



# WHITHER PAX AMERICANA?



# 9

## TRUMP AGAINST EXCEPTIONALISM

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### The Sources of Trumpian Conduct

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Is this how the Pax Americana ends?<sup>1</sup> 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 glimpses what he calls the “end of the 70-year-old US world order.”<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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. Candidate Trump never pledged to retract America’s global power. He did denounce nation-building and demand that US allies pay more for protection, but so have many of his predecessors. What was certain, all along, was that Trump would build up the nation’s supposedly depleted military, better funded as it is than its next seven competitors combined.<sup>4</sup> And Trump identified 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 US 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 has 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 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.”<sup>6</sup> Winthrop encapsulated what would come to be called exceptionalism, according to which the United States is a model for the world and exists in order to redeem mankind.<sup>7</sup> 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, although the nation reversed its posture of exemplary separation in favor of one of global intervention, its presidents still quoted Winthrop.<sup>8</sup> 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 moral superiority. Especially during the economic boom, few could doubt that America embodied the end of history. Had not history "ended" in the triumph of American-style liberal capitalist democracy?<sup>9</sup>

After President 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."<sup>10</sup> As the president's critics hastened to note, genuine exceptionalism forbade such reciprocity; Obama implied that exceptionalism was a relative value, not the one true way. Afterwards, Obama learned to speak more conventionally. But the fact that "exceptionalism" became a ubiquitous term only during his presidency—Obama uttered the word more frequently than any other president, always to affirm it<sup>11</sup>—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.<sup>12</sup> Having been named and politicized, exceptionalism could also be repudiated.

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."<sup>13</sup> During the 2016 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, affirmed that "the United States is an exceptional nation," Trump depicted America in speech after speech as retrograde.<sup>14</sup> "We're like a Third World country," he announced.<sup>15</sup> Once great, America now had to claw its way back 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.<sup>16</sup> 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."<sup>17</sup> Trump inverted the exceptionalist dogma that the United States is the "envy of the world," as both Obama and his 2012 Republican challenger, Mitt Romney, repeated during the campaign.<sup>18</sup> To Trump, the whole world still watches 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

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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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 out loud: 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 might like to *make* America exceptional, by taking back what America had given the world. (Even then, he said, he might not proclaim America to be exceptional, lest he “rub it in.”<sup>21</sup>)

In this answer, Trump disavowed the traditional meaning of exceptionalism and endorsed the concept only by redefining it. Whereas previous presidents have taken exceptionalism to be a more or less permanent trait, intrinsic to American identity, President Trump 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. Trump thus 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.”<sup>22</sup> 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 international deal-making, and playing to win. In thrall to exceptionalism, Americans tolerate, even welcome, mutual gains and shared prosperity, so long as they 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.<sup>23</sup> 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 hierarchy inherent in American exceptionalism, he puts in its place a nationalism that is intrinsically conflictual.

### A LOOMING IDENTITY CRISIS

Because Trump spurns exceptionalism in order to take things from the world, he has little reason to retreat to so-called isolation. Although Trump has adopted the slogan “America First,” analysts have erred by likening him to the original America Firsters, who opposed US intervention in World War II.<sup>24</sup> 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 fallen 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, then getting entangled in the world's squabbles could only reverse the march of progress.

Trump, by contrast, claims America has fallen behind and is doomed to further degradation unless its leaders get tough. As president, he appears inclined to do just that, which means intervening actively in the world.<sup>25</sup> The world should take seriously his threats to upend US trade relations, his longstanding recipe for bringing wealth to America. Against non-Western powers, this danger is acute. Trump addresses them with the Orientalist brew of disdain for their “savagery” and admiration for their cunning. He identifies increasingly with “Western civilization,” a framework that may be more capable than “America First” of reconciling his base of voters with the national security grandees who led the Never Trump movement.<sup>26</sup> 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.

Or Trump might come to appreciate the benefits that America reaps for its burdens and the difficulties of effecting major change. By the six-month

mark of his presidency, he had abandoned any attempt to jettison US alliances in Europe and East Asia. Trump endorsed the mutual defense guarantee of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), taking credit for the allies' rising military spending even though the increases began in 2014.<sup>27</sup> In the end, Trump may wind up stamping his nationalist branding onto a fairly conventional foreign policy, much as he revived his business career by plastering his name on other people's buildings. Who knows: having become president, Trump might even declare that he has made America exceptional again.

But whatever actions Trump takes, his rhetorical rejection of exceptionalism matters. It has already triggered a national identity crisis.<sup>28</sup> 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. Yet even though Nixon and Kissinger doggedly strengthened US power, they inspired bipartisan criticism and produced a political realignment.<sup>29</sup> 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. From the right may come a resurgence of muscular exceptionalism. Trump's assertiveness and unilateralism will go only so far to co-opt such voices within the Republican Party and the Democratic center. 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 power, as occurred after World War I and the Vietnam War but has yet to materialize following the deeply unpopular 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 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 American public opinion: recent surveys reveal a declining belief that the United States is the greatest country in the world.<sup>30</sup> 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 concrete gains that citizens enjoy. Foreign policy comes to seem an elite dogma rather than a collective choice.

Trump’s election makes it all the more difficult, but 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. 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.

### NOTES

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