North Korea, or, in the worst-case scenario, China. By practicing brinkmanship in the Taiwan Strait, Trump could seek to renegotiate the terms of trade with China while others posture in defense of democracy and self-determination.

²² Jim Geraghty, "Donald Trump's Odd Fixation on Seizing Middle Eastern Oil Fields," *National Review*, 30 July 2015, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/421825/donald-trump-foreign-policy-middle-east-oil>.

²³ For example, Frank Rich, "Trump's Appeasers," *New York Magazine*, 1 November 2016, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/11/charles-lindbergh-is-a-cautionary-tale-for-republicans.html>.

²⁴ Donald Trump, Speech on Foreign Policy, *New York Times*, 27 April 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/28/us/politics/transcript-trump-foreign-policy.html>.

Or Trump might come to appreciate, once in office, the benefits that America gets for its burdens. He could repackage as a “win” the existing reality that the cheapest places to station U.S. troops, anywhere on earth, are Japan and South Korea.²⁵ Having ascended to the presidency, Trump might even declare that he has made America exceptional again.

But whatever actions Trump takes, his presidency is poised to trigger a national identity crisis. Americans are not accustomed to thinking that theirs is a country like any other, and if Trump continues to eschew the concept of exceptionalism, he is likely to damage the domestic credibility of his foreign policy, opening up a legitimacy gap that each of the country’s political factions will scramble to fill.

The last time such a legitimacy gap appeared was in the early 1970s, under President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger. Without explicitly renouncing American exceptionalism, Nixon and Kissinger adopted a realist approach that assumed all states behaved in the same manner and pursued comparable interests. This approach had its benefits: it allowed Nixon and Kissinger to pursue détente with the Soviet Union and open relations with communist China, two countries previously seen as implacable foes. Even though Nixon and Kissinger doggedly strengthened U.S. power, however, their approach inspired bipartisan criticism and produced a political realignment.²⁶ On the right, a new group, called neoconservatives, came together to bring back the Cold War against the Soviet “evil empire.” On the left, a new politics, of human rights, laid out universal principles for the United States to embody and promote. Both sides agreed that exceptionalism was fundamental to American identity—that the United States did have a right to lecture all the rest.

If the past is any guide, Trump will not win many converts to his vision of a third-world America. But he may provoke enduring responses. On the right, this will likely take the form of a resurgence of muscular exceptionalism, which would call Americans to confront a freedom-hating enemy. Trump’s assertiveness and unilateralism will go only so far to co-opt such voices within the Republican Party and among centrist Democrats as well. Less predictable, but potentially more interesting, will be opposition from the left. After eight years of deference to Obama, the left now has an opportunity to get creative. Left-wing Democrats, and some Republicans, may revive a politics of constraining executive powers, as occurred after World War I and the Vietnam War but has yet to materialize following the war in Iraq. The left may also attempt to redesign and reinvigorate international institutions, the more it perceives the Security Council as a Holy Alliance and the Trump-led United States as an aggressor.

After Exceptionalism

Politics, in short, has returned to American foreign policy. Trump has exposed the fragility of orthodox thinking, and the best response is not simply to try and restore it. For one, exceptionalism is losing ground in

²⁵ Mira Rapp-Hooper, “Deciphering Trump’s Asia Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, 22 November 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2016-11-22/deciphering-trumps-asia-policy>

²⁶ Barbara Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); Mario del Pero, *The Eccentric Realist: Henry Kissinger and the Shaping of American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010); Daniel Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

American public opinion: recent surveys reveal a declining belief that the United States is the greatest country in the world.²⁷ Moreover, at a time when voters want change, politicians who talk up America as a “city upon a hill” can appear to be content with the status quo. They may fail to admit the costs of foreign policy, or point out the benefits citizens reap. Foreign policy comes to seem an elite dogma rather than a collective choice.

Trump’s election makes it all the more difficult, and necessary, to widen the boundaries of legitimate debate. Citizens weary of outsourced jobs and unending war are entitled to ask what they are getting in return, without being written off as isolationists. Although Trump is the latest beneficiary of their discontent, one wonders for how long he will hold their allegiance. By repudiating exceptionalism, Trump has unintentionally invited the country to reimagine its place in the world—to find a vision, perhaps, that is neither hierarchical nor conflictual.

Stephen Wertheim is a Junior Research Fellow at King’s College, University of Cambridge, and will be a lecturer in history at Birkbeck, University of London, beginning in fall 2017. His first book, currently under contract with Harvard University Press, examines the birth of U.S. global supremacy in World War II. Stephen received a Ph.D. with distinction from Columbia University in 2015 and held a postdoctoral fellowship at Princeton University in 2015-16. His articles have appeared in *Diplomatic History*, *Journal of Genocide Research*, *Journal of Global History*, and *Presidential Studies Quarterly*.

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²⁷ Alec Tyson, “Most Americans Think the U.S. is Great, but Fewer say it’s the Greatest,” Pew Research Center, 2 July 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/02/most-americans-think-the-u-s-is-great-but-fewer-say-its-the-greatest/>.