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Exceptionalist-in-Chief: Presidents, American Exceptionalism, and U.S. Foreign Policy Since 1897

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EXCEPTIONALIST-IN-CHIEF

Presidents, American Exceptionalism, and
U.S. Foreign Policy Since 1897

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2013 Senior Thesis
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Abstract

“American exceptionalism” has been an important part of presidential foreign policy, especially since the end of the nineteenth century when the United States emerged as a global power. I argue that presidents’ beliefs, rhetoric, and actions during their administrations reveal their attitudes toward exceptionalism. In this work, I propose four types of Presidential American Exceptionalism that presidents’ foreign policies since 1897 can be categorized into: messianic Americanism, messianic internationalism, realist exemplarism, and pragmatic moralism. I define these categories and explain them using case studies of Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. Furthermore, I offer a more general overview of presidents during the last 116 years and explain how these four types of exceptionalism have interacted with each other. Finally, I examine the importance of context and discuss other findings related to party identification and “muscle-flexing wars.”

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1. **Introduction: The Relationship Between American Exceptionalism and the U.S. Presidency**

**Research Question**

The concept of “American exceptionalism” is fundamentally a part of the United States Presidency; in fact, the President of the United States often plays the role of Exceptionalist-in-Chief. While power is “every president’s North Star” and primary consideration (Howell 2013, 143), a belief in an exceptional America is also like the constantly present moon. It may wax or wane to some extent from president to president, but generally it is always there influencing how presidents think about the U.S. role in the world. Presidents want to lead an exceptional nation. I define American exceptionalism as the idea that the United States has a unique history of liberty and democracy and that, as a result, America must succeed as the premier benevolent world power. Thus, according to this idea, the U.S. has a mission to spread its ideals of freedom.¹ My purpose in this work is to explore how presidents since 1897 have differed in their beliefs and actions based upon exceptionalism. I seek to develop a typology of *Presidential American Exceptionalism* for the time period in which the U.S. rose to become a global power. This topic is significant to the field of political science and the public; it offers a new framework for conceptualizing presidential foreign policy and fills a gap in the

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¹ This definition, based on literature I review subsequently, focuses specifically on these two elements – American uniqueness and mission – in order to avoid ambiguity regarding the term “American exceptionalism.” I limit my focus in this paper to these two aspects of the term in determining presidential attitudes toward exceptionalism.
literature on this subject. My method focuses on analyzing presidential rhetoric and action, and I use Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama as case studies. Ultimately, I hope to show that, despite different times and circumstances, presidents have revealed attitudes toward exceptionalism that can be broken down into a few categories.

My research question is essentially twofold. First, are there different types of American exceptionalism that presidents have shown belief in and acted upon? And second, can a typology of Presidential American Exceptionalism be developed? I argue that the short answer to both of these questions is yes. More specifically, I plan to demonstrate that presidents since 1897 have revealed attitudes consistent with four distinct types of American exceptionalism. My proposed categories of exceptionalism are messianic Americanism, messianic internationalism, realist exemplarism, and pragmatic moralism.

**Defining American Exceptionalism**

The idea of “American exceptionalism” originates in a speech given aboard the Arbella by Puritan John Winthrop (1630) during the journey to the New World in the seventeenth century. Winthrop spoke of God having given the Puritans on their way to America “a special commission” and said that the Puritans were “entered into covenant with Him for this work.” He went further, saying that “we shall be as a city upon a hill” and “the eyes of all people are upon us.” In this speech, Winthrop laid out the belief that America would be a model land with a specific destiny. This particular speech is essentially the starting point for studying presidents and exceptionalism; it has been
referenced many times by U.S. Presidents in their efforts to articulate their own views of America’s role in the world.

Subsequently, there have been two main aspects of American exceptionalism, upon which I base my earlier stated definition. The first is a focus on what makes the United States unique. Visiting and studying the U.S. in the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville (2004 [1840]) considered America’s “situation” as “entirely exceptional,” stating “there is reason to believe that no other democratic people will ever enjoy anything like it” (517-518). Unlike Winthrop’s earlier pronouncement of uniqueness, Tocqueville stayed away from proclaiming American superiority, rather emphasizing in his conclusions that the society was “different.” This is consistent with Louis Hartz’s (1955) description of exceptionalism; he attributed “Americanism” to a liberal consensus based on the ideas of John Locke and the lack of a feudal past in the U.S. (3-5). Indeed, from its inception, the U.S. had become the premier symbol of “Western liberalism” (Hartz 1955, 36; Viotti 2010, 114). This unique U.S. ideology is considered the basic reason for the existence of the U.S.; the “American Creed” consists of “liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire,” which Americans generally adhere to (Lipset 1996, 19).

The second aspect of American exceptionalism is a sense that this distinctiveness makes the U.S. a model nation and gives the U.S. a unique destiny and mission in the world. Although Tocqueville (2004 [1840]) mostly emphasized America’s differences from Europe, he did offer his belief that American democracy could act for “good,” feeling “assured” that “in order to be virtuous and prosperous, democratic nations have only to want to be so” (833). Indeed, the U.S. has defined its role in international affairs
as being for “good,” not just defending national interests (Lipset 1996, 20; Bell 1975, 197). Exceptionalism is “a highly subjective national self-image,” including the belief that the U.S. is “the model republic for the rest of the world to emulate” (Viotti 2010, 111-112). According to this idea, democracy should be spread, allowing for “broad political, economic, and social freedoms” (Viotti 2010, 114). Put simply by Robert Lieber (2012), “If one accepts that there is something unique about the society and its founding values, there is likely to be greater optimism about its resilience and the importance of its global role” (154). These positive aspects of distinctiveness and superiority associated with American exceptionalism are a fundamental part of U.S. “national identity” (Restad 2012, 54).

Explaining the duality of exceptionalism, Hartz contended that “Americanism” could be both an isolationist and internationalist idea. “Americanism” seeks to escape from “a decadent Old World” (285); yet, it could also crusade “abroad” because, once “driven” onto the “world stage by events,” it “is inspired willy-nilly to reconstruct the very alien things it tries to avoid.” The isolationist President Warren G. Harding versus the internationalist President Woodrow Wilson exemplifies this duality; Hartz considered both presidents “Americanist” thinkers (286).

Indeed, exceptionalism is not just an abstract belief, but definitively affects how the American people and policy elites, including U.S. presidents, think about America’s “privileged” place in the world (Viotti 2010, 111). According to Robert Kagan (2004), “the ambition to play a grand role on the world stage is deeply rooted in the American character” (86). Specifically, presidents and other politicians believed the U.S. would expand across North America, dominate the Western Hemisphere, and become a great
power. These policy elites believed in mission of exceptionalism; the U.S. “must become a great power, and perhaps the greatest power” because of the “unquestionably superior” nature of its founding principles and ideals (87). In exceptionalism’s most messianic form, the U.S. has a “sense of Providential destiny” (Ignatieff 2005, 11).

This idea of U.S. destiny has been consistent throughout American history. Early on, exceptionalism meant that the U.S. would become a world power that, being democratic, would exercise its power differently than any previous empire. In the form of Manifest Destiny, the American people’s “special virtue” meant a “geographical predestination,” which in practice meant the acquisitions of Louisiana, Florida, Texas, and other territories (Bell 1975, 197-199). This “exceptionalist imperial ideology” was adhered to by most politicians of the time, including U.S. presidents; furthermore, Manifest Destiny was the direct precursor of imperialism, another form of exceptionalism (Hietala 2003, 176). However, imperialism was then judged by some to be inconsistent with the U.S. emphasis on freedom. American leadership in World Wars I and II also was rooted in exceptionalism; presidents insisted on casting U.S. involvement in terms that would promote the national ideology (Bell 1975, 200-202; Viotti 2010, 141).

Exceptionalism was the basis for the “American Century,” an idea expressed by Henry Luce as America being “the Good Samaritan” and “the powerhouse of the ideals of Freedom and Justice” with a “vision” for the twentieth century (Bell 1975, 203).

Writing during the aftermath of the Vietnam War, Daniel Bell (1975) contended that Vietnam had resulted in the end of exceptionalism; America no longer had a mission and had not been the exception (204-205). Donald Pease (2009) has been starker, treating American exceptionalism purely as a fantasy. He treats it as a “rationale” for both
“imposing and defending” U.S. nationalism around the world (22). Likewise, Stephen Walt (2011) argues exceptionalism is a myth and America simply acts like most other great powers. He contends that the U.S. is not unique in proclaiming itself exceptional, as past great powers such as Great Britain and the Soviet Union viewed themselves as special as well (72). Furthermore, Walt disagrees with the notion that the U.S. “behaves” better than other countries and argues that American success has been more due to the luck of geographical isolation and natural resources than being exceptional (73-74).

Believing in its exceptionalism, the U.S. “takes too much credit for global progress” and accepts “too little blame” for counterproductive actions (74). Finally, Walt criticizes the idea that God is on America’s “side,” noting that other empires with the same belief have fallen (75).

However, even though they treat exceptionalism as a myth, Pease and Walt’s definitions of exceptionalism are consistent with the previous mentioned aspects of uniqueness and a sense of mission. Pease (2009) describes exceptionalism as “the belief in America as the fulfillment of the national ideal to which other nations aspire” (7) and a “Redeemer Nation whose Manifest Destiny entailed the commission to undertake a providential errand into the wilderness,” both on the North American continent and throughout the world (167). Similarly, Walt (2011) states that exceptionalism means American democracy, values, and history are “unique and worthy of universal admiration”; in addition, the idea implies that the U.S. “is both destined and entitled to play a distinct and positive role on the world stage” (72). These definitions are consistent with ideas put forth by Tocqueville, Hartz, Lipset, Viotti, and others. Furthermore, though Bell argued exceptionalism had ended, subsequent decades and presidencies have
clearly demonstrated the idea continues to exist and have an impact. Viotti (2010) concludes that the current U.S. “propensity” toward intervention abroad is just a modern version of the “territorial-expansion policies” that worked toward both commercial benefit and the “promotion of American liberal ideology” (149). Finally, to Hilde Restad (2012), the question of whether exceptionalism is a myth or has ended is irrelevant. She argues “the United States is exceptional as long as Americans believe it to be exceptional”; thus, U.S. foreign policy continues to be influenced significantly by the idea (70).

**American Exceptionalism in Presidential Rhetoric and Action**

American exceptionalism has been repeatedly referenced in presidential rhetoric, particularly as presidents look to connect their policies with the idea of America’s unique place in the world and mission. Despite this, there has been less attention paid to the use of these ideas in presidential rhetoric than to other aspects of exceptionalism (Neumann & Coe 2011, 13). This use of exceptionalist rhetoric is “moralism,” which Viotti (2010) defines as “the moral-laden discourse” used by presidents and members of their administrations that “reflects their thinking or provides justification for the policy choices they make” (108). Specifically, moralism draws from both American secular and religious values. In demonstrating this, Viotti refers to how presidents have frequently noted John Winthrop’s “City upon a Hill” speech, including and ranging from John Adams in the nineteenth century to Franklin Roosevelt in the twentieth and George W. Bush in the twenty-first. Viotti explicitly connects such moralist language to the actual views held by U.S. presidents. Indeed, moralism “is as American as apple pie” (Lipset 1996, 176). Presidents use this technique to “give closure to traumatizing historical
events by endowing them with moral significance” (Pease 2009, 156). Furthermore, the use of moralism is important because it implies an allowance for questionable actions because “the righteous have the obligation to slay the forces of evil with whatever means may be necessary” (Viotti 2010, 122). Clearly, presidential rhetoric, especially in speeches, is key to understanding how a president views and is influenced by the idea of American exceptionalism, both from a standpoint of personal beliefs and the extent to which exceptionalism is connected to the policy decisions a president has made. Indeed, Restad (2012) points out that American exceptionalism connects different presidents, including linking “the otherwise unlikely grouping of Woodrow Wilson, Ronald Reagan, William Jefferson Clinton, and George W. Bush and their mission to reform in the American image” (70).

I argue that one should not conclude, however, that all presidents describe and pursue American exceptionalism in the same way. The reality is that presidents individually can make different choices about the extent to which they believe in and want to pursue and articulate exceptionalist ideology. Fred Greenstein’s (2000) contention about the nature of the federal government is instructive: “If some higher power had set out to design a democracy in which the individual on top mattered, the result might well resemble the American political system” (3). Presidents are different and make a difference among a number of dimensions. Among the dimensions Greenstein offers, a few are relevant to examining exceptionalism as it relates to the presidency. Presidents can be different as “public communicators” and have differences in “vision” (5-6). These dimensions are instructive for my purposes. The president as political communicator may articulate American exceptionalism and its implications in
different ways than other presidents. Furthermore, a president may have a fundamental or slight difference in his vision of what exceptionalism is and how it connects to his presidency. How a president views exceptionalism matters because the president has significant power on foreign policy and national security matters and “extraordinary authority” to act (Viotti 2010, 209).

Connecting American Exceptionalism to the Presidents

Many scholars have connected presidents to the concept of American exceptionalism. Thomas Hietala (2003) points out that President James Madison wanted to make Americans part of a “flourishing empire” (176). Manifest Destiny was put into practice through Jefferson’s acquisition of Louisiana, Madison’s attempt to gain Canada in the War of 1812, Monroe’s acquisition of East Florida and pronouncement of the Monroe Doctrine, John Tyler’s acquisition of Texas, and James Polk’s “investment” in the “Heaven-sent” Mexican War that resulted in the acquisition of California and New Mexico (187-189). Later in the nineteenth century, Grover Cleveland used the Monroe Doctrine as the basis for American arbitration to resolve a dispute between the United Kingdom and Venezuela in 1895. William McKinley then acquired the Philippines and other territories, beginning U.S. imperialism (Chace 2002, 2-3). Continuing the era of imperialism, Theodore Roosevelt added the “Roosevelt Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine, asserting a U.S. right to intervene if necessary in the Western Hemisphere as “an international police power” (Viotti 2010, 140). Woodrow Wilson would then serve as president during World War I, believing America had a mission “to serve mankind through leadership in moral purposes in advancing peace and world unity” (Link 1979, 6-
7). Even presidents in the relatively isolationist 1920s had interventions in Central America, the Caribbean, East Asia, and the Western Pacific (Chace 2002, 3).

Continuing to America’s World War II involvement, Bell (1975) describes Franklin Roosevelt’s efforts to break up colonial empires and “establish American political leadership, if not hegemony, in the world as a whole” (202). Harold Koh (2005) also connects FDR to an exceptionalist vision, noting his emphasis on the four freedoms: “freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want,” and “freedom from fear” (125). Chris Dolan (2004) notes Harry Truman’s pursuit of containment, the Marshall Plan, and the Truman Doctrine, as well as the efforts by his successors, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson, to continue his policies. Viotti (2010) describes how Reagan repeatedly referenced Winthrop’s “City upon a Hill” idea (110). Koh (2005) notes that Ronald Reagan advocated democracy promotion as a central part of U.S. foreign policy, which was continued by successors George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton (126-127). Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes (2006) refer to George W. Bush as having adopted America’s “historic mission” (74). Also referencing Bush, Francis Fukuyama (2006) connects the justification for the war in Iraq to American exceptionalism based on an assumption that the U.S. is unique and therefore more trustworthy in how it chooses to use military power (101). Koh (2005) argues that the Bush Doctrine actually makes double standards the norm (128). Finally, Inderjeet Parmar (2011) contends that while Barack Obama has emphasized cooperating with other countries, his mission of “shaping the international order” has been consistent with previous administrations (155).

Discussing the overall history of American foreign policy, Hilde Restad (2012) asserts that, rather than an “exemplary” or “isolationist” versus “missionary” dichotomy of
exceptionalism, presidents have pursued “unilateral internationalism” in their engagement with the world (57). While these are just some examples of scholars connecting presidents to exceptionalism, there is not often an explicit attempt to differentiate among how these presidents pursued exceptionalism, which I seek to address in this work.

**Existing Typologies of American Exceptionalism**

Just demonstrating that presidents may be different in their views of American exceptionalism is not the end goal of this paper. My purpose is to define several types of exceptionalism that various presidents have demonstrated. A number of scholars, particularly in the field of human rights, have argued that there are different types of American exceptionalism and have put forth their own typologies. Michael Ignatieff (2005) distinguishes three types of exceptionalism: exemptionalism, double standards, and legal isolationism. “Exemptionalism” is defined as the U.S. signing on “to international human rights and humanitarian law conventions and treaties” and then exempting “itself from their provisions” (3). This is similar to Sabrina Safrin’s (2008) concept of “status-based exceptionalism,” in which the U.S. or potentially another country “obtains special accommodation” based upon “inherent status or position”; she considers this to be “an unacceptable form of exceptionalism” and argues that the U.S. should not be able to gain exceptions to international law “simply because of its superpower status” (1352).² The second type of exceptionalism in Ignatieff’s (2005) typology, “double standards,” is explained as the U.S. judging “itself by standards different from those it uses to judge other countries” and judging “its friends by standards

² However, Safrin (2008) does not consider U.S. attempts to make exceptions for itself in international law to be exceptional, arguing that “U.S. legal exceptionalism is overstated” because European countries also seek special legal accommodations (1307).
different from those it uses for its enemies” (7). “Legal isolationism,” the third version, focuses on the resistance of American judges to be guided by or reference foreign law and human rights precedents in developing their domestic opinions (8).

Harold Koh (2005) builds off of some of Ignatieff’s ideas and offers a similar typology, breaking down the idea of exceptionalism into positive and negative faces – a “Jekyll-and-Hyde” exceptionalism (111). He first offers four general faces. The first, a “distinctive rights culture,” contends that rights such as those protected by the First Amendment have received greater emphasis than economic and other rights in the U.S (113). Second, the U.S. has used “different labels” for the same concepts, such as torture being essentially the same as “cruel and unusual punishment” as defined by the Bill of Rights (114). Third, Koh describes Louis Henkin’s idea of “America’s flying buttress mentality,” arguing that “in the cathedral of international human rights,” the U.S. is often “a flying buttress, rather than a pillar, willing to stand outside the structure supporting it, but unwilling to subject itself to the critical examination and rules of that structure” (115). The fourth face, also part of Ignatieff’s typology, is “double standards,” when the U.S. “proposes that a different rule should apply to itself than applies to the rest of the world” (116). Arguing from a different perspective, Robert Kagan (2004) also confirms the role of double standards in U.S. policy, but explains them away as being sometimes necessary “to further the laws of advanced civilized society” (75). Koh (2005) counters that double standards are the most problematic face of exceptionalism, undermining U.S. leadership (116).³

³ Koh, who particularly criticized the Bush Administration, was a member of the Obama Administration at the State Department and was a prominent defender of Obama’s drone strike policies. Some have argued that this has been inconsistent with his previous work, including his criticism of exemptionalism and
Koh’s (2005) typology has a significant difference from Ignatieff’s, which is the proposal of a fifth overlooked face, America’s “exceptional global leadership and activism.” He explains this as the U.S. remaining “the only superpower capable, and at times willing, to commit real resources and make real sacrifices to build, sustain, and drive an international system committed to international law, democracy, and the promotion of human rights.” U.S. leadership, or lack thereof, can be the determining factor in success or failure, as in Kosovo and Rwanda in the 1990s (119). I seek to build off of Koh’s identification of positive and negative faces in examining how presidents approach American exceptionalism, identifying presidential actions that are consistent with his ideas.

Proposing a different typology, John Ruggie (2005) embraces a two-faced version of exceptionalism. Like Ignatieff and Koh, Ruggie describes “exemptionalism” as one of these faces, defining it as a perceived need to protect the uniqueness of the U.S. Constitution. His other face is “pursuing an international order” based on American values (304). This is consistent with one of the types of exceptionalism proposed by Stanley Hoffmann (2005), who describes the U.S. as crusading for democracy, meaning “a willingness to build global institutions, good both for the promotion of U.S. interests and for the expansion of America’s mission and ideals.” Hoffmann’s other type, “isolationism,” offers the U.S. as “a beacon of light” and model for other countries to possibly emulate, but also states that the U.S. was not going to get entangled in disputes among other countries (226). This contrast between isolationism and crusading is similar to the duality earlier described by Louis Hartz (1955) of “Americanism” being both double standards (McKelvey 2012). This will be covered in more detail in the case study on President Obama.
isolationist and messianic in relation to the rest of the world (286). Hoffman, Ruggie, and Hartz’s ideas also are important to my own conceptualization of different types of presidential exceptionalism, as the concepts of “isolationism” versus “crusading” inform parts of my own typology.

Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes (2006) also propose a typology of American exceptionism, but this version is not exclusively focused on human rights. The first type, “misunderstood exceptionalism,” focuses on “American values and attitudes” that are often considered a to be “a part of the problem” by people in the U.S. and abroad (69). Religiosity is central to this misunderstanding, and Kohut and Stokes point out that the idea of the U.S. as “evangelist” with the right values has been echoed in speeches by policymakers, including the president (73). A second type, “conditional exceptionalism,” focuses on “aspects of the American character that are distinctive, though not so much that they are destined to consistently divide the American people from the rest of the world” (69). In particular, this includes the idea that America sometimes views differently whether to cooperate internationally or act unilaterally to address problems and that the ultimate decision may depend on circumstances (79). Finally, the third type is “problematic exceptionalism,” or “how Americans view themselves, their country, and the world in ways that reflect potentially unbridgeable, persistent gaps in opinions on important issues” (69). This problematic exceptionalism comes about as a result of American power and optimism, which can lead to self-reliance and disregard for the views and problems of the rest of the world (83-84). Kohut and Stokes’ references to the importance of religion and conditional exceptionalism inform my own conceptions of presidential exceptionalism. Overall, these existing typologies of American
exceptionalism offer a number of important elements to consider when evaluating presidents, including the ideas of double standards, leadership, crusading, and exemptionalism.

Still, these typologies by themselves do not offer a categorization for fully describing differences among presidents in regards to their views and approaches to American exceptionalism. Furthermore, while many scholars have connected different presidents to American exceptionalism, sometimes comparing different approaches, there is not an overall attempt to lay out several specific recurring categories of exceptionalism among American presidents. Therefore, I propose to develop my own typology, defining several categories, or visions, of Presidential American Exceptionalism that have been pursued by Presidents of the United States to fill this gap in the literature.
2. Research Design and a Proposed Typology of *Presidential American Exceptionalism*

**Significance**

The development of this typology is significant to the public and academia. To begin with, it is important to political science because it offers distinct way of examining the presidency, foreign policy, and American exceptionalism. Indeed, focusing on the president is useful precisely because the president has the most power in foreign policy (Viotti 2010, 209). Essentially, this typology is a new way of conceptualizing the last hundred plus years of presidential beliefs, rhetoric, and action. It offers an alternative looks at how to understand past presidents, the present president, and future presidents. Various typologies of American exceptionalism have been developed (Hartz 1955; Ignatieff 2005; Koh 2005; Ruggie 2005; Hoffmann 2005; Kohut & Stokes 2006), but none of these have focused exclusively on presidents. Therefore, this is an important contribution to make to the field.

The typology is also relevant to the public because they can see where presidents or potential presidents would fit it can and decide if that vision is what they actually want in American foreign policy. The 2012 election showed how this is relevant to the presidential race, as the candidates demonstrated both agreement and differences regarding American exceptionalism. Both argued that “American political and economic values should triumph in the world.” However, Republican Mitt Romney “consistently
outlined a tougher approach to the world,” advocating for “rewarding traditional allies,”
while “punishing rather than cultivating difficult nations.” Furthermore, he accused
President Barack Obama of “apologizing for American values.” By contrast, Obama
emphasized “diplomacy and partnerships” and “American assistance where wanted
without heavy-handed demands from the top” (Wilson 2012). This election was an
example of how key differences in the types of exceptionalism advocated by candidates
are important to their overall foreign policy vision, and this typology would address some
of these differences and their importance.

Furthermore, this proposal addresses values that are significant to Americans.
Two Gallup Poll questions from 2010 clearly show this. The first question was “Because
of the United States’ history and its Constitution, do you think the U.S. has a unique
character that makes it the greatest country in the world, or don’t you think so?” Overall,
80% of Americans agreed with this statement, including 73% of Democrats, 91% of
Republicans, and 77% of Independents. The percentages disagreeing were much smaller
– 18% of all Americans, 23% of Democrats, 7% of Republicans, and 23% of
Independents. So Americans overwhelmingly believe the first aspect of exceptionalism –
that the U.S. is unique and great (Jones 2010).

The second question was “Do you think the United States does or does not have a
special responsibility to be the leading nation in world affairs?” Though not as
overwhelming, the majority of Americans again agreed. 66% of all Americans, 61% of
Democrats, 73% of Republicans, and 64% of Independents believe the U.S. has this
responsibility. Conversely, 31% of all Americans, 33% of Democrats, 26% of
Republicans, and 33% of Independents disagreed. On the second aspect, the idea that the
U.S. has a special destiny and mission, the majority of Americans again agree. Thus, overall, Americans do appear to believe in the notion of American exceptionalism to some degree (Jones 2010).

Responses to a similar 2011 Pew Research Center poll addressing American exceptionalism were somewhat different. A lower 38% of Americans said the U.S. “stands above all other countries in the world,” but another 53% responded that the U.S. “is one of the greatest” nations “along with some others.” Similar to the Gallup poll, conservatives were more likely to believe the U.S. is the greatest country than liberals (Pew Research Center 2011a). A later 2011 Pew poll also revealed generational differences in beliefs about whether the U.S. is “the greatest country in the world.” Older Americans responded more often that the U.S. is the greatest country compared to younger Americans; for example, 64% of the Silent generation agreed with this idea versus only 32% of the Millennial generation. Overall, however, 48% of Americans in this poll said that the U.S. is the greatest nation and another 42% responded that it is “one of the greatest countries in the world” (Pew Research Center 2011b).

The apparent differences in belief in exceptionalism based upon party, ideology, and age support the importance of studying presidential attitudes toward exceptionalism. Americans overall do appear to believe in the notion of American exceptionalism to some degree. Because of this, how much a president believes in and may act upon the idea of exceptionalism should resonate with the American public. Even if Americans differ in attitudes toward exceptionalism based on party, ideology, age, or other factors, this reinforces the importance of studying presidential attitudes toward exceptionalism. Americans have the right to know how their leaders’ beliefs regarding exceptionalism
might influence their thoughts or actions, particularly when there are notable differences in how segments of the public view American exceptionalism.

**Method**

I define American exceptionalism for this work as the idea that the United States has a unique history of liberty and democracy and that, as a result, America must succeed as the premier benevolent world power. Additionally, this implies that the United States has a special mission to spread its ideals of freedom around the world. This definition draws from existing literature on the two parts of American exceptionalism— that the U.S. is unique (Tocqueville 2004 [1840]; Hartz 1955; Lipset 1996; Viotti 2010) and that the U.S. has a specific destiny in the world (Bell 1975; Lipset 1996; Kagan 2004; Ignatieff 2005; Viotti 2010).

In examining how exceptionalism is related to presidential foreign policy, I am concerned with how presidents’ beliefs about the U.S. within the given context of their presidency influence their attitude toward exceptionalism and thus their overall foreign policy. I argue that a presidents’ beliefs about America’s appropriate role in the world prior to taking office, combined with the global and domestic context the president faces, influence what his (or her) presidential attitude is toward American exceptionalism. This then influences the president’s general foreign policy. I am not arguing that this model by any means explains everything about a president’s views or foreign policy, but I do think it is a useful framework for understanding how exceptionalism matters and is generally borne out in the case studies of presidents that will follow.
There are two principal dimensions on which I examine how presidents’ beliefs, rhetoric, and actions reflect different types of American exceptionalism. The first is the degree to which they believe in and act upon exceptionalism. According to the typology I have proposed, this can be measured based on whether they act upon it greatly, moderately, or relatively little. The second dimension is the degree to which presidents embrace unilateralism or internationalism and how much they pay attention to international opinion. Again, according to my proposed typology, presidents can act mostly unilaterally, act using international institutions, act unilaterally or multilaterally depending on the situation, or act focusing on a balance of power among nation-states.

Focusing on these dimensions, I examine the rhetoric and policy decisions of various presidents, especially how presidents explain their own views and choices. These are differences presidents have as “public communicators” and in their “visions”
(Greenstein 2000, 5-6). In particular, I draw from Viotti’s (2010) concept of “moralism,” which is the use of morality in presidential rhetoric to justify decisions (108). Moralist rhetoric is a key aspect of how presidents express American exceptionalism. Though President Obama is the first sitting president to publicly use the phrase “American exceptionalism” (Gilgoff 2012), there are many indications of a president referring to American exceptionalism. Donald Pease (2009) offers some examples; descriptions “concerned with what made America exceptional would include the following phrases: America is a nation with a ‘Manifest Destiny’; America is the ‘Nation of Nations’; America is an ‘Invincible Nation’” (8). Indeed, any language referring to the U.S. as having a mission, leading the world, being the vital nation, having unique ideals, liberating other countries, and inspiring people would be an example of exceptionalist rhetoric. Furthermore, references to being on the right side of history and fighting for the right ideals would be examples of this moralism.

Foreign policy decisions, particularly how they are deemed important and justified, can be examined in how they reflect exceptionalism as well. In terms of the actual policies, I base my analysis on some of the elements of the typologies proposed by human rights scholars. Harold Koh’s (2005) idea of positive and negative faces is particularly important, especially his conception of the positive face that is America’s “exceptional global leadership” (119). Similar to this are John Ruggie’s (2005) idea of America “pursuing an international order” (304) and Stanley Hoffmann’s (2005) idea of the U.S. crusading for democracy (226). These are actions where the U.S. is deemed the necessary nation with a responsibility to undertake a certain policy for the benefit of the world. All of my proposed typologies involve “exceptional global leadership,” but this
leadership is accomplished in different ways and to different degrees. I also consider some of the negative faces, including “double standards” (Koh 2005, 116; Ignatieff 2005, 7) and “exemptionalism” (Ignatieff 2005, 3; Ruggie 2005, 304). Double standards are important to parts of my typology, as they would be an example of the U.S. thinking itself exceptionally justified to undertake certain questionable actions. Exemptionalism informs my broader concept of Americanism – the view that the U.S. itself can achieve its mission in the world and should preserve its own sovereignty as the best means to do so. Finally, Kohut and Stokes’ (2006) type of “conditional exceptionalism” informs my idea of the middle ground between just Americanism and internationalism, where the U.S. considers how much it will cooperate internationally or act unilaterally based on circumstances (79).

In order to study this subject and explain my typology, I offer an overview of where I judge all the presidents since 1897 to fit, but focus also on a few specific case studies. To do this, I draw upon a number of essential sources. Chief among these are presidential speeches; these are the main sources of rhetoric reflecting American exceptionalism, as the presidents actually speak to the nation about their worldview, vision, and policy decisions. In particular, I focus on major speeches, including inaugural addresses, State of the Union addresses, and addresses announcing particularly important foreign policy decisions and accomplishments. I have examined speeches from all presidents of the last 116 years in order to initially determine what different types of exceptionalism presidents have exemplified. Furthermore, by examining all of these presidents’ speeches, I have attempted to avoid a selection bias of which presidents I examine in more detail for case studies.
Other major sources I draw upon include autobiographies and biographies of presidents that I am using for case studies. The autobiographies in particular offer the worldview of presidents in their own words and what they thought about their decisions; biographies can also clarify these views. Also useful are autobiographies by members of the administration; they recount what they thought their mission was on foreign policy. Furthermore, other secondary histories and newspaper articles are useful, particularly for the more recent presidents.

My case studies focus on a few presidents, each reflecting a specific type of my proposed attitudes toward exceptionalism. Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and George W. Bush are analyzed as demonstrating messianic Americanism. In explaining messianic internationalism, I examine Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt. I analyze President Richard Nixon as showing realist exemplarism. Finally, for pragmatic moralism, I discuss Presidents Jimmy Carter and Barack Obama.

**A Typology of Presidential American Exceptionalism**

The first of my proposed types of exceptionalism, messianic Americanism,4 fully embraces the idea of American exceptionalism. A president demonstrating this type emphasizes a belief that the U.S. is unquestionably unique with a destiny of leading the world toward freedom and democracy. Stark moral contrasts are used; the U.S. is the unquestionably “good” power fighting against an evil opposing force. Because the U.S. is always “good,” any actions taken, however negatively perceived, are considered justified.

Religious beliefs and rhetoric about the U.S. fulfilling a mission from God are often

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4 I use this specific phrase slightly differently than Alan Dawley (2003), whose defines “messianic Americanism” as an overall concept of American exceptionalism and nationalistic myth. He focuses on “the belief that America has a God-given mission of redemption,” involving both “self-righteous isolation” and “jingoistic expansion” (109), whereas I do not consider “isolation” or “expansion” to be a necessary part of this type of exceptionalism.
employed. Furthermore, the success of the U.S. in meeting all foes and challenges is considered inevitable, and there is generally a willingness to make sacrifices to achieve goals. Importantly, this type of exceptionalism focuses on the U.S. using its own power and ideals to achieve its destiny of spreading freedom. It does not as significantly pay attention to international opinion nor embrace international law and institutions; rather, these institutions are often viewed with suspicion.

Similarly, the second type, messianic internationalism, also fully embraces the uniqueness of American exceptionalism and the belief in the U.S. as having a mission in the world. There is also a prominent religious component to this type and a use of stark moral contrasts. Furthermore, U.S. success in the world is considered to be inevitable. However, what distinguishes this category is the embrace of international institutions as being crucial to the U.S. achieving its world destiny. The U.S. can best project its own democratic success onto the rest of the world through significant engagement in an international system that reflects American values.

The third type, realist exemplarism, does not mean an outright rejection of the idea of American exceptionalism, but does mean that policy will not necessarily be determined by or consistent with the sense of America’s duty and mission to freedom and democracy. Rather, the main concern is to promote a balance of power in the world to foster peace and make sure the U.S. is secure and powerful; this is the best way to preserve U.S. freedom and provide an example for the rest of the world. Still, this balance of power can be achieved at the expense of democracy promotion. The rhetoric and ideas of American exceptionalism may be used, but in a more limited way that focuses on the U.S. as an inspiration to others.
Finally, the fourth type, *pragmatic moralism*, is also not as complete an embrace of American exceptionalism. Overall, the U.S. is still judged to be the leader of the world in promoting the ideals of freedom and democracy. Many aspects of the messianic types can be employed, including religious language. However, this type allows for U.S. fallibility and pays more attention to international opinion; America is capable of choosing wrongly in its actions and should acknowledge its own flaws. Indeed, it involves a more limited view of what U.S. actions can be considered morally justified. In this sense, rather than the U.S. being able to take actions because it is exceptional, America must acknowledge moral limits *to live up to* its exceptionalism. Furthermore, the U.S. does not operate in the world and undertake commitments as if it has unlimited will and resources. The gap between unilateralism and internationalism is bridged; the U.S. might undertake a course consistent with either one of these paths depending on the issue. America might commit what would be perceived as negative actions, but overall it will advocate for American ideals and human dignity.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Exceptionalism</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Presidents</th>
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| **Messianic Americanism** | - U.S. is unquestionably unique  
- U.S. has destiny to lead world toward democracy  
- Stark moral contrasts  
- Religious rhetoric  
- American success inevitable  
- U.S. should use its own power to achieve its destiny  
- More suspicion of international opinion / law / institutions | - William McKinley  
- Theodore Roosevelt  
- William H. Taft  
- Warren G. Harding  
- Calvin Coolidge  
- Herbert Hoover  
- Dwight Eisenhower  
- John F. Kennedy  
- Lyndon Johnson  
- Ronald Reagan  
- George H. W. Bush  
- George W. Bush |
| **Messianic Internationalism** | - U.S. is unquestionably unique  
- U.S. has destiny to lead world toward democracy  
- Stark moral contrasts  
- Religious rhetoric  
- American success inevitable  
- U.S. should fulfill destiny through international system reflecting American values  
- Maintain international system | - Woodrow Wilson  
- Franklin Roosevelt  
- Harry Truman |
| **Realist Exemplarism** | - Not a rejection of exceptionalism  
- Policies not necessarily in line with sense of American mission  
- Main focus is balance of power  
- Best way to make U.S. secure  
- Allow U.S. to be example of freedom for rest of the world | - Richard Nixon  
- Gerald Ford |
| **Pragmatic Moralism** | - U.S. leader of the world in promoting democracy  
- More likely to allow for U.S. fallibility  
- Pays more attention to international opinion  
- U.S. does not operate as if it has unlimited will and resources  
- More concerned about international opinion / reputation of U.S.  
- Unilateralism or internationalism depending on situation  
- Might still commit negative actions  
- Advocate for ideals of freedom and human dignity | - Jimmy Carter  
- Bill Clinton  
- Barack Obama |
3. Theodore Roosevelt’s *Messianic Americanism*

President Theodore Roosevelt completely exemplified the first type of exceptionalism that I have proposed – *messianic Americanism*. He clearly articulated a vision based on a fervent belief in both aspects of American exceptionalism – that the U.S. is unique and has a special destiny – referring to the people of the United States as “the heirs of the ages” with a “responsibility” to “show that under a free government a mighty people can thrive best.” The opportunity to demonstrate this was due to “the Giver of Good” blessing “us with the conditions which have enabled us to achieve so large a measure of well-being and of happiness.” Because of God, the U.S. had not had to face the same hardships and “penalties” that were a part of the Old World. Therefore, consistent with the messianic aspect of this type of exceptionalism, Roosevelt felt that, because “much has been given us,” “much will rightly be expected from us” and that the U.S. would have “duties to others and duties to ourselves”; America would be able to “shirk neither” (Roosevelt 1905). Indeed, Roosevelt believed that these duties meant “America should take civilization to the rest of the world” (Beale 1956, 5). Furthermore, the U.S. had a “moral obligation as a specially advantaged nation to play a major role in the world of backward peoples” (Beale 156, 6). The cause and success of the U.S. was vital to the world:
Upon the success of our experiment much depends, not only as regards our own welfare, but as regards the welfare of mankind. If we fail, the cause of free self-government throughout the world will rock to its foundations, and therefore our responsibility is heavy, to ourselves, to the world as it is to-day, and to the generations yet unborn. There is no good reason why we should fear the future, but there is every reason why we should face it seriously, neither hiding from ourselves the gravity of the problems before us nor fearing to approach these problems with the unbending, unflinching purpose to solve them aright. (Roosevelt 1905)

Here, Roosevelt showed his belief that the U.S. must be serious and righteous because of its moral purpose, but also asserted it would not have to “fear the future,” consistent with a belief in the inevitability of U.S. success characteristic of messianism. Roosevelt employed this type of moralist rhetoric throughout his presidency.

Significantly, Roosevelt believed the United States must become a major global power in order to achieve its great destiny. Even before becoming president, Roosevelt had been an advocate and leader for “the movement to win for America her place in the world” (Beale 1956, 20). Part of this was due to “national pride” that Roosevelt felt about America. But, showing a messianic sense of righteousness, Roosevelt also believed that “his country would never act unjustly or wrongly” because of the unquestionable goodness of America. Therefore, any action taken by the U.S. was “right” (Beale 1956, 25). With these beliefs, Roosevelt felt he could act to help free “the people living in barbarism” from “their chains” (Beale 1956, 34).

The most important goal for the U.S. in Roosevelt’s view was to foster a righteous peace for the world through being a strong nation. He felt there was “no nobler cause for which to work than the peace of righteousness” (Roosevelt 1913, 575). As president, he believed “the steady aim of this Nation” must “be to strive to bring ever nearer the day when there shall prevail throughout the world the peace of justice.” This shows a
commitment to Koh’s (2005) idea of exceptionalism as “exceptional global leadership” (119). Because the peace must be righteous, however, Roosevelt believed “force” must sometimes be provided, or at least threatened, because it would be “contemptible” for the U.S. “to use high-sounding language to proclaim its purposes” and then “refuse to provide” the force necessary to ensure justice (Roosevelt 1904).

A few circumstances justified war and outside interference in Roosevelt’s view. Even “the most peaceful persons” must go to war when “big and powerful nations” decide to commit “outrageous” wrongs “either upon other nations or upon sections of their own people.” Furthermore, he judged some nations “weak” and “so utterly incompetent either to protect the rights of foreigners against their own citizens” or “to protect their own citizens against foreigners” that it would be “a matter of sheer duty” for an “outside power to interfere” (Roosevelt 1913, 576). Elaborating on this belief, Roosevelt revealed another crucial aspect of his belief in messianic Americanism. For Americans to advocate peace regardless of whether it were righteous or not would be a “folly” of a “scandalous” nature, since peace under any circumstance would have prevented the U.S. from achieving independence or from preserving the Union in the Civil War (Roosevelt 1913, 577-578). Thus, the U.S. in particular must always be an advocate of righteousness, even at the expense of peace. Otherwise, it could become like China, which because it had “neither a fleet nor an efficient army” had become “the helpless prey of outsiders.” Conversely, Japan, possessing power, stood “on a footing of equality with European and American nations” (Roosevelt 1913, 578).

Seeking a righteous peace meant that the United States owed “it to itself and to all mankind not to sink into helplessness before the powers of evil.” Here another aspect of
messianism – stark moral contrasts – is evident; if the U.S. were not strong and righteous, “powers of evil” would be able to win in the world. Indeed, liberty demanded a “price” of “external vigilance” because, ultimately, “the right of freedom and the responsibility for the exercise of that right” could “not be divorced.” The U.S. had a “responsibility of making good use” of its independence for the world. Indeed, Roosevelt felt that the U.S. with him as president acted both “in our own interest as well as in the interest of humanity at large” (Roosevelt 1904). He envisioned the U.S. as an “international police” power acting “for the sake of the welfare of mankind” (Roosevelt 1901).

Roosevelt clearly believed that it was better for the world that the U.S. itself act in its interest, as he had an aversion to international law and restraints upon America – another crucial component of messianic Americanism. This is similar to Ignatieff’s (2005) concept of “exemptionalism” (3). Roosevelt believed the U.S. should be cautious about entering any type of arbitration, particularly because of the Bering Sea arbitration going against the U.S. (Beale 1956, 91). Indeed, he believed those advocating international arbitration were “futile sentimentalists” who would lead the U.S. to the weakness and inefficiency of China (Beale 1956, 181-182). These “amiable but fatuous persons,” who “pass resolutions demanding universal arbitration for everything,” would ruin the world through demanding “disarmament” (Roosevelt 1913, 577). Because of his strong “conviction” in the unquestionable “righteous motives” of the U.S., he opposed “any international restraints upon his own power” (Beale 1956, 452). Even having multiple powers pursue an action was “usually considerably worse” than “if only one Power interfered” (Roosevelt 1913, 577). Despite Roosevelt’s opposition to international arbitration, he did note that he helped save the Hague Court “from becoming an empty
force” by arranging for a first case to come before it (Roosevelt 1913, 581). However, he attributed the success of the court to America’s own action to help it; thus, the U.S. was still ultimately responsible for any good that came out of the Hague Court.

Several specific policy actions of Roosevelt also are consistent with messianic Americanism. His emphasis on the Monroe Doctrine demonstrated a commitment to the U.S. playing the most important role in the Western Hemisphere. He asserted this to promote democracy, saying that the U.S. would “safeguard” other nations’ “independence” and security for “the lesser among the New World nations.” Additionally, he asserted that, in pursuing this policy, the U.S. was unquestionably a righteous power because it had “not the slightest desire to secure any territory” from its neighbors (Roosevelt 1901). Furthermore, articulating what became known as the Roosevelt Corollary, he said that “the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases” of “wrongdoing or impotence” to “exercise” an “international police power” (Roosevelt 1904). In this way, Roosevelt felt he was acknowledging both U.S. “rights” and “duties that went with the rights” (Roosevelt 1913, 546). In fact, any U.S. action would be taken “as a friend whose help was invoked” (Roosevelt 1913, 547). Thus, by placing the U.S. in the middle of any international issue in the Western Hemisphere, Roosevelt was displaying both global leadership and a sense of righteous American duty.

The decision to intervene in Santo Domingo was a prime example of this messianic Americanism in practice. When Santo Domingo had defaulted on interest due to its creditors, European governments had decided to “arrange for concerted action,” which would have included taking over seaports and custom-houses. Roosevelt wanted to
avoid foreign powers being “in partial possession of Santo Domingo” (Roosevelt 1913, 548). In order to prevent this, Roosevelt put a “naval commander in the waters” off the coast who was “directed to prevent any fighting which might menace the custom-houses.” Furthermore, Roosevelt arranged for the customhouses to be “placed under American control” so that the U.S. could “keep order and prevent any interference with the custom-houses or the places where they stood.” The U.S. was responsible for collecting and distributing the revenue; forty-five percent was “turned over to the Santo Domingan Government” and fifty-five percent “put in a sinking fund in New York for the benefit of the creditors.” Roosevelt felt this intervention worked so well that Santo Domingo actually received more revenue “than it had ever received before” (Roosevelt 1913, 549). More so, the island nation attained “a degree of peace and prosperity” which it had not had in “at least a century” (Roosevelt 1913, 550). Roosevelt felt this unilateral action was for the good of all involved, and he believed his intervention “should serve as a precedent for American action in all similar cases” (Roosevelt 1913, 548).

Roosevelt also had a singularly positive view of the U.S. role in Cuba, believing that America was “putting the independent government of the island upon a firm footing.” In order to do this, Roosevelt felt Cuba must be kept “in closer and more friendly relations” to the U.S. “than with any other power.” The U.S. would be “bound” by “honor” to “pass commercial measures in the interest of her material well-being” (Roosevelt 1901). This was in a way an early form of nation-building; the U.S. would bring democracy and prosperity to Cuba. Roosevelt felt that, because of the U.S., there was less “chaos” in Cuba and that the “administration of the island” had been raised to a level “never before achieved.” The U.S. had also, out of its goodness and sense of duty,
given “the Cubans substantial advantages in” American markets and given them their independence. Roosevelt boasted that when the U.S. had promised Cuba independence, there was probably not “a single ruler or diplomat in Europe who believed that it would be kept.” He also stated that “the United States was the first power which, having made such a promise, kept it in letter and spirit” (Roosevelt 1913, 545). Here, Roosevelt again asserted that the U.S. is unquestionably righteous and only serves the world in a positive way, better than other cynical nations. Summing up American involvement in Cuba, Roosevelt said, “I know of no action by any other government in relation to a weaker power which showed such disinterested efficiency in rendering service as was true in connection with our intervention in Cuba” (Roosevelt 1913, 546).

The policy that most demonstrated Roosevelt’s belief in America providing crucial services for the betterment of the world was his pursuit of the construction of the Panama Canal. Toward the beginning of his presidency, Roosevelt declared that “no single great material work which remains to be undertaken on this continent is of such consequence” as the canal. He believed it to be “one of those great works which only a great nation can undertake with prospects of success” and that a completed canal would be a “standing monument” to U.S. “constructive ability.” Roosevelt arranged for a treaty in which it would be specified that “the United States alone should do the work of building and assume the responsibility of safeguarding the canal” (Roosevelt 1901). Clearly, Roosevelt felt that the U.S. alone should provide such a great service to the Western Hemisphere and the world. In fact, Roosevelt said that a U.S.-led project was “required by our position,” necessitating that the U.S. would both “safeguard” the Isthmus of Panama and undertake the “inestimable privilege” of building the canal
(Roosevelt 1903). No “old-world government” would be permitted to do so, and
“Colombia was utterly impotent to build it herself” (Roosevelt 1913, 555).

Roosevelt’s messianic attitude is further revealed from his views about the
revolution in Panama. He said that “the people of Panama had long been discontented
with the Republic of Colombia” and that it was of “vital concern” to them that the U.S.
begin the canal project across their isthmus (Roosevelt 1903). Thus, once they had
rebelled, Roosevelt believed the U.S. had a clear “duty” to recognize Panama, as “every
consideration of international morality and expediency” had “bade us to take immediate
action” (Roosevelt 1913, 565). He arranged for the U.S. to declare that interference
against the revolution would not be tolerated, and argued that protecting the canal was “in
the interest of the commerce and traffic of the whole civilized world.” If the U.S. had not
recognized Panama as a new nation, America “would have been guilty of folly and
weakness,” basically “amounting” to a “crime” because the U.S. had “obligations to
mankind” (Roosevelt 1903). Later, Roosevelt would say that for the U.S. not to have
acted would have been “wickedness” and that, had he himself “hesitated to act,” he
would have deserved “a place in Dante’s inferno” (Roosevelt 1913, 566). Roosevelt also
showed a sense of messianism in considering Colombia evil for trying “to close the
gates” on trade over the isthmus, which would have been a “travesty on justice”
(Roosevelt 1913, 561). Ultimately, Roosevelt judged that the U.S. “gave to the people of
Panama self-government,” “freed them from subjection to alien oppressors,” and “alone
brought peace” to Panama (Roosevelt 1913, 567). This statement clearly demonstrates
Roosevelt’s belief in the messianic mission of the U.S. to spread democracy and do it
solely through U.S. influence.
Policies regarding the Far East, particularly the Philippines and China, also reveal Roosevelt’s *messianic Americanism*. Roosevelt regarded America gaining control of the Philippines as “Providential,” showing that God had given the U.S. this possession (Beale 1956, 173). Believing that the U.S. could help the Philippines, Roosevelt stated that he hoped “to do for them what has never before been done for any people of the tropics – to make them fit for self-government after the fashion of the really free nations.” He also used moralism in describing the U.S. duty to the Philippines, saying that to desert the Filipinos “would be a crime against humanity.” Convinced of the benevolence and unwavering goodness of the U.S., Roosevelt boasted:

> History may safely be challenged to show a single instance in which a masterful race such as ours, having been forced by the exigencies of war to take possession of an alien land, has behaved to its inhabitants with the disinterested zeal for their progress that our people have shown in the Philippines. (Roosevelt 1901)

In fact, Roosevelt asserted that the only wrong the U.S. might have committed against the Philippines was giving them self-government “too rapidly” out of eagerness to help the Filipinos (Roosevelt 1901).

Roosevelt was convinced that the U.S. had a “peculiar obligation” to the Filipinos because “at present they are utterly incapable of existing in independence at all or building up a civilization of their own.” His goal was to have the Philippines develop a close relationship to the U.S. like Cuba had. Roosevelt admitted that having the Philippines did serve U.S. “interests in the Pacific Ocean,” but asserted that the “chief reason for continuing to hold” the territory “must be that we ought in good faith to try to do our share of the world’s work” (Roosevelt 1904). Thus, Roosevelt again asserted that the U.S. was only acting as a benevolent power, not pursuing its own interest, but the interest of civilization. In fact, this specific case of work, according to Roosevelt,
basically fell into the lap of the U.S. as a result of the Spanish War; he did not view the U.S. as having sought to gain the Philippines (Roosevelt 1913, 543). The work of the U.S. in the Philippines, again like Cuba, was essentially a form of nation-building, as well as fighting insurgents:

> Within a few months of my assuming office we had stamped out the last armed resistance in the Philippines that was not of merely sporadic character; and as soon as peace was secured we turned our energies to developing the islands in the interests of the natives. We established schools everywhere; we built roads; we administered an even-handed justice; we did everything possible to encourage agriculture and industry; and in constantly increasing measure we employed natives to do their own governing, and finally provided a legislative chamber. (Roosevelt 1913, 544)

In the end, Roosevelt judged that America had ruled the Philippines solely “with an eye” to “the welfare of the natives themselves” (Roosevelt 1913, 544). Again, Roosevelt felt that the U.S. was pursuing its destiny and doing so with its own power and influence.

China too had importance to Roosevelt. He believed that, “owing to the rapid growth of our power and our interests on the Pacific, whatever happens in China must be of the keenest national concern to us.” Demonstrating exceptional global leadership, the U.S. had “unswervingly advocated moderation” and tried to create agreements among nations that would “enhance the welfare of China.” While believing in U.S. benevolence toward China, Roosevelt also admitted the national interest, advocating “the ‘open door’ with all that it implies” for U.S. trade (Roosevelt 1901).

Also in the Far East, Roosevelt demonstrated exceptional global leadership of a messianic and American nature in his efforts to end the Russo-Japanese War. Mediating to end the war was consistent with Roosevelt’s urge for “active participation in world decisions for which he felt we shared responsibility and whose consequences we could not escape” (Beale 1956, 253). In Roosevelt’s view, the war was causing a “strain on the
civilized world” with “losses of life and of treasure” that were “frightful.” Because he felt the war was bad for Japan and worse for Russia, he resolved “to get both to agree to peace’’ (Roosevelt 1913, 583). Trying to bring peace through an international “congress of rival powers” would not work because they would each seek their “own advantage”; rather, the U.S. must lead “direct negotiation” between Russia and Japan (Beale 1956, 276-277). Believing that only the U.S. could best serve the “interests” of Japan, Russia, and “the world at large,” Roosevelt tried “to be the friend” of both warring nations (Roosevelt 1913, 586). Still, while Roosevelt showed a messianic sense of American duty, he also was pursuing national interest, hoping that neither Japan or Russia “would become predominant” as a result of the war (Beale 1956, 270). Though Roosevelt was not always against war, thinking it could sometimes preserve civilization against barbarous nations, he specifically worked to end the Russo-Japanese War because of his conviction that wars were tragic between civilized nations (Beale 1956, 352).

Finally, Roosevelt aimed for America to become a great nation and meet its destiny through his determination to build up the U.S. Navy. Early in his presidency, he argued that “no one point of our policy, foreign or domestic, is more important than” the build-up of the Navy “to the honor and material welfare, and above all to the peace, of our nation in the future.” The Navy would be expanded in order to meet America’s “international duties.” Only a strong Navy would allow the U.S. to pursue its messianic mission. In particular, the Navy would provide real strength to U.S. assertion of the Monroe Doctrine, forcing other nations to honor it and allowing America to have “the peace which comes as of right to the just man armed” rather than “the peace granted on terms of ignominy to the craven and the weakling.” The U.S. could not be exceptional
without a great Navy because without it, America would have to “accept a secondary position in international affairs” (Roosevelt 1901). Even after the Navy expansion had begun, Roosevelt continued to assert America could “not afford a let-up in this great work” and that not continuously expanding would mean “to go back” (Roosevelt 1903). Once the Navy had been built up, Roosevelt sought to demonstrate a physical manifestation of American exceptionalism by having the U.S. Navy be the first fleet to travel completely around the world. He later reflected:

> In my own judgment the most important service that I rendered to peace was the voyage of the battle fleet round the world. I had become convinced that for many reasons it was essential that we should have it clearly understood, by our own people especially, but also by other peoples, that the Pacific was as much our home waters as the Atlantic, and that our fleet could and would at will pass from one to the other of the two great oceans. (Roosevelt 1913, 592)

U.S. strength and glory through an exceptional Navy were entirely consistent with Roosevelt’s vision of *messianic Americanism*.

Indeed, Roosevelt’s beliefs, rhetoric, and foreign policy revealed an attitude toward American exceptionalism best described as *messianic Americanism*. He always felt that the U.S. had a special history and role to play in the world, and he was not afraid to act on this belief. His own view of U.S. morality and policy can be summed up with his philosophy that the safest rule is to “speak softly and carry a big stick” (Roosevelt 1913, 580). Thus, he sought to strengthen U.S. forces, especially the Navy, while pursuing other policies that demonstrated exceptional U.S. global leadership, such as negotiating a settlement to end the Russo-Japanese War and building the Panama Canal. Importantly, this global leadership was distinctly American; Roosevelt viewed international law and arbitration with suspicion and hostility. Furthermore, Roosevelt engaged in what he viewed as the advancement of democracy in Cuba, Panama, and the
Philippines, consistent with Hoffmann’s (2005) conception of exceptionalism as an American crusade for democracy (226). Having been given tremendous advantages by God, Roosevelt felt that, through strength and morality, American success against any evil or challenge in fulfilling its destiny in the world was inevitable. Summing up his presidency, Roosevelt said:

During the seven and a half years that I was President, this Nation behaved in international matters toward all other nations precisely as an honorable man behaves to his fellow-men. We made no promise which we could not and did not keep. We made no threat which we did not carry out. We never failed to assert our rights in the face of the strong, and we never failed to treat both strong and weak with courtesy and justice; and against the weak when they misbehaved we were slower to assert our rights than we were against the strong. (Roosevelt 1913, 543)

Clearly, Theodore Roosevelt believed he had pursued policies consistent with American morality and righteousness.
4. **George W. Bush’s *Messianic Americanism***

In his personal life, George W. Bush sought to overcome challenges through bold steps, such as making a decision to quit drinking and using his own willpower to stick to it. Similarly, as President of the United States and in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Bush took a bold approach to putting his vision of American exceptionalism into practice. Indeed, Bush sought to lead “by definition,” feeling that “definitions effectively asserted can create their own reality” and that he should act “with unflinching resolve on stated purposes” (Skowronek 2008, 121-122). Essentially, Bush would define his presidential foreign policy in terms of American exceptionalism. In attempting to promote freedom, sometimes through force, and doing so primarily through U.S. power, Bush’s presidency was consistent with *messianic Americanism*; indeed, his actions and philosophy were in many ways *messianic Americanism* to almost its greatest extent.

Even before the attacks of 9/11, Bush articulated a vision for the U.S. that spelled out his view of American exceptionalism. Speechwriter Michael Gerson said that Bush’s speeches “were intended to inaugurate an era of idealism” (Gerson 2007, 9). In his first
inaugural address, Bush outlined how he saw the history of the U.S. in terms of American exceptionalism:

We have a place, all of us, in a long story, a story we continue but whose end we will not see. It is a story of a new world that became a friend and liberator of the old, the story of a slaveholding society that became a servant of freedom, the story of a power that went into the world to protect but not possess, to defend but not to conquer. (Bush 2001a)

Here, Bush articulated several aspects of messianic Americanism, asserting that the U.S. is unquestionably unique and good and has a destiny to lead the world toward freedom and peace. More so, Bush noted that, after a century when “America’s faith in freedom and democracy was a rock in a raging sea,” now democracy was “taking root in many nations.” As part of his religious beliefs, Bush felt this trend would continue “because we are guided by a power larger than ourselves, who creates us equal, in His image.”

Furthermore, the role of the U.S. was to use its own ideals and power in the world to achieve these democratic goals because if America did “not lead the cause of freedom,” it would “not be led.” American exceptionalism would be a full part of national policy because God’s “purpose” would be “achieved in our duty” to fulfill these lofty ideals (Bush 2001a). These words were not just rhetoric for the president either; as Gerson notes, Bush used his speeches “to set his doctrines in rhetorical stone” (Gerson 2007, 9).

9/11 soon made Bush feel a duty to the world to take a significantly activist approach to achieve this vision of exceptionalism. Hearing of the attacks that morning, Bush’s “blood was boiling” and he resolved to “find out who did this” and “kick their ass” (Bush 2010, 128). However, this gut reaction was only the beginning of Bush’s strategy even that very day. The horrible attacks, to Bush, had also created “an opportunity” for heroism and greatness consistent with America’s national mission
Exceptionalist-in-Chief

(Beinart 2010, 327). He quickly decided that the U.S. would have to “force nations to choose whether they would fight the terrorists or share in their fate”; furthermore, the U.S. would have “to wage this war on the offense, by attacking the terrorists overseas before they could attack us again at home” (Bush 2010, 137). These elements of the Bush Doctrine were developed within hours of the attacks. Indeed, they were the result of an Achilles heel syndrome in which the U.S. simultaneously had a “schizophrenic sense of its exceptional power coupled with its exceptional vulnerability” (Koh 2005, 125).

Bush believed that al-Qaeda had attacked the U.S. because they hated American freedom. Articulating a stark moral contrast, Bush said that Americans had now seen “evil, the very worst of human nature” (Bush 2001b). In response, the U.S. had a “responsibility to history” to respond to the attacks “and rid the world of evil” (Bush 2001c). American success in this endeavor would be inevitable; Bush said the night of 9/11:

Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve. America was targeted for attack because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining. (Bush 2001b)

In keeping America as the beacon of hope for the world, the U.S. would be defending “all that is good and just” (Bush 2001b) and engaging in “the calling of our time” (Bush 2001c). The “act of war” that was 9/11 meant the U.S. would not only “bring justice to our enemies,” but it would start a global “war on terror” that would “not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated” (Bush 2001d).

This war would by definition draw stark moral contrasts between good and evil. Bush said that the terrorists and their supporters “hate our freedoms – our freedom of
religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble to disagree with each other.” Because of this, Bush proclaimed that “every nation, in every region” would have “a decision to make: Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” There would be no gray area; the forces of good were mandated to the cause of the United States of America because this war would be “civilization’s fight.” Again affirming his belief in the inevitability of U.S. success, Bush declared that America would defeat terror and usher in “an age of liberty, here and across the world.” While the cause was for civilization, the success of it would depend mainly on the U.S.; therefore, Bush said, “We will not tire; we will not falter; and we will not fail.” Indeed, there was not doubt that the U.S. would succeed for Bush because, though “freedom and fear, justice and cruelty have always been at war,” Americans could take comfort in knowing “that God is not neutral between them” (Bush 2001d). The messianic sense of duty – exceptional global leadership taken to an extreme – that Bush felt in reaction to 9/11 was a “responsibility” he would remember every remaining day of his presidency (Bush 2010, 151). In Harold Koh’s words, Bush used “an exceptionalist strategy” as “America’s dominant response to the horrendous attacks of September 11” (Koh 2005, 124).

In the months after 9/11, Bush would make many decisions about how to conduct the war on terror that would further reflect messianic Americanism. To begin with, while the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) invoked Article V and declared that “an attack against one is an attack against all,” Vice President Dick Cheney emphasized that the U.S. must “not allow” its “mission to be determined by others” (Cheney 2011, 332). Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld agreed, believing that while the U.S. would “organize a global campaign against terrorism,” there would be many things the U.S.
would and should do alone (Rumsfeld 2011, 344). Allies would have to join the war on terror on America’s terms. Indeed, Cheney felt that it was likely “this was a conflict in which our nation would be engaged for the rest of” his life (Cheney 2011, 332). Cheney further noted that the U.S. would need intelligence, and he believed working with “the dark side” would be necessary (Cheney 2011, 335). Whatever the U.S. did to preserve national security would be justified to the Bush Administration, reflecting the sense of messianism that U.S. actions ultimately could not be questioned. After anthrax attacks and the failed shoe-bombing attempt of Richard Reid, Bush’s fears of another attack increased even more. He regretted having to give Reid “the right to remain silent” because it prevented collecting “vital intelligence” from him. Therefore, Bush decided on a “least worst choice” of using the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay to hold detainees. This would preserve the ability to gather intelligence by not guaranteeing the prisoners constitutional protections (Bush 2010, 165-166). Furthermore, this decision was viewed as necessary and just because it was America undertaking the action; international and domestic criticism was irrelevant. Cheney addressed this directly, saying he did not “have much sympathy for the view that we should find an alternative to Guantanamo – a solution that could potentially make Americans less safe – simply because we are worried about how we are perceived abroad” (Cheney 2011, 356). Bush was “confident the military tribunals would provide a fair trial” (Bush 2010, 167). In addition, Bush approved the use of an enhanced interrogation program, including the use of waterboarding. Though he knew when it became public there would be “criticism that America had compromised our moral values,” he felt he had no choice to use a program to avoid accepting “a greater risk” of another attack (Bush 2010, 169).
At the same time, Bush took his first firm response against terrorism in launching the war in Afghanistan. He wanted to “help the Afghan people liberate themselves” from the Taliban government and defeat al-Qaeda (Bush 2010, 187) by putting “boots on the ground” (Bush 2010, 191). Indeed, Bush “knew” in his “heart that striking al-Qaeda, removing the Taliban, and liberating the suffering people of Afghanistan was necessary and just” (Bush 2010, 197). This would not just be a military mission for freedom, however; humanitarian aid, including food drops, were immediately brought into the country to attempt to help the Afghan people (Rumsfeld 2011, 387). In fighting the Taliban and al-Qaeda, Bush decided that enemy combatants taken prisoner would not be afforded protections under the Geneva Convention (Beinart 2010, 336). America’s opponents were evil and America’s actions in Afghanistan were unquestionably for good, so this was not a sticking point. Indeed, the war initially had quick success, as the Taliban was forced from power and al-Qaeda’s training operations were disrupted. Therefore, the next stage of Bush’s plan for the country would take effect. The president viewed Afghanistan as “the ultimate nation building mission.” Having liberated its people, the U.S. would have “a moral obligation” to build a free society in Afghanistan and display a “hopeful alternative to the vision of the extremists” (Bush 2010, 205). For Bush, a particularly concrete example of America’s goodness in action was that girls were able to go to school after the overthrow of the Taliban’s regime of “unspeakable brutality” (Bush 2010, 202). Furthermore, the interim leader and later Afghan President Hamid Karzai led a government that would protect “basic rights such as freedom of speech and assembly.” After 2001, Bush continued to see positive signs in the development of Afghanistan, especially its elections in 2004 in which “nearly 80 percent of the voting-age population”
cast ballots (Bush 2010, 208). Despite this, U.S. difficulties in Afghanistan increased, and Bush approved a large troop increase in 2006 – what he called a “silent surge” in comparison with actions in Iraq – in order to ward off terrorist and Taliban gains (Bush 2010, 212). Furthermore, recognizing that terrorists were able to in many cases gain safe haven in neighboring Pakistan, Bush approved the use of the Predator drone to “turn up the pressure on the extremists.” Bush felt that Pakistan was a democracy whose sovereignty should not be violated, but did not really see the use of drones in the border areas as a violation of that sovereignty (Bush 2010, 217). Ultimately, despite setbacks, Bush believed that the war in Afghanistan had been a great liberation and strategic victory in the war on terror.

Bush’s actions to improve U.S. security and the war in Afghanistan were just part of a larger post-9/11 strategy, which included an approach to foreign affairs known as the Bush Doctrine. In Bush’s own words, there were four parts:

First, make no distinction between the terrorists and the nations that harbor them – and hold both to account. Second, take the fight to the enemy overseas before they can attack us again here at home. Third, confront threats before they fully materialize. And fourth, advance liberty and hope as an alternative to the enemy’s ideology of repression and fear. (Bush 2010, 396-397)

These four components are all consistent with messianic Americanism, defining stark moral contrasts between the U.S., its enemies, and any associates of those enemies, as well as asserting a prerogative for preemptive action. Finally, it made democracy promotion an official part of the global war on terror. This idealistic portion of the doctrine was American exceptionalism as an official policy; Bush believed he was serving the “cause of justice.” In the wake of the initial success in the Afghan war, Bush said that what the U.S. had “found in Afghanistan” meant that, “far from ending there,
our war against terror” would only be beginning. He said that the U.S. was taking action all over, including in the Philippines, Bosnia, and Africa. Because some governments would be “timid in the face of terror,” America would act. To Bush, the rogue states of North Korea, Iran, and Iraq made up “an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.” Because of the danger, Bush said that he would “not wait on events” or “stand by as peril draws closer and closer.” Defending America and defending freedom were part of the “obligation” to “history” that the U.S. had in taking advantage of “a unique opportunity.” Though evil was “real,” it would be opposed without fear because “God” would be “near” (Bush 2002).

While pledging not to impose U.S. culture on other nation-states and peoples, Bush connected 9/11 and the resulting war on terror to a narrative of history reflecting American exceptionalism:

In a single instant, we realized that this will be a decisive decade in the history of liberty, that we’ve been called to a unique role in human events. Rarely has the world faced a choice more clear or consequential. Our enemies send other people’s children on missions of suicide and murder. They embrace tyranny and death as a cause and a creed. We stand for a different choice, made long ago on the day of our founding. We affirm it again today. We choose freedom and the dignity of every life. Steadfast in our purpose, we now press on. We have known freedom’s price. We have shown freedom’s power. And in this great conflict, my fellow Americans, we will see freedom’s victory. (Bush 2002)

Michael Gerson compared Bush’s pronouncements to Woodrow Wilson’s vision of America liberating “mankind,” but felt that Wilson was legitimately criticized for trying to achieve this vision with “an unrealistic belief that nations and their rivalries could be replaced by a League of Nations.” Both Bush and Wilson shared a sense of messianism in believing that “history has a moral direction” that would move “in favor of democratic ideals.” However, Bush differed from Wilson’s internationalism in favoring a more
distinctly U.S. approach. Bush did “not believe this vision” would be “fulfilled in the
decline or replacement of the nation-state by international institutions.” Rather, it would
be “fulfilled” through America helping to increase the “strength and number of
democratic societies” (Gerson 2007, 89). To Harold Koh, Bush’s “strategic unilateralism
and tactical multilateralism” naturally resisted “enforced obedience to international
treaties and institutions as dangerously constraining on U.S. national sovereignty” (Koh
2005, 127). At the same time, Bush also was rejecting a realist foreign policy as lacking
moral direction (Gerson 2007, 90). Still, under Bush the U.S. would have a messianic
sense of justification for many actions; to Koh, the Bush Doctrine made “double
standards” not only an “exception” but also “the rule” in attempting to preserve “U.S.
hegemony” (Koh 2005, 129). Exemptionalism was firmly entrenched in U.S. policies.
Opposing too much internationalism, Bush rejected America joining the International
Criminal Court and abiding by the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change (Koh 2005, 116).

The next stage in this war on terror and for the spread of freedom would be the
war in Iraq. In reality, the Bush Administration had thought of taking action in support of
regime change in Iraq even before 9/11 (Beinart 2010, 320). After 9/11, this remained a
goal, and the administration believed that an easy victory in Afghanistan would make the
public more supportive of action in Iraq because, having overthrown the Taliban, taking
down Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein “would no longer seem so hard” (Beinart 2010,
331). Furthermore, Bush believed that success would beget success; for Bush, the “glory”
would always go “to those with ambition and faith, not the faint of heart.” Thus, Bush
chose to go to war in Iraq, viewing “the U.S. military as the greatest army of compassion
of all” (Beinart 2010, 342). Indeed, even before the war began, Bush viewed it as an
inevitable victory because “American ideals were the ultimate destination of all humankind” (Beinart 2010, 343).

Indeed, because he perceived “the Middle East” as “the center of a global ideological struggle,” Bush believed removing Saddam Hussein from power and creating a democracy in Iraq would be a “transformation” that would impact the rest of the region and the world. In his view, “once liberty took root in one society, it could spread to others” (Bush 2010, 232). In effect, Bush was articulating a belief in a new version of the old domino theory about the spread of communism; indeed, his argument was essentially a domino theory of American exceptionalism. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice echoed this idea, believing democracy there would “address the freedom gap” in the region (Rice 2011, 187). The administration did not just make its case on democracy promotion, however. It asserted that Saddam Hussein continued to have weapons of mass destruction and preemptive war would be necessary to disarm him if he did not pledge to end these programs. Furthermore, regime change would advance “the cause of human rights” (Bush 2010, 232); there was both “a moral case and a national security argument for overthrowing Saddam” (Rice 2011, 179). Vice President Cheney believed the U.S. “could not ignore the threat or wish it away” (Cheney 2011, 369). More so, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld felt that Saddam Hussein had been “emboldened by a decade of UN and American acquiescence” and that the U.S. needed to act to have credibility and even give some credibility back to the UN itself (Rumsfeld 2011, 423). While Cheney and Rumsfeld were not as concerned about building a potential post-war democracy in Iraq, Bush and Rice felt “the use of U.S. military power had to be followed by an affirmation of the United States’ principles” (Rice 2011, 187).
Bush would articulate these points in addressing the country on his decision to go to war against Iraq. He charged that Saddam Hussein had “a history of reckless aggression” and that there was a significant danger that terrorists would take hold of weapons of mass destruction he was believed to have. Thus, “before the day of horror” occurred, the U.S. would remove the danger through its “sovereign authority to use force in assuring its own national security.” Furthermore, since the United Nations Security Council had not endorsed the war and “lived up to its responsibilities,” the U.S. would “rise” to its duties to the world. The U.S. would “accept” the “responsibility” both of disarming Iraq and, consistent with American exceptionalism, “honoring the deepest commitments” of America by advancing “liberty and peace” in the country. To Bush, freedom was an unquestionably universal desire and destiny that he was helping to fulfill; specifically, the U.S. was morally right to go to war in Iraq because “the Iraqi people” were “deserving and capable of human liberty” (Bush 2003). Like in Afghanistan, the Iraq War started off well for the U.S., and Bush decided that America would take the lead role of reconstruction and reorder in Iraq rather than the UN (Rice 2011, 191). However, no weapons of mass destruction were found; Saddam Hussein no longer had them. Still, all along the goal for Bush had really been “democratic transformation” (Beinart 2010, 341). Indeed, Bush firmly felt his actions justified after leaving office, believing the war had taken out one of “America’s most committed and dangerous enemies,” given Iraq the possibility of democracy, and shown “hostile nations” that they would bear a terrible “cost” for “supporting terror and pursuing WMD” (Bush 2010, 270).

While difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan increased, Bush was firmly convinced of the nobility of his cause and, having won reelection in 2004, articulated his complete
vision of American exceptionalism in his second inaugural address. The speech was “a
deep reflection of his personal convictions regarding human dignity and freedom” (Rice
2011, 325). Bush asserted that “the survival of liberty” in the United States would depend
“on the success of liberty in other lands.” Therefore, “the best hope for peace” in the
world would be “the expansion of freedom” for all of the world. In this way, “America’s
vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one.” Bush firmly connected these goals to
American exceptionalism, saying that “advancing these ideals is the mission that created
our Nation.” Again, Bush made American exceptionalism a firm national policy, saying,
“So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic
movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending
tyranny in our world.” He further put into policy a stark moral contrast, saying that the
U.S. would “persistently clarify the choice before every ruler and every nation, the moral
choice between oppression, which is always wrong, and freedom, which is eternally
right.” Finally, inevitable success in these endeavors was tied to a destiny stemming from
the nation’s founding:

When the Declaration of Independence was first read in public and the Liberty
Bell was sounded in celebration, a witness said, ‘It rang as if it meant something.’
In our time, it means something still. America, in this young century, proclaims
liberty throughout all the world and to all the inhabitants thereof. Renewed in our
strength, tested but not weary, we are ready for the greatest achievements in the
history of freedom. (Bush 2005)

All these ideas were part of what Bush called the Freedom Agenda. There were
several strategies that would be a part of this policy. Bush sought to “advance freedom by
supporting fledgling democratic governments in places like the Palestinian Territories,
Lebanon, Georgia, and Ukraine,” would “encourage dissidents and democratic reformers
suffering under repressive regimes in Iran, Syria, North Korea, and Venezuela,” and
would “advocate for freedom while maintaining strategic relationships with nations like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Russia, and China” (Bush 2010, 397). On the whole, Bush “considered it America’s responsibility to put pressure on the arms of the world’s tyrants” (Bush 2010, 398). In trying to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, Bush felt that “talking” to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad “would legitimize him and his views and dispirit Iran’s freedom movement” (Bush 2010, 417). Similarly, Bush tried to hold a tougher line against North Korea, likening Kim Jong-il to his daughters when they were young and “would throw their food on the floor.” Bush said that the U.S. would be “through picking up his food” (Bush 2010, 423). Regarding China, Bush believed that trade and U.S. influence would be “a tool to promote the freedom agenda”; furthermore, Bush broached the subject of human rights and treatment of religious groups with the Chinese leadership (Bush 2010, 427-428). Similarly, Bush addressed human rights abuses and free speech issues with Russia (Bush 2010, 432). Finally, Bush sought to expand NATO, believing that possible membership would act “as an incentive for reform” for candidate countries (Bush 2010, 430).

While Bush believed in the inevitability of U.S. success in promoting the freedom agenda, this success was being tested in Iraq. Sectarian warfare had broken out and the country was in chaos. However, to Bush, most Iraqis “were grateful to America for their liberation” and “wanted to live in freedom,” so he “would not give up on them” (Bush 2010, 373). In fact, Bush was committed and “prepared to put everything on the line” to achieve victory (Rice 2011, 544). Bush believed that failure in Iraq would be a disaster, hurting American credibility and allowing terrorists to have a new safe haven to plan attacks. Therefore, he announced a surge in troops to help stabilize the country; while the
U.S. would enhance security, the Iraqi government would need to fulfill promises on providing good governance. This was despite widespread opposition among the American public, in both houses of Congress, and internationally. Regardless of this opposition, Bush felt America could not afford to lose “the decisive ideological struggle of our time.” Indeed, Bush believed “the most realistic way to protect the American people” would be “to provide a hopeful alternative to the hateful ideology of the enemy” in Iraq. Movements promoting freedom in other areas of the world, in Bush’s view, would be looking to Iraq and wondering if the U.S. would “withdraw and yield the future of that country to the extremists” or if it would “stand with the Iraqis who” had “made the choice for freedom.” The surge would ensure the success of a noble cause – “the survival of a young democracy” – and the “Author of Liberty” would “guide” the U.S. through the difficulties of meeting this goal (Bush 2007a). Bush admitted that there were problems in Iraq, but convinced of the goodness of the U.S., always believed that the “cause” was “eternally right” (Bush 2010, 394).

Indeed, advocating for and justifying the surge in Iraq revealed Bush’s take on history and just how much his views reflected messianic Americanism. The Iraq War for Bush was “a struggle for civilization.” In explaining this, Bush cited a number of examples of the U.S. being tested. In particular, he focused on how there had been skepticism that Japan and South Korea would successfully embrace democracy and become allies of America, but that it had happened. The lesson Bush took away from this was that “the heart’s desire for liberty” would “not be denied.” Crucially, it had been “America’s presence and perseverance” that had made those successes possible; therefore, in Iraq and Afghanistan, America was needed for a democratic transformation.
to take place. He equated those who had criticized U.S. efforts in Japan and South Korea with the current critics of the Iraq War, arguing that eventually those critics would be proven wrong and that, like Japan and South Korea, Iraq would become another ally in the continuing “ideological struggle” (Bush 2007b).

Bush also waded into more controversial territory in explaining his views of the Vietnam War and its relationship to the Iraq War. He criticized those who argued that, as during Vietnam, “the real problem was America’s presence and that if we would just withdraw, the killing would end.” The tragedies in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, to Bush, were that “millions of innocent citizens” paid “the price of America’s withdrawal” from the region. Therefore, the U.S. could not do the same in Iraq. Furthermore, Bush believed withdrawing from Vietnam had hurt American credibility and made al-Qaeda feel that the American public would not support any war for long; as a result, they could undertake attacks like 9/11 with relative impunity. Again, Bush pushed back at his critics, saying that “we must listen to the words of the enemy” in understanding the price of possible withdrawal in Iraq. At his core, Bush believed that the U.S. was justified in its cause regardless of opposition domestically and internationally and that success in Iraq, despite difficult times, would be achieved to “bring the taste of freedom to millions” (Bush 2007b). His view of history showed how he viewed both success and failure primarily through an American lens; democracies like Japan and South Korea had been the result of U.S. action, while tragic cases like Vietnam had occurred because America had not been committed enough. And on Iraq and in the war on terror, Bush was never going to allow a waning in his commitment.
The commitment Bush had to *messianic Americanism* was not just limited to the war on terror and democracy promotion either. One of Bush’s greatest legacies was his exceptional global leadership to combat HIV/AIDS and malaria in Africa. Bush saw the suffering of people there “as a challenge to the words of the Gospel: ‘To whom much is given, much is required.’” Since America “had been given a lot,” it was its duty, consistent with American exceptionalism, to “answer the call” and help the people of Africa against those diseases. As a result, Bush proposed the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief – PEPFAR – that would provide billions of dollars and “serve as a medical version of the Marshall Plan” (Bush 2010, 333). Indeed, Bush viewed PEPFAR as “a new chapter in Africa’s unfolding story of freedom, dignity, and hope” (Bush 2010, 342). Similarly, in 2005, Bush announced the President’s Malaria Initiative to work toward the goal of “cutting malaria mortality rates by 50 percent over the next five years” (Bush 2010, 345). Michael Gerson viewed the initiatives as “one of the high points of political idealism in modern history”; America was helping Africa out of its own exceptional goodness and generosity (Gerson 2007, 8). Indeed, Condoleeza Rice believed PEPFAR would “be remembered as one of the greatest acts of compassion by any country in history” (Rice 2011, 229).

At the end of his presidency, Bush continued to call for vigilance and the prosecution of the war on terror. He said that he had always followed his “conscience” in decision-making and that making America live up to its “solemn responsibilities” had been among those crucial decisions. Bush’s outlook on foreign policy for the twenty-first century continued to be defined by *messianic Americanism*, as he said that “if America does not lead the cause of freedom, that cause will not be led.” Furthermore, Bush called
for continuing “moral clarity” and stark moral contrasts, saying that “good and evil are present in this world, and between the two there can be no compromise” (Bush 2009). In thinking about his legacy, George W. Bush was confident that history would view him more favorably in the long run. He ultimately tied up his legacy to American exceptionalism, saying:

Decades from now, I hope people will remember me as a president who recognized the central challenge of our time and kept my vow to keep the country safe; who pursued my convictions without wavering but changed course when necessary; who trusted individuals to make choices in their lives, and who used America’s influence to advance freedom. (Bush 2010, 476-477)
5. **Woodrow Wilson’s Messianic Internationalism**

Having a fervent belief in American exceptionalism and a conviction that the United States should lead the world through an international organization, President Woodrow Wilson is a clear illustration of my second proposed type of exceptionalism – *messianic internationalism*. Wilson’s beliefs were firmly rooted in his Christianity; his faith “informed and influenced his every action and policy” (Link 1979, 4-5). Even more significantly, Wilson “believed that God controls history and uses men and nations to achieve His preordained purposes.” Without question, Wilson had a deep sense of messianism that guided his actions. Furthermore, Wilson combined this religiosity with a conviction that democracy was the best and most humane form of government for the entire world; more so, peoples from any nation could eventually be capable of maintaining democracy (Link 1979, 5-6). He hoped that the spread of democracy was part of “the divine plan” of human history (Link 1979, 6).

For Wilson, the United States in particular would play the defining role in this process. He fully embraced the first aspect of American exceptionalism – that America is unique among all nations. First, Wilson believed the U.S. was “unique politically,” not just because of its democratic history, but because the federal system had “succeeded in organizing” a hundred million diverse people. Significantly, Wilson thought the
American system might prove to be an ideal “model for a world organization,” showing that he had internationalist beliefs even before his proposal of the League of Nations. Second, Wilson felt America was “unique socially” because of its (supposed) equality for a mixed racial group of people. Third, in Wilson’s view, the U.S. was “unique morally” because it had “been born” so that “men might be free” and to “advance human welfare” (Link 1979, 6). Because of his belief in the moral goodness of the U.S., Wilson also believed in the second aspect of American exceptionalism – that America had a unique destiny to spread democracy. Campaigning for president in 1912, Wilson had said, “I believe that God presided over the inception of this nation,” giving Americans “the vision of liberty” and choosing Americans “to show the way to the nations of the world how they shall walk in the paths of liberty” (Link 1979, 7). As president, Wilson personally conducted U.S. diplomacy (Link 1979, 14). Therefore, he had the opportunity to definitively act on his beliefs in American exceptionalism.

Wilson’s attitude toward exceptionalism was revealed even before World War I in his actions and ideas regarding Latin America. He showed his internationalism in proposing that countries in the Western Hemisphere should agree to “a Pan-American collective security treaty,” which would protect nations from war amongst themselves, from the rest of the world, and general “internal disorder.” Furthermore, Wilson was willing to intervene in the hemisphere, thinking it consistent with his vision, because he felt “he wanted for” Latin America only what the people “wanted for themselves.” His goal was to create “democratic capitalist governments where property was respected and change occurred only via the law.” Still, he displayed a sense of messianism in thinking that he knew what sort of leaders were best for the Latin American countries, only
wanting those nations to elect “progressive capitalists” rather than “radicals.” He was disappointed when Mexicans did not support the U.S. as “liberators” in its intervention during the Mexican Revolution. However, his messianism did not dampen, and, though the Pan-American treaty was not ratified, “it remained his model for the world” (Beinart 2010, 26-27).

World War I would ultimately be the defining opportunity to exercise Wilson’s messianic internationalism. At first, Wilson sought to remain neutral, but he also sought to end the war and mediate a just peace, demonstrating a positive face of American exceptionalism – “exceptional global leadership” (Koh 2005, 119). Attempting to achieve peace, Wilson tried to gain the cooperation of the British through his intermediary Colonel Edward House. Working with British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, they produced the House-Grey Memorandum, which proposed that Wilson would call for a peace conference when Britain and France indicated “that the time was ripe.” If Germany either refused to join the conference or made unreasonable demands, then the U.S. would “probably” enter the war on the side of the Allies (Link 1979, 36). Still, Wilson sought to avoid being too much tied to one side; rather, he wanted to support those who were looking for a “just settlement” (Link 1979, 37). Even after the German sinking of the Lusitania, killing 128 Americans, Wilson tried to avoid military entanglement in the war.

Early on, Wilson outlined his goals for the end of the war while fighting to preserve American neutrality. He asserted that the United States had “nothing material of any kind to ask for ourselves,” showing his messianic belief that America would only mediate an end to the war out of its own absolute goodness. The primary interest would be “only in peace and its future guarantees.” Furthermore, Wilson showed his belief in
internationalism, proposing a “universal association of the nations to maintain the inviolate security of the highway of the seas” and “to prevent any war” that would break treaties or start without consideration of the “opinion of the world” (Wilson 1916).

When Wilson’s ambitions were frustrated, he decided to try to “bring the Allies” under his “complete control” in a clear messianic move that demonstrated his own sense of righteousness. He warned the British not to violate international law, accompanying this warning with legislation passed by Congress that would allow him to “deny port facilities and clearance to the ships of any nation” that violated American shipping or business rights. In addition, Congress gave Wilson powers to “levy an embargo” against nations “that denied American trading rights under international law” and to deny the use of American communications to nations who tried to censor or interfere with them. Finally, Wilson severely curtailed American loans to the Allied countries (Link 1979, 54). This threatened their ability to conduct the war, essentially giving Wilson “the power of life or death” over them (Link 1979, 55). Wilson did this as part of his insistence for a “peace without victory” (Link 1979, 61).

Despite his insistence on neutrality, Wilson argued in his second inaugural address that it was “out of the question” to be “indifferent” to the war. Still, because of America’s goodness, the U.S. was “intent upon” interests “that transcended the immediate issues of the war itself.” More so, the U.S., despite intolerable injuries, would “demand for all mankind” a just peace with “the freedom to live and to be at ease against organized wrong.” Again using moralist language and declaring good intentions, Wilson said that the U.S. desired “neither conquest nor advantage” and “always professed unselfish purpose” and “sincere” intentions. Indeed, Wilson believed the American
people had become “citizens of the world,” again showing his sense of internationalism. He intended to apply America’s “principles of a liberated mankind” for world peace, while rejecting as false a realist peace based “upon an armed balance of power.” Rather, nations should have governments based on the “consent of the governed” and share “responsibility to maintain peace.” Even before U.S. entry into the war, Wilson called for sacrifice from all Americans to achieve his, and indeed God’s, vision of messianic internationalism:

We are being forced into a new unity amidst the fires that now blaze throughout the world. In their ardent heat we shall, in God’s Providence, let us hope, be purged of faction and division, purified of the errant humors of party and of private interest, and shall stand forth in the days to come with a new dignity of national pride and spirit. Let each man see to it that the dedication is in his own heart, the high purpose of the nation in his own mind, ruler of his own will and desire. (Wilson 1917a)

Characteristic of messianism, Wilson asserted that, despite the need for sacrifice, success for the U.S. would be inevitable, as “the shadows” lying “dark upon our path” would “soon be dispelled, and we shall walk with the light all about us” (Wilson 1917a). As a progressive, he thought he could bring his domestic successes to the international level and, despite the war, “rationalize the entire globe” (Beinart 2010, 19). Even as the U.S. was about to be drawn into war, Wilson did not doubt that America would ultimately succeed.

In maintaining neutrality, however, Wilson was not able to succeed. There were two principle reasons for his critical decision to have the United States enter World War I. First, and arguably most importantly for Wilson, he had decided that the only way he could achieve his goals for a lasting, just international peace was to actually enter the war (Link 1979, 71). Secondly, German belligerency – including trying to incite Mexico to
war against the U.S. – and unrestricted submarine warfare had forced his hand. Wilson had come to regard the German government as evil, saying the Germans had demonstrated a “reckless lack of compassion or of principle.” Demonstrating himself another aspect of messianism by articulating this stark moral contrast, Wilson said the Germans were affronting the “human practices of civilized nations” and that their submarine warfare was a war “against mankind” and “all nations.” Drawing a positive contrast between Germany and the U.S., Wilson asserted that America would have a motive not of “revenge or the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only the vindication of right.” The U.S. would go against “selfish and autocratic power” to make a just peace upheld by “the free and self-governed peoples of the world.” Only democracies could preserve such a peace, as “no autocratic government could be trusted to keep faith within it or observe” international covenants. These autocratic governments had made neutrality impossible because they were a “menace” to peace and “natural foes to liberty” (Wilson 1917b).

Proclaiming both America’s goodness and sense of mission, Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war with America fighting for a great purpose, saying, “the world must be made safe for democracy.” Peace would depend on “foundations of political liberty,” and the U.S. would only be satisfied when “the rights of mankind” were “made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them.” In closing his address to Congress, Wilson declared his messianic belief that the U.S. was even called by God to fight for righteousness, American values, and a new peaceful international order:

It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars, civilization itself seeming to be in the balance.
But the right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts – for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own Governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free. To such a task we can dedicate our Eves and our fortunes, everything that we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other. (Wilson 1917b)

America was called on to sacrifice, even being “privileged to spend” the blood of soldiers for the cause. Any “lawless and malignant” dissent within the nation would be suppressed. In fighting, the U.S. would also emancipate the German people from their evil government. Finally, distinguishing its noble goals from the aims of the other Allied nations, the U.S. would be an “associate, not an ally, of the Entente powers” (Link 1979, 77).

Even before winning the war, Wilson decided to outline his bold plan for a lasting, international peace in an address to Congress on his proposed Fourteen Points for peace. His decision to outline this plan demonstrates a number of aspects of American exceptionalism, including “exceptional global leadership” (Koh 2005, 119), “pursuing an international order” (Ruggie 2005, 304), and crusading for democracy (Hoffmann 2005, 226). At its core, Wilson’s plan emphasized his faith in the ability to create “a scientific peace” through “the force of reason” (Beinart 2010, 17). In proposing his plan, Wilson asserted both messianism and internationalism, saying that “all the peoples of the world” were “partners in this interest” and that the Fourteen Points were “the only possible program” that could work for the world. Only “open covenants of peace” would be allowed between nations, rather than secret treaties. He demanded “absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas.” The only exception to this would be an “international action”
to enforce “international covenants.” Declaring equality among nations, Wilson sought the “removal” of “all economic barriers and the establishment” of equal trading rights. He advocated for a reduction of all national armaments “to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety”; crucially, this would also be overseen internationally. The peoples of the world, including in colonial territories, should have equal consideration with the governments administering those areas. Russia would be welcomed to free society, and Belgium would be restored because “without this healing act the whole structure and validity of international law” would be “forever impaired.” Again advocating for the rights of peoples, Wilson called for invaded French territory to be evacuated, the “frontiers of Italy” to be adjusted along “clearly recognizable lines of nationality,” the peoples of Austria-Hungary to have “the freest opportunity for autonomous development,” guarantees of independence for the Balkan states, self-determination for the various peoples of the Ottoman Empire, and “an independent Polish state” (Wilson 1918a).

Finally, and most importantly, Wilson called for “a general association of nations” formed “for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.” Wilson forcefully argued, in proposing the League of Nations, that only internationalism could successfully achieve the goals of the Fourteen Points and preserve peace. Furthermore, Wilson readily embraced sacrifice to ensure his goals were met. He asserted, “We are willing to fight and to continue to fight until” the achievement of American goals “because we wish the right to prevail.” Americans would be “ready to devote their lives, their honor, and everything that they possess” to this cause. Indeed, “the people of the United States
could” not possibly act upon any other principle. For Wilson, World War I had turned into a final test of American exceptionalism, and he expected to win in this “moral climax of this culminating and final war for human liberty” (Wilson 1918a).

The war would come to a climax, and Wilson and the United States achieved victory. Subsequently, people from all over the world looked to Wilson to bring the world into a new age of peace (Dawley 2003, 335-336). Wilson himself was thankful to God for the opportunity granted by American victory, boasting of how the fate of the world had depended on America:

What we all thank God for with the deepest gratitude is that our men went in force into the line of battle just at the critical moment when the whole fate of the world seemed to hang in the balance and threw their fresh strength into the ranks of freedom in time to turn the whole tide and sweep of the fateful struggle, turn it once for all, so that thenceforth it was back, back, back for their enemies, always back, never again forward! After that it was only a scant four months before the commanders of the Central Empires knew themselves beaten; and now their very empires are in liquidation! (Wilson 1918b)

Though the war was over, the fate of the world would continue to depend on the actions of America in Wilson’s view, as he stated that the U.S. would “give order and organization” to “peace not only for ourselves but for the other peoples of the world as well.” America would achieve “international justice.” Indeed, Wilson himself would ensure this messianic and internationalist goal by going overseas to the Paris Peace Conference because the Allies “very reasonably” wanted his “personal counsel.” Wilson sincerely believed he had no choice but to go, even at the possible expense of domestic issues, saying he knew of “no business or interest which should take precedence” to the peace settlements. Furthermore, he was obligated to go because “the gallant men of our armed forces on land and sea” had “consciously fought for the ideals which they knew to be the ideals of their country,” even accepting these ideals “as the substance of their own
thought and purpose.” Therefore, Wilson felt he owed it to the soldiers to play his “full part in making good what they offered their life’s blood to obtain” (Wilson 1918b). America’s ideals would be the central part of the new international peace program.

Wilson was so determined to get the peace treaty to create the League of Nations that he became willing to give up some of his other objectives at the Paris Peace Conference. In particular, he assented to a much more severely fierce punishment of Germany. For Wilson, though, he must have felt justified to embrace these negatives because of the overall objectives he was able to achieve (Link 1979, 98). Embracing negatives out of the conviction of overall righteousness is another aspect of American exceptionalism (Koh 2005, 116). Indeed, Wilson did have many significant accomplishments due to his efforts. These included the restoration of Belgium, the return of the territory of Alsace-Lorraine to France, and the creation of an independent Poland with international guarantees of protection. Furthermore, many peoples in Central Europe and the Balkans had achieved self-determination. German power to resume any sort of offensive warfare had been eliminated for the time being. Finally, Wilson’s brainchild – the League of Nations – would be a reality (Link 1979, 102).

Still, though Wilson had achieved the creation of the League of Nations with the Treaty of Versailles, he had to get the treaty ratified in the United States Senate. To this end, Wilson advocated for the League with all the messianic rhetoric he could muster. He stated his belief that the League of Nations had been what America had “dreamed at our birth” and that rejecting it would “break the heart of the world” (Link 1979, 107). Despite his weakened physical condition after being abroad, Wilson decided to go on a speaking tour of the country to rally public support for the League of Nations and ratification of the
treaty. He asserted that America had not chosen to enter onto the world stage; rather, the reality of American exceptionalism had, in fact, inevitably brought the U.S. upon the world stage. Wilson felt the U.S. could not reject the opportunity to lead the world and fulfill the ideals and goals it had pursued since its founding (Link 1979, 120-121).

Though he suffered a debilitating stroke on the tour, Wilson even pushed to make approval of the League an important issue in the 1920 presidential election, which he had wanted to run in (Link 1979, 125).

Wilson’s main antagonist in the fight to ratify the League was Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts. In a sense, the League fight was a battle between two different visions of exceptionalism – messianic internationalism versus messianic Americanism. Lodge, as a Reservationist, “saw his battle with Wilson as a tribute to his dead friend” Theodore Roosevelt. He wanted to make sure that only Congress could have America enter a war – not the League. Lodge believed Wilson’s conception of the League “was a dangerous delusion.” Instead of putting teeth to the organization, Lodge and other Republicans in the tradition of Roosevelt’s messianic Americanism preferred to make it “a mere debating society, which would change nothing fundamental about international affairs” (Beinart 2010, 48-49).

Despite his desire to see the Senate ratify the treaty and approve the League, Wilson was unwilling to compromise, preferring to oppose all reservations to the treaty rather than compromise and possibly get a form of it passed. In fighting for the League, Wilson actually preferred to have ratification fail in the short run because of his absolute messianic conviction that his cause would ultimately succeed (Link 1979, 127).

Essentially, Wilson took on the role of a “prophet,” warning of consequences if the U.S.
did not join the League. Toward the end of his second term, he told Congress that not joining the League would be an affront to the founders of America; the U.S. could not “refuse this role of champion without putting the stigma of rejection upon the great and devoted men who brought its government into existence and established it in the face of almost universal opposition and intrigue.” He believed that history was at a crucial moment “when Democracy should prove its purity and its spiritual power to prevail.” Furthermore, it was “surely the manifest destiny of the United States to lead in the attempt to make this spirit prevail.” The “triumph of Democracy” would depend on U.S. success as “the sample democracy of the world.” Wilson summed up his absolute conviction of this, saying:

I have not so much laid before you a series of recommendations, gentlemen, as sought to utter a confession of faith, of the faith in which I was bred and which it is my solemn purpose to stand by until my last fighting day. I believe this to be the faith of America, the faith of the future, and of all the victories which await national action in the days to come, whether in America or elsewhere. (Wilson 1920)

Without question, Wilson had no intention of going against what he believed was truly right for America and for the world.

Overall, Wilson’s rhetoric and actions before, during, and after World War I showed that his beliefs in American exceptionalism are most accurately described as messianic internationalism. Though he had tried to stay neutral, Wilson had shown global leadership in trying to attain peace; furthermore, this peace was to have the ideals of freedom and democracy as its foundation. Entering the war, Wilson sought to have America win and fulfill a destiny that had started with its own victory in the Revolutionary War, so that the world would have the same opportunity to build a positive future. America would meet “a supreme moment of history” and win, for “the hand of
God” was “upon the nations” (Wilson 1917c). Finally, after the war, Wilson sought to create a just peace that would improve the lives of millions and create a League of Nations to preserve that peace. Though his vision was not immediately realized, Wilson’s “final achievement was to lay strong foundations for the tradition that the American people can best serve mankind by committing their resources and power to the quest for peace through international cooperation” (Link 1979, 19). Woodrow Wilson’s presidency had established a legacy of American duty to spread freedom and of internationalism as a way to bring American ideals to the rest of the world.
Leading the United States through one of its greatest foreign policy challenges during World War II, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt exemplified messianic internationalism through his firm conviction that America’s role in the war was part of its mission in the world and his efforts to bring about a lasting peace through the establishment of the United Nations. Revealing his own conception of American exceptionalism, FDR sought to capture the idealism of President Woodrow Wilson in his attempts to create a postwar order, but he also had his own unique approach to structuring global power based on more flexibility and great power cooperation. As James MacGregor Burns notes, FDR “as war leader was a deeply divided man – divided between the man of principle, of ideals, of faith, crusading for a distant vision” and “the man of Realpolitik, of prudence, of narrow, manageable, short-run goals, intent always on protecting his power and authority in a world of shifting moods and capricious fortune” (Burns 1970, vii). In this way, FDR tried to use a relatively realistic attitude to achieve his overarching goals. His actions were consistent with several specific types of exceptionalism, as he demonstrated “exceptional global leadership and activism” (Koh 2005, 119), pursued “an international order” based on American values (Ruggie 2005, 304), and essentially crusaded for democracy (Hoffmann 2005, 226).

Roosevelt had a particular sense of destiny and naturally saw himself as being right for the job of President of the United States (Costigliola 2012, 206). Of course,
when FDR came into office, his main priority and challenge was combating the Great Depression; thus foreign policy was for many years a lesser concern by comparison. In his first inaugural address, FDR referred to exceptionalism in trying to reassure people that America would make it through the Depression. He asserted the inevitability of the U.S. overcoming challenges in saying “this great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper.” He boldly declared that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” More specifically on foreign policy, FDR said that he “would dedicate this Nation to the policy of the good neighbor,” meaning that the U.S. would respect itself and “the rights of others,” as well as respecting “obligations” and “the sanctity” of “agreements in and with a world of neighbors” (Roosevelt 1933a). A limited sense of messianism and internationalism can be seen here; FDR was proclaiming that the U.S. would have virtuous intentions, and he placed emphasis on a world order governed by international law. His selection of Cordell Hull as secretary of state also sent a clear signal that he would pursue a foreign policy guided by these principles (Dallek 1979, 34).

While primarily focusing on the New Deal and combating the Depression, Roosevelt had many interests in foreign affairs; “after setting domestic programs in motion, he hoped to deal with economic and political issues abroad” (Dallek 1979, 25). His general goal was to improve the climate of international relations and increase prospects for lasting peace through cooperation. Proclaiming America’s good intentions, FDR “declared his commitment to equality and cooperation among the American Republics, acknowledging the independence of each and the need to abolish all artificial barriers hampering the healthy flow of trade.” At the same time, he began to work toward
and eventually accomplished normalization of relations with the Soviet Union, believing this would be crucial to achieve such global cooperation (Dallek 1979, 39).

Roosevelt also demonstrated exceptional global leadership in advocating for global disarmament during this period as a way to achieve peace. Specifically, his proposal was “aimed” at Nazi German chancellor Adolf Hitler (Dallek 1979, 43). The idea of disarmament ultimately failed as Hitler would withdraw Germany from the League of Nations and began a major expansion of his armed forces. However, FDR’s advocacy of disarmament was meant more as a signal of America’s opposition to aggression by Germany and Japan rather than as a realistic goal. Because of Americans’ opposition to the risk of “foreign wars,” he felt “compelled to rely on symbols to answer challenges and threats from abroad” (Dallek 1979, 529). In this instance, FDR was maintaining his credibility with pacifists in the U.S. while also “strengthening his case with the Congress and the country for a larger Navy” to provide for a strong defense (Dallek 1979, 68). FDR also gave in to pressure for enactment of the Neutrality laws, which was “less an act of conviction than of realistic calculation about what he could achieve at home and abroad” at that time (Dallek 1979, 530).

While he had supported U.S. entry into the League of Nations as a vice presidential candidate in 1920, Roosevelt articulated a more nuanced view of U.S. involvement with the League as president during the Depression. Recognizing prevalent public attitudes, FDR clearly stated that the U.S. would not be a member of the League; however, he also emphasized that America was “cooperating openly in the fuller utilization of the League of Nations machinery than ever before.” He asserted that the League, despite problems, was a fundamental “prop in the world peace structure,”
providing for “a common meeting place,” establishing “machinery which serves for internal discussion,” creating cooperation in areas such as “labor and health and commerce and education,” and helping settle “many disputes great and small between Nations great and small.” Overall, FDR still summed up the purpose of the League in a Wilsonian way, declaring that “the old policies, the old alliances, the old combinations and balances of power” had proven “themselves inadequate for the preservation of world peace.” Rather, America would assist the League as part of its mission in the world to create a peace consistent with Wilson’s vision. In fact, FDR challenged the world to think about achieving peace in a specifically Wilsonian way, saying, “It is but an extension of the challenge of Woodrow Wilson for us to propose in this newer generation that from now on war by governments shall be changed to peace by peoples” (Roosevelt 1933b).

Still, Roosevelt was generally cautious about foreign affairs for much of the 1930s as he focused on the New Deal. However, as international relations deteriorated from the rise of totalitarianism, FDR was increasingly concerned. In 1937 in Chicago, he chose to criticize more boldly this trend and explain how events abroad might threaten the U.S. He began his “quarantine” speech by contrasting the U.S. from other areas of the world, saying that the world had begun a descent into a “reign of terror and international lawlessness.” Indeed, he asserted that, while the U.S. was enjoying relative “happiness and security and peace,” the “very foundations of civilization” were being “seriously threatened” as “the landmarks and traditions which” had “marked the progress of civilization toward a condition of law, order and justice” were “being wiped away.” Seeking to impress upon Americans a stark moral contrast between themselves and totalitarian governments, FDR explained that “innocent peoples” and “innocent nations”
were “being cruelly sacrificed to a greed for power and supremacy which is devoid of all sense of justice and humane considerations.” He warned that the success of evil forces elsewhere would threaten the U.S.; America would not be able to “escape” or “expect mercy” (Roosevelt 1937).

Having set an alarming tone, Roosevelt also began to articulate more forcefully than earlier in his presidency his conception of America’s mission in the world. He argued that “peace-loving nations must make a concerted effort in opposition to those violations of treaties and those ignorings of humane instincts which today are creating a state of international anarchy and instability.” Significant activism and cooperation in foreign affairs would be needed because there would be “no escape through mere isolation or neutrality.” Presenting a mission consistent with exceptionalism, FDR explained that “those who cherish their freedom” tend to live peacefully, but they would have to “work together for the triumph of law and moral principles in order that peace, justice and confidence may prevail in the world.” Since “international anarchy destroys every foundation for peace,” FDR said that it would be “a matter of vital interest and concern” to the U.S. “that the sanctity of international treaties and the maintenance of international morality be restored.” He almost chastised the public, insinuating that Americans were lucky by declaring that “circumstances of the moment” had allowed for the government to focus on New Deal programs of infrastructure improvements rather than focusing on manpower and defense equipment for war (Roosevelt 1937).

Roosevelt resolved, however, “to look ahead” because freedom and peace “of ninety percent of the population of the world” was “being jeopardized by the remaining ten percent.” Appealing to America’s sense of goodness, FDR said that “the situation”
was “of universal concern” and involved the “moral consciousness of the world.” His immediate policy recommendation was one of “a quarantine” that would “protect the health of the community” of the world “against the spread of the disease.” While he would pursue an overall “policy of peace,” FDR again firmly emphasized his view that “the peace of the world and the welfare and security of every nation,” including the U.S., was “being threatened” since war was “a contagion.” Since, consistent with its unique goodness, America “hate[d] war,” FDR called for being part of international “positive endeavors to preserve peace” (Roosevelt 1937). Privately, as Hitler’s power in Europe increased, FDR began to feel that too many people “thought in terms of appeasement” – views that he believed rose “out of materialism and selfishness” (Burns 1970, 3). The shift toward a fuller embrace of messianic internationalism by FDR continued to build.

The start of World War II was a manifestation of Roosevelt’s fears of international anarchy and lawlessness. In a fireside chat after Germany had invaded Poland, FDR noted that “for four long years a succession of actual wars and constant crises have shaken the entire world and have threatened in each case to bring on the gigantic conflict which is today unhappily a fact.” While pledging to attempt to avoid American involvement in the war itself, FDR called for the use of America’s influence “in seeking for humanity a final peace which will eliminate, as far as it is possible to do so, the continued use of force between nations.” In this way, even at the outset of conflict and while addressing a relatively isolationist public, FDR was already embracing a sense of American exceptionalism along the lines of Woodrow Wilson’s vision for the world. In the more immediate term, FDR called for using “every effort” to keep the war “out of the Americas,” but did not specify that this could involve the use of force. Similarly to
Wilson at the outbreak of World War I, he said the U.S. would be “a neutral nation,” but unlike Wilson, he would not expect “every American” to “remain neutral in thought as well.” No neutral could “be asked to close his mind or his conscience”; this aligned well with FDR’s drawing of sharp moral contrasts between the British and the Germans. Concluding, FDR stated his hatred of war “again and again” (Roosevelt 1939).

Certainly Roosevelt himself was not neutral. Indeed, FDR faced “a daunting political problem: how to gain congressional and popular support for a measure strong enough to give decisive aid to the democracies” while still avoiding a challenge too soon to the isolationist “mood-God of America” (Burns 1970, 43-44). In a sense, FDR was willing to essentially deceive the American people to achieve his goals and help America begin to fulfill its vital role in the world. He felt that, with the full help of U.S. production, the British and American democracies would prove that dictatorships could not win the war (Burns 1970, 51). In advocating for this, FDR continued to tailor his arguments more fully to his messianic and internationalist approach. To begin with, he emphasized the danger to American national security, saying, “Never before since Jamestown and Plymouth Rock has our American civilization been in such danger.” In particular, he focused on explaining the absolute lack of morality of the Nazis:

The experience of the past two years has proven beyond doubt that no nation can appease the Nazis. No man can tame a tiger into a kitten by stroking it. There can be no appeasement with ruthlessness. There can be no reasoning with an incendiary bomb. We know now that a nation can have peace with the Nazis only at the price of total surrender. (Roosevelt 1940)

In equating the Nazis with a “tiger” and “an incendiary bomb,” FDR fully drove home the unreasonable fanaticism of the Nazis as compared to the perceived goodness of Americans; indeed, he stated that “the proposed ‘new order’” of the Axis powers was
“the very opposite” of everything the U.S. stood for. Thus, he argued that the U.S. must act as “the great arsenal of democracy,” providing war supplies to the British (and eventually the Soviets and Chinese) with “the same spirit of patriotism and sacrifice as we would show were we at war.” As part of this, America would send “every ounce and every ton of munitions and supplies” that could possibly be spared “to help the defenders who are in the front lines.” At the same time as urging meeting “the threat to our democratic faith,” FDR asserted the inevitability of U.S. success characteristic of messianism. He said that the U.S. had “every good reason for hope” of “the building of a better civilization in the future” and “no excuse for defeatism.” Through policies including the Destroyers for Bases Agreement and Lend-Lease, FDR asserted “absolute confidence that our common cause” of democratic success against totalitarian “world conquest” would “greatly succeed” (Roosevelt 1940).

Roosevelt continued to advocate for increases in U.S. armament production as the war deepened and Great Britain was left the only nation in Europe still fighting the Nazis. He explained that if the defense of democracy were to fail, “all the population and all the resources of Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia will be dominated by the conquerors.” Because “the total of those populations and their resources in those four continents greatly exceeds the sum total of the population and the resources of the whole of the Western Hemisphere,” he said that America was in real danger and that attempts at peace would not achieve security. FDR chastised “selfish men who would clip the wings of the American eagle in order to feather their own nests.” Rather, the U.S. would embrace a policy more consistent with its exceptional nature, offering “respect for the rights and dignity of all nations” and supporting “all those resolute peoples, everywhere, who are
resisting aggression and are thereby keeping war away from our Hemisphere.” Such support would ensure the inevitability of American and democratic success; “the justice of morality must and will win in the end.” He embraced exceptionalism in arguing that “enduring peace cannot be bought at the cost of other people’s freedom” (Roosevelt 1941a).

Since the British would soon be unable to pay for armaments, Roosevelt proposed Lend-Lease because their defense of freedom was absolutely vital. In a sense, FDR was making the case that America could no longer remain exceptional if it let down its fellow democracy and abrogated its responsibility to help defend freedom. He asked Americans to “say to the democracies: ‘We Americans are vitally concerned in your defense of freedom’” and would put “forth our energies, our resources and our organizing powers to give you the strength to regain and maintain a free world” through offering “ever-increasing numbers” of “ships, planes, tanks, guns,” and other equipment (Roosevelt 1941a).

At the same time, Roosevelt also proposed a concrete vision for the world – a vision of American exceptionalism that reflected messianism and internationalism. He declared in his State of the Union Address:

In future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms. The first is freedom of speech and expression – everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way – everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want – which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants – everywhere in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear – which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction in armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor – anywhere in the world. (Roosevelt 1941a)
To FDR, these four freedoms were not a utopian “vision of a distant millennium,” but rather “a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation.” In other words, a fulfillment of the dream of American exceptionalism was achievable soon. He further connected his vision specifically to the American experience, saying that “since the beginning of our American history, we have been engaged in change – in a perpetual peaceful revolution – a revolution which goes on steadily, quietly adjusting itself to changing conditions.” In essence, FDR called for extending this exceptional, perpetual revolution that was America to the rest of the world in its time of crisis. More so, foreshadowing his attitude once the U.S. was actually involved in the war, FDR said that, with “faith in freedom under the guidance of God,” there could “be no end save victory” in seeking to achieve these goals (Roosevelt 1941a).

Roosevelt ratcheted up the exceptionalist rhetoric to an even greater extend in his third inaugural address a few weeks later. While some people were suggesting “that freedom is an ebbing tide,” FDR argued that Americans specifically “know that this is not true.” Even in the current times of strife, FDR proclaimed his faith that democracy was still progressing and “spreading on every continent – for it is the most humane, the most advanced, and in the end the most unconquerable of all forms of human society.” He connected this “faith of America” to history going back beyond even the founding, linking it to the Middle Ages and the Magna Carta – a nod to the British fighting the Nazis. Furthermore, he emphasized America’s unique role in democratic history:

In the Americas its impact has been irresistible. America has been the New World in all tongues, and to all peoples, not because this continent was a newfound land, but because all those who came here believed they could create upon this continent a new life – a life that should be new in freedom. Its vitality was written into our own Mayflower Compact, into the Declaration of Independence, into the Constitution of the United States, into the Gettysburg Address. Those who first
came here to carry out the longings of their spirit, and the millions who followed, and the stock that sprang from them – all have moved forward constantly and consistently toward an ideal which in itself has gained stature and clarity with each generation. (Roosevelt 1941b)

To FDR, American exceptionalism was, by its very nature, continuously marching forward. He further went all out in connecting President George Washington’s message from his first inaugural address to the current crisis:

The destiny of America was proclaimed in words of prophecy spoken by our first President in his first Inaugural in 1789 – words almost directed, it would seem, to this year of 1941: ‘The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered… deeply, … finally, staked on the experiment intrusted to the hands of the American people.’” (Roosevelt 1941b)

Having connected his conception of America’s destiny to Washington’s, FDR then told Americans that if they should “lose that sacred fire” they would be rejecting “the destiny which Washington strove so valiantly and so triumphantly to establish.” Instead, the U.S. should make “every sacrifice” for national defense with a “strong purpose” to “protect and to perpetuate the integrity of democracy” at home and abroad through “the will of God” (Roosevelt 1941b). Only this mission would honor the nation’s legacy.

These principles of exceptionalism were put firmly into words in the Atlantic Charter, signed by Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Britain and the U.S. would “seek no aggrandizement” or forced “territorial changes.” They would emphasize self-determination in a Wilsonian sense, respecting “the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live.” World trade would be equalized to help promote general “economic prosperity.” Hinting at more forceful efforts toward internationalism in the future, the Charter promised “to bring about the fullest collaboration between all Nations in the economic field with the object of
securing, for all, improved labor standards, economic advancement, and social security.” Defeating “the Nazi tyranny” would allow for peoples to live lives in their countries “in freedom from fear and want.” Freedom of the seas would be reestablished. Finally, they would promote disarmament as part of “the establishment of a wider and permanent system of general security” (Roosevelt 1941c). While committed to many of these principles, FDR viewed many of them as longer-term goals and would also become committed to the maintenance of security by the U.S., United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and China. Indeed, “for the rest of his presidency, he would struggle to fit the square peg of the Four Policemen approach into the round hole of the Atlantic Charter” (Costigliola 2012, 184).

Roosevelt took other concrete actions that stepped up U.S. involvement in addition to policies like Lend-Lease. He had succeeded in getting Congress to pass the Selective Service and Training Act of 1940, the first peacetime draft in U.S. history. In 1941, he prevailed in the struggle to extend the draft by a single vote in the House of Representatives (Burns 1970, 120). Beyond this, FDR stepped up pressure on the Nazis in the Atlantic and the Japanese in the Pacific. He decided to agree that the U.S. would occupy Iceland and defend it from possible attack, taking over for the British, who had occupied Iceland after its ruling country of Denmark had been invaded by Nazi Germany. Indeed, FDR “could have had no doubt as to the seriousness of his move into Iceland.” This would also lead to navy cooperation between the British and Americas; FDR at the time would not offer specific orders about the nature of American assistance to the British. Instead, “he would let these things happen by day-to-day chance and necessity in the fog of Atlantic battle,” but the U.S. was unquestionably “quietly challenging the
Nazis” (Burns 1970, 104-105). Later in 1941, FDR used the German attack on the U.S. destroyer Greer to convince the American public that the Nazis were deliberately stepping up their aggression against the U.S., and he instituted a shoot on sight policy. Again, FDR moved the U.S. closer to full involvement in the war (Burns 1970, 141). The Atlantic was FDR’s first priority.

Still, at the same time, tensions grew between the U.S. and Japan in the Pacific. Though FDR had for a while been “content” to let Secretary of State Cordell Hull “sermonize” to the Japanese, he began to grow tougher with them in opposition to their expansionary actions and plans. He decided to freeze Japanese assets in the U.S., closed the Panama Canal, and took the most serious move of cutting off their supply of oil (Burns 1970, 108-109). While FDR’s policy was “Atlantic First,” his actions in the Pacific proved critical in the Japanese decision to strike against Pearl Harbor (Burns 1970, 128).

The surprise attack by Japan that devastated the American Navy at Pearl Harbor proved the impetus to finally get the U.S. fully involved in World War II. In asking Congress for a declaration of war, Roosevelt asserted his faith in the U.S. and exceptionalism. He boldly declared, “No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.” Embracing messianism, he said that Americans would “make it very certain that this form of treachery shall never again endanger us.” Through “the unbounding determination of our people” and with the help of God, America would “gain the inevitable triumph” (Roosevelt 1941d). On Christmas Eve, FDR further connected the American effort in the war to Christianity, saying, “Our strongest weapon in this war is
that conviction of the dignity and brotherhood of man which Christmas Day signifies” (Burns 1970, 178).

Roosevelt emphasized immediately at the beginning of the war that America would not be motivated simply by “any mere desire for revenge.” Instead, the U.S. would work “to make very certain that the world will never so suffer again.” He emphasized “cooperative action by all the United Nations – military action and economic action” as the way to combat totalitarian forces. Though “the militarists of Berlin and Tokyo started this war,” the “massed, angered forces of common humanity” would “finish it.”

Articulating a stark moral contrast, FDR noted that the enemies knew to fear an Allied victory because it would signify the triumph of freedom:

They know that victory for us means victory for freedom. They know that victory for us means victory for the institution of democracy – the ideal of the family, the simple principles of common decency and humanity. They know that victory for us means victory for religion. And they could not tolerate that. The world is too small to provide adequate ‘living room’ for both Hitler and God. (Roosevelt 1942a)

In saying that Hitler essentially thought himself as equal to God, FDR painted the opposing forces in the most evil terms possible. While the U.S. was “striving to be true” to the “divine heritage” of freedom from God, its “enemies” were “guided by brutal cynicism” and “unholy contempt for the human race.” No compromise would be made as there could be no “successful compromise between good and evil.” Rather, “only total victory” would “reward the champions of tolerance, and decency, and freedom, and faith” (Roosevelt 1942a).

Declaring that the U.S. would fight for the four freedoms he had outlined earlier, Roosevelt declared that the U.S. would happily “pay a heavy price for freedom” and not at all “stop short of these objectives.” He called for Americans to sacrifice and embrace
the U.S. as a Redeemer Nation, as they were “fighting to cleanse the world of ancient evils, ancient ills” (Roosevelt 1942a). Indeed, FDR asserted that Americans had learned to sacrifice and realize “that there is something larger and more important than the life of any individual or of any individual group”; American citizens were realizing “what this Nation is, and what we owe to it.” In effect, he called upon Americans to do their duty in fulfilling America’s exceptional destiny. Internationalism would be vital to this effort; the U.S. would pursue a new international order because “freedom of person and security of property anywhere in the world depend upon the security of the rights and obligations of liberty and justice everywhere in the world.” He stated that the allies of the United Nations were “an association of independent peoples of equal dignity and equal importance” who were all “dedicated to a common cause” of ending war. There could be no question that every nation in the effort was “equally dispensable and dependent one on the other.” FDR connected the mission of World War II to the efforts of patriots in the American Revolution more than a century before (Roosevelt 1942b).

In practice, even as the war effort faced difficulties in its first year, Roosevelt referred to exceptionalism. Particularly notable was his attitude toward the Philippines. As the American resistance in the Philippines began to falter against the Japanese, the idea was proposed of having the Philippines be neutral rather than continuing to resist. FDR responded by asserting that the U.S. must not let the will to resist in “any particular theatre” break against the encirclement by “the predatory powers” of totalitarianism. He explicitly stated that this was because the U.S. was “the most powerful member” of the allied coalition and must not “display weakness in fact or in spirit anywhere.” To do so would be to diminish faith in America’s ability and mission. However, this did not mean
that FDR would doom American troops in the Philippines either. He recognized that American forces had to pull out of the Philippines and relocate to Australia to regroup before future operations could be attempted (Burns 1970, 208-209). Another policy that showed a justification of exceptionalism was the internment of Japanese citizens. This was an example of FDR embracing too much messianism and a major double standard, as he did not resist the tragic internment of Japanese Americans to concentration camps in the U.S. (Burns 1970, 216). Though America’s enemies had engaged in arbitrary imprisonment as well, the double standard was considered justified by FDR because the U.S. was fighting to preserve the free world.

Despite setbacks in 1942, Roosevelt felt assured the forces of the United Nations were increasingly guaranteed success. In his 1943 State of the Union Address, he boasted, “The Axis powers knew that they must win the war in 1942 – or eventually lose everything.” Those enemy forces “who did not believe in the people, who attempted to block their forward movement across history” and “to force them back to servility and suffering and silence” could not possibly prevail against the good forces of “those who put their faith in the people.” He acknowledged the sacrifice that would still be necessary, saying, “A tremendous, costly, long-enduring task in peace as well as in war is still ahead of us.” But, using moralist language, FDR assured Americans that they could take absolute comfort and have the utmost confidence in victory precisely because “the state of this Nation is good – the heart of this Nation is sound – the spirit of this Nation is strong – the faith of this Nation is eternal” (Roosevelt 1943a).

Similar to his connection of America’s efforts in 1941 to Washington’s view of America’s destiny, Roosevelt in 1943 at the dedication of the new Jefferson Memorial
connected the country’s efforts in World War II to the views of President Thomas Jefferson. In this way, he continued to emphasize the connection of American involvement in the war to the nation’s exceptional heritage and historical mission in the world. FDR stated that Jefferson “faced the fact that men who will not fight for liberty can lose it”; likewise, Americans had “faced that fact.” He declared, “Jefferson, across a hundred and fifty years of time, is closer by much to living men than many of our leaders of the years between.” Jefferson’s passion for the cause of liberty “was a cause to which we also are committed, not by our words alone but by our sacrifice.” Indeed, again accentuating the theme of sacrifice, FDR said that “spiritual advancement throughout all” of American history had “called for temporal sacrifices.” Indeed, he very explicitly stated that this had been the case at the time of the founding, saying, “the Declaration of Independence and the very purposes of the American Revolution itself, while seeking freedoms, called for the abandonment of privileges.” FDR urged Americans to draw confidence and inspiration from Jefferson’s example; he had proven “that the seeming eclipse of liberty can well become the dawn of more liberty.” For FDR, there was no doubt that “those who fight the tyranny of our own time” would “come to learn that old lesson.” Finally, FDR noted the importance of faith in this mission, having put Jefferson’s view of America’s exceptional mission into the stone of the memorial:

> The words which we have chosen for this Memorial speak Jefferson’s noblest and most urgent meaning; and we are proud indeed to understand it and share it: “I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.” (Roosevelt 1943b)

Roosevelt’s war strategy reflected an emphasis on his belief in total victory and the inability to come to any sort of compromise with the opposing forces. As he stated himself, FDR went from being “Dr. New Deal” to “Dr. Win-the-War” (Burns 1970, 553).
He did not make any major attempt to solve the vast tragedy of the Holocaust. This was not, however, because of inhuman indifference. In FDR’s view, “the only way to persuade Hitler to relinquish his grip on his victims was by bribing him or by negotiating with him,” which would be a result short of unconditional surrender and absolute victory. Instead, FDR believed that “the best way to assist the Jews and other helpless peoples” would be to win “the war as quickly and decisively as possible.” At the same time, FDR also tried to destroy the will of enemy populations to fight and inspire resistance in countries occupied by the Nazis. The forces of the United Nations engaged in a major propaganda campaign, getting across its message through “radio, films, leaflets, posters, press, and all possible media” (Burns 1970, 385-386).

Another aspect of Roosevelt’s strategy was an emphasis on the involvement of science in the national war effort, which would of course eventually prove crucial in the ultimate American victory in World War II. He sought to embrace science as a way to preserve free civilization. In particular, he was concerned with developing the atomic bomb before the Germans could do so, and he had been worried about this even before American participation in the war had begun. To this end, he established the National Defense Research Committee, and he soon instituted American cooperation with the British on the project (Burns 1970, 250-251). Science would be part of the messianic effort to rid the world of evil forces.

Roosevelt’s strategy also embraced a vision of American exceptionalism in regards to China and its postwar role in maintaining world peace. FDR tried to treat China in a way that would recognize a role for it in being “a bulwark of Asian stability and democracy after the war,” as well as a crucial linchpin in the future American role in
Asia. This was both a military and idealistic goal for FDR. He felt that sending supplies and money to China would help it resist the Japanese and prepare it for its crucial postwar role. Furthermore, he felt he was giving the Nationalist government of China led by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek more “legitimacy” through involving it in some deliberations (Burns 1970, 544). Of course, in the end, FDR’s hopes for China would not be fulfilled.

James MacGregor Burns has argued explicitly that Roosevelt did indeed seek to actively craft actual policy to implement some of his idealistic goals. He cited “Big Power unity and cooperation, the complete eradication of Nazism, general disarmament, a United Nations with power to enforce the peace, and a variety of international agencies and arrangements for specific purposes in education, transportation, relief, refugees, and many other fields” as examples of FDR’s institution-building attempts to achieve his goals (Burns 1970, 547-548). Furthermore, FDR was willing to “subordinate immediate military advantage to broader goals” in some cases, such as his eventual decision to directly attack Germany rather than try to encircle it and his decision “to recover the Philippines largely for symbolic reasons despite practical military arguments for bypassing them” (Burns 1970, 548-549).

Roosevelt also had strong views against colonialism consistent with his attitude of messianic internationalism. He believed the French record of colonialism in Indochina was “Western colonialism of the worst sort.” Furthermore, this view also revealed FDR’s favorable conception of America’s role in similar activities, as he viewed France’s rule of Indochina as “an utter contrast with the American record in the Philippines.” Thus, FDR continuously emphasized that he wanted Indochina to be put under a UN trusteeship after
the war ended rather than returned to France (Burns 1970, 379). More generally, FDR wanted to prevent colonial peoples from sliding “back into the same semi-slavery” (Costigliola 2012, 183). However, FDR was still realistic and unwilling to pressure the British or Soviets too hard in an effort to avoid disrupting the alliance (Burns 1970, 380). Instead, FDR hoped through his personal influence to influence the other allies after the war to resolve these issues in ways more consistent with his views (Burns 1970, 593). Specifically, FDR wanted to grant the Philippines independence immediately after the war as a demonstration of America’s exceptional nature. Doing so “would set an example for” for the colonial powers of the world, and FDR even hoped to possibly grant independence in August 1945 and to be there for it in person (Burns 1970, 596).

Opposing the slavery of colonialism was part of Roosevelt’s view that the U.S. had “become an active partner in the world’s greatest war against human slavery” and the fighting against the threat of “gangster rule.” As FDR increasingly looked toward the postwar order, he said, “Sacrifices that we and our allies are making impose upon us all a sacred obligation to see to it that out of this war we and our children will gain something better than mere survival.” The main objective for FDR above all was to be security, but this to him meant “physical security,” “economic security, social security,” and “moral security” in “a family of Nations.” These nations would “join together in a just and durable system of peace.” American had an exceptional “obligation under God to serve this Nation in its most critical hour – to keep this Nation great – to make this Nation greater in a better world” (Roosevelt 1944a).

Still, the postwar order would not become as clear until after the invasion of Europe by Britain and the U.S. on D-Day. Speaking to the American people in a fireside
chat, Roosevelt asked them to join him in a national prayer for the success of their mission. He asked “Almighty God” to help them succeed in their “struggle to preserve our Republic, our religion, and our civilization, and to set free a suffering humanity.” Though “their road” would “be long and hard,” FDR had no doubt whatsoever that “by the righteousness of our cause, our sons will triumph.” He explained that they fought “to end conquest,” “to liberate,” “to let justice arise,” and promote “tolerance and good will among” all of God’s people. With faith “in our united crusade” and help from God, the U.S. and its allies would “prevail over the unholy forces” of the enemy (Roosevelt 1944b).

Though Roosevelt had always stressed that the main focus must be on winning the war, he continuously thought about how to structure the postwar peace in an effort to prevent others from having a greater ability to shape the postwar world (Burns 1970, 354). Roosevelt particularly addressed this to the public in his fourth inaugural address in 1945 when it was increasingly clear that the war would be won. He stated, “We Americans of today, together with our allies, are passing through a period of supreme test,” a “test of our courage – of our resolve – of our wisdom – of our essential democracy.” He noted that the successful passing of this test would be “a service of historical importance which men and women and children will honor throughout all time.” More so, FDR had no doubt that America had been meeting and would continue to meet the test of its exceptionalism: “I know that it is America’s purpose that we shall not fail.” Even more than that, FDR asserted that America would “strive for perfection,” and though it would “not achieve it immediately” and would “make mistakes,” they would hopefully “never be mistakes which result from faintness of heart or abandonment of
moral principle.” Mistakes would be excusable if in the name of morality. FDR asserted his belief in internationalism as well, saying Americans had “learned that we cannot live alone” and “that our own well-being is dependent on the well-being of other Nations, far away.” Americans were now “citizens of the world, members of the human community.” He also attributed America’s exceptionalism to God, who had “blessed our land in many ways,” including giving “our people stout hearts and strong arms with which to strike mighty blows for freedom and truth” and giving “to our country a faith which has become the hope of all peoples in an anguished world” (Roosevelt 1945a). The U.S., to FDR, would unquestionably meet this redeeming mission for the world. Additionally, FDR sought a “postcolonial world that would welcome U.S. business and values” (Costigliola 2012, 184).

Still, there was an aspect of realism distinct from Woodrow Wilson’s postwar vision that was present in Roosevelt’s plans for the postwar world. FDR clearly recognized that “inflexible principles had destroyed Wilson’s dream” and had been very concerned about avoiding a repetition of his failure (Costigliola 2012, 212). The main part of Roosevelt’s plan was the Four Policemen approach, which would rely upon the power and influence of the U.S., U.K., Soviet Union, and China in various areas of the world to maintain order and peace. In his conception, Europe would be managed by the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom. The U.S. would preserve freedom of the seas, keep order in parts of Asia with China, and maintain the integrity of the Western Hemisphere. Furthermore, “to prepare for this responsibility Roosevelt was overseeing construction of the world’s largest navy and air force and a global network of air and naval bases” (Costigliola 2012, 184). The Four Policemen would also legitimate their
power through the United Nations Security Council, taking responsibility for promoting “global prosperity” and guiding “colonies toward gradual independence” (Costigliola 2012, 211). Ultimately, FDR envisioned “a long postwar transition during which Americans would have to tolerate spheres of influence in Eastern Europe and other departures from the Wilsonian principles of the Atlantic Charter” (Costigliola 2012, 316). This approach would, in FDR’s mind, use a realistic method to achieve his overall idealistic goals and lead to a more durable peace based on cooperation.

The development of the postwar order was the main purpose of Roosevelt’s trip to the Yalta Conference with Prime Minister Churchill and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. FDR went to Yalta likely knowing that it would shorten his life; even more significantly to U.S.-Soviet relations, Stalin arguably knew this (Costigliola 2012, 239). Reporting on the conference to Congress, FDR emphasized messianic internationalism as an approach, but within that general attitude tried to explain that this would be a long process. Echoing an earlier theme, he explained “that there is not room enough on earth for both German militarism and Christian decency.” FDR spoke about the conference of the United Nations that would meet in San Francisco within a few weeks, at which he expected “a definite charter or organization” would be devised “under which the peace of the world will be preserved and the forces of aggression permanently outlawed.” Internationalism would allow for “the machinery of peace” to be set up to prevent war “from happening again.” He specifically stressed the cooperative nature of the peace he envisioned:

The structure of world peace cannot be the work of one man, or one party, or one Nation. It cannot be just an American peace, or a British peace, or a Russian, a French, or a Chinese peace. It cannot be a peace of large Nations – or of small Nations. It must be a peace which rests on the cooperative effort of the whole world. (Roosevelt 1945b)
FDR urged the U.S. not to repeat its mistakes of the aftermath of World War I. He said that there could “be no middle ground here”; either the U.S. would “have to take the responsibility for world collaboration, or we shall have to bear the responsibility for another world conflict.” More specifically, he said:

Twenty-five years ago, American fighting men looked to the statesmen of the world to finish the work of peace for which they fought and suffered. We failed them then. We cannot fail them again, and expect the world to survive. (Roosevelt 1945b)

Spelling out what his conception of internationalism meant, FDR asserted that the United Nations would mean “the end of the system of unilateral action, the exclusive alliances, the spheres of influence, the balances of power, and all the other expedients that have been tried for centuries – and have always failed.” Rather, the U.S. would help lead the world through “a universal organization in which all peace-loving Nations will finally have a chance to join.” Though in reality FDR was planning to rely on the Four Policemen to maintain the world peace through the UN, he did envision the organization as the best hope of the world overall. FDR felt confident the U.S. would accept his proposed system “as the beginnings of a permanent structure of peace upon which we can begin to build, under God, that better world in which our children and grandchildren – yours and mine, the children and grandchildren of the whole world – must live, and can live.” He concluded by telling Congress and Americans that he felt this message “very deeply” (Roosevelt 1945b).

But perhaps the most important part of Roosevelt’s postwar strategy was that he would continue to be the president. Though his health had been declining, FDR “continued his strategy for cheating death – and for cheating those who calculated on his dying in office.” Since he believed “he was a man of destiny, he did not prepare any of
his vice presidents” (Costigliola 2012, 253). At the San Francisco conference, FDR had planned “to rally support for his postwar vision by speaking eloquently about America’s own struggle for unity after 1776” (Costigliola 2012, 337). Here again Roosevelt was preparing to refer to exceptionalism, comparing the current world situation to that of the American states under the Articles of Confederation. However, Roosevelt died in April of 1945, shortly before the victory in Europe and a few months before victory over Japan. According to James MacGregor Burns, Roosevelt, “like Lincoln and Wilson, died fighting for his ideals” after having pursued his goals out of “the depth of his conviction” (Burns 1970, 608). The country and the world mourned his passing. Only part of his postwar vision of messianic internationalism would end up being enacted; the United Nations was established and America did not turn to isolationism in foreign policy. However, the Cold War began as communism and democratic capitalism split the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union. In Frank Costigliola’s (2012) view, this was significantly influenced by Roosevelt being absent from the world stage during subsequent crises. Overall, though, FDR left a legacy that subsequent presidents would have to deal with even if not pursuing exactly the same sort of foreign policy. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s conception of American exceptionalism was that of the U.S. fulfilling its historical destiny and doing so through leading the world to peace through cooperation.
7. Richard Nixon’s Realist Exemplarism

President Richard Nixon sought to create conditions for world peace by focusing on a balance of power that would allow the United States to remain an inspiration to other nations, an approach consistent with the third type of American exceptionalism I have proposed – realist exemplarism. Wanting to be extremely involved in foreign policy decisions, “Nixon was determined to be his own secretary of state” (Dallek 2007, 82). While Nixon held a Wilsonian goal of ending major wars, he adopted a realist approach (Dallek 2007, 285). His attempts to use American leadership to create a favorable global equilibrium are consistent with the ideas of the U.S. displaying “exceptional global leadership” (Koh 2005, 119) and “pursuing an international order” (Ruggie 2005, 304). Nixon used “moralism” (Viotti 2010, 108) in explaining America’s role in the world. He felt that “the greatest honor history can bestow is the title of peacemaker” and that the United States would have “the chance to help lead the world at last out of the valley of turmoil and onto that high ground of peace that man has dreamed of since the dawn of civilization.” Saying that the U.S. was “entering an era of negotiation,” Nixon wanted to “cooperate to reduce the burden of arms,” “strengthen the structure of peace,” and prevent people from living “in angry isolation.” Believing that “the heart of America is good,” Nixon sought a peace that would not be “victory over any other people” and
would offer people the chance “to choose their own destiny” (Nixon 1969a). Indeed, by creating a strong balance of power, Nixon hoped that the U.S. could achieve the great goal of making “the next generation the first in this century in which American was at peace with every nation in the world” (Nixon 1970a).

Despite Nixon’s rhetoric, he also embraced more limits on the U.S. role in the world as part of his efforts to create a stable peace. While he warned other nations not to be “tempted by” perceived “weakness” (Nixon 1969a), he also said that “neither the defense nor the development of other nations can be exclusively or primarily an American undertaking.” He sought to “reduce” U.S. “involvement” and “presence in other nations’ affairs” and move to a “sharing of responsibility.” In maintaining a stable balance of power, Nixon was focused particularly on relations with the ideological adversaries of the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. These relationships would be based on national interest and realism; he explained that his purpose was “to avoid a catastrophic collision and to build a solid basis for peaceful settlement of our differences” (Nixon 1970a).

Nixon sought to balance his realist approach with his belief in the exceptionalist idea of the United States being “the hope of the world” (Nixon 1970a). After World War II, “leadership of a whole free world” had fallen to America, leading the U.S. to seek to halt the spread of communism, promote “economic development,” and encourage “other countries to adopt our economic, political, and social ideas.” Nixon felt it was “a noble and unselfish goal in its enthusiasm,” but was “simplistic and occasionally misguided.” The Korean and Vietnam Wars had “sapped too much of our national self-confidence and sense of purpose” and the U.S. “was no longer a giant towering over the rest of the world.
with seemingly inexhaustible resources and a nuclear monopoly.’” Therefore, he rejected appeals for the U.S. “to transform the internal as well as the international behavior of other countries,” saying that while the U.S. would not “acquiesce in the suppression of human liberties,” America must be “concerned with results” because “there are limits to what we can do.” The main responsibility of the U.S. would be “the prevention of a” nuclear “war that could destroy all societies” rather than the “transformation of other societies.” Embracing American exceptionalism in a more limited manner, Nixon said that “no single nation can save the world,” but believed that America would, by its “example, save the cause of peace and freedom for the world” (Nixon 1974) and would thus be able to “fulfill its destiny of being the world’s best hope for liberty, for opportunity, for progress and peace for all peoples” (Nixon 1970a).

Nixon’s Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs and later secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, also had a realist view that matched Nixon’s thinking and significantly influenced his foreign policy. Kissinger was “America’s chief practitioner of realpolitik” (Dallek 2007, 71), drawing some lessons from the peace process of Europe after the Napoleonic Wars (Kissinger 1979, 54). Like Nixon, Kissinger felt that the U.S. had to realize that “the seemingly limitless possibilities of youth” had narrowed and “not every option is open any longer” (Kissinger 1979, 56); the U.S. could not rely on “assumed moral superiority” (Dallek 2007, 370). Kissinger believed the U.S. should not rely on “ultimate solutions to specific problems” and should stop having “the illusion that our exertions had a terminal point” (Kissinger 1979, 58). America had too often scoffed at the idea that its own security “might depend on some sort of equilibrium of power” (Kissinger 1979, 60), so the Nixon Administration would seek “to purge our foreign
Exceptionalist-in-Chief

policy of all sentimentality” and create an equilibrium to “assure stability among the major powers, and even eventual cooperation” (Kissinger 1979, 191-192). Despite being a “malignant” concept in the U.S., the balance of power was “the precondition of peace” (Kissinger 1979, 195); Kissinger felt that the Nixon Administration was creating for the first time in the U.S. a “geopolitical tradition” because “all the strands of our international experience ran counter to what we were trying to accomplish” (Kissinger 1979, 915).

Still, Kissinger combined this realist approach with a belief “in the moral significance of” the U.S.; “only America had both the power and the decency to inspire other peoples who struggled for identity, for progress and dignity” (Kissinger 1979, 229). Acting as an example of freedom, America would have “to reconcile” itself with “imperfect choices, partial fulfillment,” and “the unsatisfying tasks of balance and maneuver,” maintaining “confidence” that “our moral values” could “be achieved only in stages and over a long period of time” (Kissinger 1979, 1089).

Because of the problems of the Vietnam War and recognition of America’s limits, Nixon embraced what was called the Nixon Doctrine toward Asia. America would not “abdicate” its “responsibilities as the most powerful nation in the free world,” but needed “to reassess those responsibilities” because “unrealistic idealism could be impractical and potentially dangerous” (Nixon 1974). While promising that the U.S. would “keep all of its treaty commitments” and “provide a shield if a nuclear power” threatened an ally or “a nation whose survival” was “vital to our security,” he explained that America would “look to the nation directly threatened” by aggression “to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense.” The U.S. would still “furnish military and economic assistance” consistent with its “treaty commitments” (Nixon
In this way, Nixon put his emphasis on a more limited American involvement overseas into a firm policy. He believed that this was the “only sound basis” for the U.S. to continue to help “non-Communist nations and neutrals” and “our Asian allies to defend their independence” (Nixon 1978, 395). The Doctrine was aimed at both helping to “end the war in Vietnam” and “prevent future Vietnams” (Nixon 1969b).

Indeed, Nixon would put his Doctrine into practice in attempting to end the war in Vietnam, as he hoped to eliminate the “irritant” of the war and move on to the “bigger fish to fry” of fashioning a global peace through a stable balance of power (Nixon 1978, 730). While seeking to end the war, Nixon felt he “had to think of the effect of [his] decision on the next generation and on the future of peace and freedom in America and in the world” (Nixon 1969b). Thus, Nixon sought an “honorable” peace, but hoped to ultimately withdraw and “spare the United States from further losses” (Dallek 2007, 105).

The administration did not believe that the U.S. had the time to achieve a full victory in Vietnam (Kissinger 1979, 262). In fact, Kissinger believed that America’s entry into Vietnam had been a result “of a naïve idealism that wanted to set right all the world’s ills and believed American goodwill supplied its own efficacy” (Kissinger 1979, 230).

Though he would not pursue victory, Nixon hoped that his “Madman theory” – the idea that his reputation for anticommunism would scare the Communists – would convince the North Vietnamese to negotiate an end to the war; therefore, he sought to increase military pressure on the Communists (Dallek 2007, 106-107).

Since he could not say that the war could not be won (Dallek 2007, 126), Nixon instead looked to determine how to “win America’s peace.” He believed that a “first defeat in our Nation’s history would result in a collapse of confidence in American
leadership, not only in Asia but throughout the world.” More specifically, he feared that the U.S. would not be able to successfully create a stable equilibrium because it would cease to be respected as a great power. He warned, “a nation cannot remain great if it betrays its allies and lets down its friends.” “Defeat and humiliation in South Vietnam” would result in “recklessness” by other “great powers” that had not “abandoned their goals of world conquest” (Nixon 1969b). While the U.S. would not commit “an essentially narcissistic act of abdication,” it would be willing to “settle for minimum terms” (Kissinger 1979, 1016). Thus, the U.S. quickly offered the North Vietnamese leaders a cease-fire involving the withdrawal of American forces and free elections in South Vietnam. Furthermore, Nixon consistently attempted to persuade the Soviets to push the North Vietnamese into an agreement (Nixon 1969b), revealing his penchant for believing that the great powers could essentially create a stable world order. Furthermore, Nixon and Kissinger worried about a loss of American credibility because “it was easy to imagine just how merciless America’s enemies would become once they realized Uncle Sam could be pushed around” since they themselves could “envision how merciless they would be” in wanting to “crush” opponents and “show them no mercy” (Beinart 2010, 196).

Still, the inability of the U.S. and North Vietnamese leaders to come to an agreement also led Nixon to act upon the Nixon Doctrine by “Vietnamizing” the war. Revealing a more limited view of American exceptionalism, he stated that “the defense of freedom is everybody’s business – not just America’s.” The Johnson Administration had “Americanized the war in Vietnam”; now the Nixon Administration would focus on “Vietnamizing the search for peace.” The U.S. would withdraw its forces as the South
Vietnamese forces were trained and grew stronger; however, Nixon also pledged “to take strong and effective measures” in response to “increased enemy action” (Nixon 1969b). Withdrawal would be “an expression of policy” rather than “collapse” (Kissinger 1979, 298). Nixon acknowledged the U.S. had only “two choices” to end the war – “withdrawal or negotiated peace and Vietnamization.” For Nixon, withdrawal was unacceptable; it would ruin America’s capacity for “exceptional global leadership” (Koh 2005, 119).

Trying to gain the support of a divided public, Nixon used a narrative of American exceptionalism, explaining that “the Wheel of destiny has turned so that any hope the world has for the survival of peace and freedom will be determined by whether the American people have the moral stamina and the courage to meet the challenge of free world leadership.” He beseeched “the great silent majority” of Americans to not allow “the most powerful nation in the world” to allow “the last hopes for peace and freedom of millions of people to be suffocated by the forces of totalitarianism.” North Vietnam could not “defeat or humiliate” the U.S.; “only Americans” could do that (Nixon 1969b).

The administration hoped that withdrawals of U.S. troops would help “win public support so that the troops which remained” and American “enhanced staying power” might give the North Vietnamese “an incentive to negotiate seriously.” However, because “the process of withdrawal was likely to become irreversible,” Nixon would “be in a race between the decline in our combat capability and the improvement of South Vietnamese forces – a race whose outcome was at best uncertain” (Kissinger 1979, 271-272). Nixon decided to increase the military pressure on North Vietnam by bombing and invading its sanctuaries in neighboring Cambodia and Laos; he was “convinced that the combined effect of the military pressure from the secret bombing and the public pressure from [his]
repeated invitations to negotiate would force the Communists to respond” (Nixon 1978, 390). This would also be a way to continue U.S. involvement in the war while withdrawing troops to satisfy the public. By 1970, Nixon felt Vietnamization had been successful enough to announce large withdrawals, a process that would continue throughout his presidency (Nixon 1978, 448). The bombings in Cambodia and Laos – countries technically not involved in the war – were a double standard Nixon felt necessary to help America end the war honorably. Nixon was convinced he was making the right decision, believing history would look upon his move as comparable to Winston Churchill’s views that confronting Nazi Germany was necessary rather than appeasing Adolf Hitler in order to achieve peace (Nixon 1970, 462).

Feeling that the U.S. and South Vietnamese incursions into Cambodia had been successful, Nixon lowered his threshold for what a favorable peace agreement would entail, deciding that the U.S. could “consider agreeing to a cease-fire in place in South Vietnam without first requiring that the North Vietnamese” withdrew their forces (Nixon 1978, 468). Though the “commitment to Vietnamization was progressively reducing other options” (Kissinger 1979, 476), Nixon believed “Vietnamization was working,” even viewing the attempted North Vietnamese invasion in 1972 “as a sign of desperation” (Nixon 1978, 587). Thus, he decided to continue to militarily pressure North Vietnam while attempting to again push the Soviet Union to stop supplying arms to the Communist forces and convince them that “great powers” should “follow the principle that they should not directly or indirectly encourage any other nation to use force or armed aggression against one of its neighbors” (Nixon 1978, 587-589). Defeating major North Vietnamese offensives would, in Nixon’s view, force them to settle (Kissinger
1979, 1111). Mindful of the 1972 presidential election, Nixon also sought to avoid a
defeat in Vietnam that would make his major achievements of détente with the Soviet
Union and new relations with China appear to be “appeasement” (Dallek 2007, 372). An
agreement was almost reached when North Vietnam “finally separated the military and
political questions,” but the agreement was not concluded as South Vietnamese President
Nguyen Van Thieu and the U.S. could not agree on finalizing the deal and the North
Vietnamese changed their offer (Kissinger 1979, 1345).

As a result, Nixon decided to try to force a settlement with the massive Christmas
bombing, “using B-52s on a sustained basis for the first time over the northern part of
North Vietnam” (Kissinger 1979 1448); because of the significance of the brutal
devastation, the North Vietnamese were forced to negotiate again (Dallek 2007, 446). For
Nixon, not bombing North Vietnam would have caused the U.S. to “cease to be a
respected great power” (Nixon 1978, 602). The U.S. had “won” its “gamble” with the
destructive bombing and was able to secure the Paris Agreement at the beginning of
Nixon’s second term (Kissinger 1979, 1459). Kissinger felt the Paris Agreement was
possible because North Vietnam finally accepted “the continued existence of the Saigon
government”; it also “called for an immediate cease-fire in place throughout Vietnam; for
the withdrawal of all remaining American troops”; and “for the release of prisoners of
war throughout Indochina.” Finally, it “prohibited” the “infiltration of” North Vietnamese
troops and equipment “into South Vietnam” (Kissinger 1982, 9). President Theiu was
pressured into acceptance of it (Kissinger 1979, 1470). Nixon said that the agreement was
“a peace” that would contribute “to the prospects of peace in the whole world” (Nixon
1973b); furthermore, the U.S. had demonstrated it was “a reliable partner in the defense of liberty” in giving the South Vietnamese the opportunity for freedom (Nixon 1974).

Despite his pronouncements of U.S. success, Nixon privately “doubted that the treaty would end the fighting” and “hoped the South Vietnamese had the wherewithal to resist on their own” (Dallek 2007, 453). If fighting started again, he hoped a limited military response might be possible, but consistent with his more limited view of exceptionalism, felt that the U.S. was finally done with the irritant of the war. Since “there was not much hope that the two sides would learn to reconcile” (Kissinger 1982, 28), Nixon attempted to offer North Vietnam aid to keep them from resuming their aggression (Kissinger 1982, 38). However, the agreement would soon be breached, while at the same time, Congress curtailed economic aid and prohibited a military response. Furthermore, the discovery of Nixon’s attempts to cover up the Watergate break-in eroded his ability to respond to North Vietnamese aggression (Kissinger 1982, 327). Still, despite his doubts, Nixon asserted after his presidency that the survival of the South Vietnamese “for more than two years after the peace agreement” had proven “the will and mettle of the South Vietnamese people and their desire to live in freedom.” He ultimately blamed Congress for keeping the U.S. from enforcing the peace agreement and allowing North Vietnam to succeed in taking over all of Vietnam; Cambodia and Laos fell to communism as well. The divisive war had not succeeded (Nixon 1978, 889).

While dealing with the Vietnam War, Nixon turned his focus to his main goal for foreign policy – the creation of a stable peace through a balance of power. Nixon and Kissinger felt that, “if relations could be developed with both the Soviet Union and China,” the “triangular relationship would give [them] a great strategic opportunity for
peace” (Kissinger 1979, 164). Part of this plan consisted of détente with the Soviet Union; the U.S. would have to create stability and “coexistence on the basis of the balance of forces” so that the Soviets would have no favorable situations to exploit (Kissinger 1979, 119-120). Détente would involve “mutual restraint” and “linkage” of related events and conduct in different areas in the world (Kissinger 1979, 128-129).

Nixon was “prepared to let bygones be bygones,” feeling “the time had come to put US-Soviet relations on a new basis” (Kissinger 1979, 554). He even hoped that meeting the Soviets could isolate the North Vietnamese (Kissinger 1979, 552). In pursuing this balance of power, Nixon was prepared to overcome the sentimentality of American exceptionalism and cooperate more with an opposing ideology; he would “not ask” the Soviets “to sacrifice” their “principles” and realized that both the Soviets and Americans would continue to assist their allies (Nixon 1978, 605). An early test of the new détente and Nixon’s attitude toward the Soviets was the crisis over the Soviet nuclear submarine base at Cienfuegos in Cuba. Nixon decided not to provoke a public confrontation, offering the Soviets “an opportunity to withdraw” and avoid the “brink of a nuclear confrontation” (Nixon 1978, 487-489). The Soviets agreed to withdraw and the incident did not affect Nixon’s view that a U.S.-Soviet summit was crucial to his goals and his legacy (Kissinger 1979, 646). Nixon was further prepared to have the summit despite Soviet equipment being used by North Vietnam in the war and was excited that a summit would occur despite the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam (Nixon 1978, 607).

Nixon revealed his realist exemplarist attitude toward American exceptionalism in working with the Soviets. He said that, despite his “reputation” as “a very hard-line, cold-war-oriented, anticommunist” and firm conviction in the American system, he
respected “those who believe” very “strongly in their own systems.” Furthermore, “there
must be room in this world for two great nations with different systems to live together
and work together” (Nixon 1978, 611). Nixon told Soviet General Secretary Leonid
Brezhnev that he would “take no steps directed against the interests of the Soviet Union.”
The U.S. and U.S.S.R. succeeded in coming to an agreement in the Strategic Arms
Limitation Talks (SALT) on the SALT I treaty to limit offensive weapons and the Anti-
Ballistic Missile Treaty with both sides “giving up missile defenses” and “leaving its
population and territory hostage” to an attack. Therefore, both the U.S. and U.S.S.R.,
through “mutual terror,” would have “an ultimate interest in preventing a war.” In this
way, Nixon sought “to involve Soviet interests in ways that would increase their stake in
international stability and the status quo” (Nixon 1978, 617-618). Again, Nixon showed
that he placed the maintenance of a global equilibrium as the highest priority in his
foreign policy, not democracy promotion.

Having held this initial meeting with the Soviets, Nixon resolved to “go forward
to do away with the hotbeds of war that exist in the world” (Nixon 1978, 621). He
asserted that “the foundation” had “been laid for a new relationship between the two most
powerful nations in the world.” In addition to arms limitation agreements, the U.S. and
Soviet Union would seek to cooperate in medicine, the environment, and space
exploration. Furthermore, both nations would “disavow any intention to create spheres of
influence or to conspire against the interests of any other nation.” The U.S. and U.S.S.R.
achieved the recognition that, as nuclear nations, they had “no alternative but to coexist
peacefully, because in a nuclear war there would be no winners, only losers” (Nixon
1972). Power would be used “to keep the peace” and influence would be used over “other nations in conflict or crisis to moderate their behavior” (Kissinger 1979, 1209-1210).

Nixon sought to use American exceptionalism as a reassurance, asserting that no power would be “stronger than the United States of America in the future” and that America must remain “strong in spirit” and “confident of its mission in the world” in order to successfully maintain the vital balance of power. He admitted, “Soviet ideology still proclaims hostility to some of America’s most basic values” (Nixon 1972). Détente would not be able to change that, nor would “rhetorical crusades” (Kissinger 1982, 237). Nixon’s attitude toward American exceptionalism was fundamentally connected to his realist goals. By creating a stable balance of power, the U.S. would prevail in peaceful competition; fear of such competition showed “a serious lack of faith in the American people.” The administration believed that the free nations of the West “would win” their “historical bet” (Kissinger 1982, 243). While the U.S. would not “condone the suppression of fundamental liberties,” it would have to continue to recognize the absolute importance of a stable international system (Kissinger 1982, 255). Indeed, Nixon believed the only way to possibly help lessen Soviet repression was to have a better relationship with them. While asserting he “never had any illusions about the brutally repressive nature of Soviet society,” he believed “the more public pressure we placed on the Soviet leaders, the more intransigent they would become.” The only way “to be heard” would be to have access inside the thick “walls of the Kremlin.” Therefore, Nixon scoffed at objections in Congress to granting the Soviets most favored nation trade status, thinking it “utterly unrealistic” to expect the Soviets to change at all because of a refusal
“to extend MFN status” to them (Nixon 1978, 876). Kissinger felt that too much idealism from the U.S. hurt the promotion of freedom and human rights (Kissinger 1982, 1030).

Détente was deemed necessary and “indispensable for the peace of the world” (Nixon 1978, 1029). Thus, Nixon continued to pursue summits with the Soviet Union and increased cooperation. At the same time, by creating a new relationship with China, Nixon successfully increased the pressure on the Soviet Union to improve its relationship with the U.S. At the second summit meeting, Nixon felt General Secretary Brezhnev had tried “to demonstrate that the U.S.-Soviet relationship was more important than the U.S.-Chinese relationship, and that if we had to choose between the two our ties to the Soviet Union would prevail” (Nixon 1978, 878). While not achieving a second SALT agreement, the two sides did reach an “Agreement on the Prevention of Nuclear War,” which would attempt to make the U.S. and U.S.S.R. adhere “to standards of behavior” (Kissinger 1982, 285). Before the third summit not long before his resignation over Watergate, Nixon criticized the newest “fashionable outrage” regarding “Soviet repression of political dissidents and their restriction of Jewish emigration,” believing it risked hurting détente (Nixon 1978, 1024). For Nixon, “the alternative to détente” would be “a return to constant confrontation, and a shattering setback to our hopes for building a new structure of peace in the world.” What was most important for achieving a long-term success consistent with American exceptionalism was the “reduction in tensions” and shared “high stakes in preserving a stable international environment” (Nixon 1974). Nixon would leave the ideological struggle between democratic capitalism and communism to be played out on its own.
Similar to his establishment of better relations with the Soviet Union, the other part of the triangulation strategy was to create a new relationship with the communist People’s Republic of China. In this way, Nixon would create a global equilibrium favorable to the U.S. Nixon was focused at the beginning of his administration on “how unproductive continuing Sino-American tensions” should be overcome in reaching “for greater international stability and peace” (Dallek 2007, 105). The “potential of China” was “such that no sensible foreign policy could ignore or exclude it” (Nixon 1978, 552); in fact, Nixon believed failure to improve relations would result in “one day” being “confronted with the most formidable enemy that has ever existed in the history of the world” (Nixon 1978, 557). The ability to improve relations resulted from hostility between the communist Chinese and Soviet governments; thus, the leaders of the U.S. and China finally began “to regard each other in geopolitical rather than ideological terms” (Kissinger 1979, 685). Reflecting both the U.S. emphasis on China and its use of triangulation, Nixon supported Pakistan military in its war against India in 1971 because the U.S. felt it could not allow the Soviet ally of India to defeat the U.S. and Chinese ally Pakistan (Nixon 1978, 527).

The announcement of Kissinger’s secret visit to China in 1971 and the impending presidential visit of Nixon to China in 1972 was viewed as “one of the greatest diplomatic surprises of the century” and “a major development in” the effort “to build a lasting peace in the world” (Nixon 1978, 544). Nixon believed that future “generations” would “have a better chance to live in peace” because of this “moment of historical significance” (Nixon 1978, 552). Furthermore, it would have a “traumatic” effect to isolate the North Vietnamese (Kissinger 1979, 691) and had fundamentally changed “the
bargaining positions between” the U.S. and Soviet Union. Kissinger admitted that America’s “loyal ally,” Taiwan, would not deserve what would happen to it as a result of opening China (Kissinger 1979, 733).

Arriving at the summit in 1972, Nixon reflected that the playing of “‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ had never sounded so stirring to me as on that windswept runway in the heart of Communist China” (Nixon 1978, 559). Nixon told Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai he was “aware of the fact that over a period of years my position with regard to the People’s Republic was one that the Chairman and the Prime Minister totally disagreed with.” The U.S. and China were brought together by “a recognition of a new situation in the world and a recognition” by the U.S. “that what is important is not a nation’s internal political philosophy”; “its policy toward the rest of the world and toward” the U.S. would be more important (Nixon 1978, 562). In this way, Nixon emphasized foreign policy realism over the anticommmunist, democratic sentimentality of American exceptionalism. He would “not ask” the Chinese “to compromise” their “principles, just as” they “would not ask” the U.S. to do so. The U.S. under Nixon would now “look at each country in terms of its own conduct rather than lumping them all together and saying that because they have this kind of philosophy they are all in utter darkness” (Nixon 1978, 565).

By working together, the U.S. and China would “rise to the heights of greatness,” building “a new and better world” based on “a world structure of peace and justice” (Nixon 1978, 566). While acknowledging differences over Vietnam, the two sides would work together out of common “interests” to preserve their “national security” (Nixon 1978, 567-568). In the Shanghai Communiqué, the U.S. and China agreed not to seek
hegemony in Asia and sent a message to the Soviet Union that they would also oppose efforts by “any other major power to dominate Asia” (Nixon 1978, 577). The U.S. was willing to concede that there was one China, of which Taiwan as a province, and that the Chinese should peacefully resolve the issue (Kissinger 1979, 1075). However, the U.S. still asserted its role in providing security for Taiwan (Kissinger 1979, 1080). While Nixon downplayed ideological differences in advocating cooperation, he still asserted American exceptionalism with his “intense belief” that “in peaceful competition” the U.S. system “would prevail.” More so, he believed it was “essential not to let the assumption exist at all” that the Chinese “system will eventually prevail because of its superiority” (Nixon 1978, 579). Once again, Nixon demonstrated that, while seeking a realist balance of power, he felt that peaceful competition would eventually lead to an eventual American triumph in the long-term.

The successful improvements in relations with both China and the Soviet Union made Nixon feel that the U.S. had established a “more durable pattern of relationships among the nations of the world” and that 1972 would “be long remembered as the year of the greatest progress since the end of World War II toward a lasting peace in the world.” While asserting the need for America to work to maintain peace and freedom, Nixon also said that the time had “passed when America will make every other nation’s conflict our own, or make every other nation’s future our responsibility, or presume to tell the people of other nations how to manage their own affairs.” Democracy promotion was not a key component of his foreign policy. Still, by focusing instead on creating “a structure of peace that [could] last,” the United States would continue to be “as bright a beacon of hope for all the world” (Nixon 1973a), again a use of moralism by Nixon to connect his
purposes with American exceptionalism. Kissinger felt the U.S. was “using an era of negotiation to achieve our purposes of securing peace and defending freedom” (Kissinger 1979, 841). Peace would be helped because of having “the two Communist powers competing for good relations with” the U.S.; this “was the essence of the triangular strategy” (Kissinger 1979, 836). Furthermore, by opening China, “the time would be not far off when all the major power centers – the United States, Western Europe, China, and Japan – would be on one side and the Soviet Union on the other” (Kissinger 1979, 1142). In this way, the cause of peace and freedom would ultimately be helped.

In seeking to create a stable peace, Nixon was willing to embrace some of the negative faces of American exceptionalism, including the double standard of interfering internally in the affairs of Chile despite rhetoric about avoiding such actions. After the Cienfuegos crisis in Cuba, Nixon feared the potential election in 1970 of the Communist Chilean presidential candidate Salvador Allende, feeling that it would upset the balance of power and give the Soviet Union another ally in the Western Hemisphere (Kissinger 1979, 654). Thus, Nixon directed the CIA to support opponents of Allende in the election, justifying his actions later by saying that “it would have been the height of immorality to allow the Soviets, the Cubans, and other Communist nations to interfere with impunity in free elections while America stayed its hand.” Rather, “as long as the Communists” attempted to influence elections, the U.S. “should do the same and do it secretly so that it can be effective” (Nixon 1978, 489). Kissinger felt the U.S. was trying “to promote a clear-cut popular choice between the democratic and the totalitarian forces,” but that “the effort was amateurish, being improvised in panic and executed in confusion” (Kissinger 1979, 677). Allende won the election, but the CIA continued to
support opposition to his leadership, and the Nixon Administration knew of a coup in September 1973 against Allende shortly before it occurred (Dallek 2007, 511). Though it did not directly overthrow Allende, the U.S. had fostered “the conditions that persuaded the Chilean military to move against” him (Dallek 2007, 515). Being more concerned with returning Chile to the U.S. side in the balance of power rather than democracy promotion, “reports of severe repression” did not prevent Nixon from supporting the new military junta under dictator General Augusto Pinochet (Dallek 2007, 512).

The Nixon Administration also demonstrated a commitment to “exceptional global leadership” (Koh 2005, 119) in working for peace in the Middle East, even while embroiled in the Watergate scandal in 1973 and 1974. Nixon was focused on maintaining a balance of power militarily in the Middle East (Kissinger 1979, 580), wanting “to construct a completely new set of power relationships” not just “between Israel and the Arabs, but also among the United States, Western Europe, and the Soviet Union” (Nixon 1978, 481). At the beginning of the October 1973 Yom Kippur War between Israel and Egypt and Syria, Kissinger felt that the U.S. was “in a good position to dominate events” (Kissinger 1982, 467). The U.S., both through its own diplomacy and through the United Nations Security Council, would have “to protect” its “ability to play its indispensable role as the guarantor of peace and the repository of the hopes of free people”; thus, it was imperative that the U.S. lead an effort for a Middle East peace process (Kissinger 1982, 468). Nixon felt that “only a battlefield stalemate would provide the foundation on which fruitful negotiations might begin” and that “any equilibrium – even if only an equilibrium of mutual exhaustion – would make it easier to reach an enforceable settlement” (Nixon
1978, 921). Thus, the U.S. countered Soviet supply of arms to Egypt and Syria by offering to replace Israeli equipment losses (Kissinger 1982, 495).

The U.S. and Soviet Union arranged for a cease-fire (Nixon 1978, 936), but continued fighting led Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev to suggest that Soviet and U.S. troops should impose the cease-fire. He also tested the U.S. by threatening to bring in Soviet troops unilaterally. As a result, Nixon decided to put American conventional and nuclear forces on military alert (Nixon 1978, 938-939). The U.S. instead wanted a non-great power United Nations peacekeeping force to monitor the cease-fire and avoid upsetting the global equilibrium (Kissinger 1982, 593). As a result of U.S. actions, Kissinger felt that the U.S. had successfully emerged “as the pivotal factor in the diplomacy” of the Middle East (Kissinger 1982, 612). Kissinger would then engage in “shuttle diplomacy” to push for the disengagement of Israel, Egypt, and Syria from contested land areas of the Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights, creating the basis for a longer lasting peace (Kissinger 1982, 799). U.S. actions, to Nixon, had made it “clear to the moderate leaders of the Arab world that a positive American role was indispensable to achieving a permanent settlement in the Middle East” (Nixon 1974). Nixon’s last major trip before resigning over Watergate was to the Middle East in order “to give tangible expression to a new departure” in which the U.S. would be the significant player in the region (Kissinger 1982, 1124). Visiting Egypt and Syria, Nixon felt he was encouraging the new, better relationships between the U.S. and those countries (Nixon 1978, 1011-1013). Ultimately, Nixon believed his “receptions in Egypt and Syria” and conversations with Anwar Sadat and Hafez al-Assad “confirmed the tremendous potential
of the new role of the United States as a force for peace in the Arab world” (Nixon 1978, 1014).

Though Richard Nixon’s presidency was cut short because of the Watergate scandal, Henry Kissinger felt that his administration had “striven for a revolution in American foreign policy” based on prioritizing the creation of a lasting peace through a stable balance of power (Kissinger 1979, 1476). Indeed, after deciding to resign, Nixon urged Kissinger to continue to serve in the incoming Ford Administration in order to continue the foreign policy that had made Nixon “so proud” (Kissinger 1982, 1206). Insecure about his accomplishments, Nixon hoped that the world was “a safer place” than when he had taken office. Kissinger believed Nixon had truly “understood what was at stake in the world” (Kissinger 1982, 1208). The actions of the Nixon Administration in trying to fashion a balance of power that would preserve the U.S. as a hope for freedom were generally consistent with an approach to American exceptionalism best described as realist exemplarism.
Believing that the United States had erred in foreign policy and needed to prominently embrace human rights to be consistent with American ideals, President Jimmy Carter articulated a viewpoint and took actions consistent with the fourth type of American exceptionalism I have proposed—pragmatic moralism. Trying to correct for the deterioration in international opinion of the U.S., Carter “flashed a smile of friendship and integrity to the world” (Kalb & Kalb 2011, 48). The Carter administration admitted U.S. fallibility and felt it needed a new approach to foreign policy that would embrace “the basic values of the Founding Fathers” because “a nation that saw itself as a ‘beacon on the hill’ for the rest of mankind could not content itself with power politics alone” (Vance 1983, 29). This new approach was rooted in “Carter’s personal philosophy,” as he was focused on making “U.S. foreign policy more humane and moral.” Carter felt that the administrations of Presidents Nixon and Ford had too often embraced a “‘Lone Ranger’ style” and were too focused on “practicing balance-of-power politics” (Brzezinski 1983, 48). From the beginning of his presidency, Carter outlined a vision of correcting for foreign policy flaws, promoting human rights, and improving U.S. international cooperation and the image of America abroad.
Carter sought “to use the immense resources” of the U.S. for the “compassionate mission” of helping “mankind improve its condition” (Brzezinski 1983, 123).

Referencing American exceptionalism, he asserted that this was consistent with the original goal from the time of America’s founding:

Two centuries ago, our Nation’s birth was a milestone in the long quest for freedom. But the bold and brilliant dream which excited the founders of this Nation still awaits its consummation. I have no new dream to set forth today, but rather urge a fresh faith in the old dream. Ours was the first society openly to define itself in terms of both spirituality and human liberty. It is that unique self-definition which has given us an exceptional appeal, but it also imposes on us a special obligation to take on those moral duties which, when assumed, seem invariably to be in our own best interests. (Carter 1977a)

In Carter’s view, the U.S. had not recently lived up to these “moral duties,” and he called for correcting “recent mistakes” by making “a resurgent commitment to the basic principles of our Nation.” If America were to become better, it would have to maintain “humility” and not “dwell upon remembered glory”; the U.S. would have to recognize its limits in terms of both power and what actions were truly morally justifiable. Carter promised that the U.S. would “not behave in foreign places so as to violate our rules and standards” because domestic and international “trust” would be “essential to our strength” (Carter 1977a). The willingness to fight “fire with fire” and use “tactics” of U.S. “adversaries” had led to a failed approach, and Carter believed that the Vietnam War was “the best example of its intellectual and moral poverty” (Carter 1977c). In addition, the U.S. had become too comfortable with not criticizing abuses of “right-wing monarchs and military dictators” rather than “promoting freedom and democratic principles” in an effort to combat communism (Carter 1982, 142). To the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Zbigniew Brzezinski, the U.S. was seen as “Machiavellian” and “preoccupied with the status quo” (Brzezinski 1983, 49).
A principle way the U.S. would improve its foreign policy was the “absolute” embrace of human rights. Carter felt U.S. freedom meant that it could “never be indifferent to the fate of freedom elsewhere” and that “moral sense” should mean a “preference for those societies” that had “an abiding respect for individual human rights” (Carter 1977a). The “compelling” quality of “democracy’s example” and a freedom from “that inordinate fear of communism” would help the U.S. “reject the arguments of those rulers who deny human rights to their people.” Thus, U.S. foreign policy would be “democratic,” “based on fundamental values,” and use “power and influence” for “humane purposes” in a way that was consistent with the “optimism” and “historical visions” of America. Peace could no longer be achieved by focusing solely on “global stability” without a focus on human rights. Though the U.S. had its “own shortcomings and faults,” Carter called for pride in American values and asserted that “no other country” would be as “qualified” to set a good example for the rest of the world. Embracing human rights and using a policy of “constructive global involvement” would allow the U.S. “to regain the moral stature” it had previously (Carter 1977c). Part of this involvement would involve a renewed emphasis on international engagement and cooperation, including being part of international agreements for human rights such as the American Convention on Human Rights (Brzezinski 1983, 135).

Still, Carter also urged for pragmatism in how human rights would be incorporated into U.S. foreign policy, admitting the U.S. could not be guided only “by rigid moral maxims” because of an always “imperfect” world. Because of the limits of “moral suasion,” the U.S. would need to combine the “power of words” and “ideas” with its “material wealth” and “military power” (Carter 1977c). Carter warned potential
enemies not to “confuse our idealism with weakness” and pledged to “maintain strength so sufficient that it need not be proven in combat” (Carter 1977a). Only “credible American power” would allow for the fulfillment of “more humane goals” (Brzezinski 1983, 49). Carter also admitted that it would still be necessary for the U.S. to support “some of the more conservative regimes” of other countries with poor records of supporting human rights. However, he felt that within those nations “it was not possible to conceal” all abuses and that “world condemnation” and U.S. influence would be “more effective there than in communist countries”; Carter decided to “combine support for our more authoritarian allies and friends with the effective promotion of human rights within their countries” (Carter 1982, 143). Brzezinski admitted that it was “difficult” for the administration to “find the proper balance between human-rights imperatives and the uglier realities of world politics,” but cited numerous examples of Carter’s policies helping individuals around the world:

In April 1977, the Peruvian government released over 300 political prisoners. In Argentina ‘disappearances’ dropped from the thousands to 500 in 1978, 44 in 1979, and even lower in 1980. President Carter raised the case of Jacobo Timerman, the noted publisher, with President Videla of Argentina and obtained his release. In Chile, ‘disappearances’ ended and President Pinochet ultimately released most political prisoners. The pattern was repeated in Brazil. Our policy contributed to the institutionalization of democracy in Peru and Ecuador. In Southeast Asia the improvement in human-rights conditions was most notable in Indonesia. Over a period of eight months in 1977-78, the government released 15,000 political prisoners and completed the release of the remaining 20,000 over the next two years. In Africa, political prisoners were released in Guinea, Niger, Rwanda, Swaziland, and the Sudan. (Brzezinski 1983, 128-129)

As a result of these and other successes, the administration felt it brought “about a decline in anti-Americanism abroad” and kept the U.S. from being as “isolated internationally as it had been”; furthermore, it ensured that human rights would remain “relevant” (Brzezinski 1983, 144-145).
Carter also revealed a more pragmatic, limited view of the U.S. role in the world as compared to other presidents. He promised to fulfill U.S. responsibilities and commitments around the world, including in Asia and the Middle East. At the same time, he embraced part of the Nixon Doctrine, saying that in those areas “the primary responsibility for preserving peace and military stability rests with the countries of the region.” While investing in defense would be necessary “to fulfill the worthy goals” of the U.S. (Carter 1978a), Carter rejected the idea that America should “be the world’s policeman,” preferring “to be the world’s peacemaker.” Furthermore, though few world problems could “be solved by the United States alone,” the U.S. would work with allies and be unafraid “to face problems and to solve problems” (Carter 1979a). Ultimately, the strength of the U.S. would be needed because the U.S. would “have no guarantee that the blessings” of its freedom would “endure”; success would not be inevitable without American resolve (Carter 1978a).

An early example of Carter’s pledge to engage the U.S. internationally in a more equal way and improve American standing in the world was his effort to improve relations with Latin America. He said that the U.S. had “a special need for cooperation and consultation with other nations” in the Western Hemisphere (Carter 1977c). Carter articulated a more limited view of American exceptionalism and what the U.S. could justify by asserting that the U.S. would have “a high regard for the individuality and the sovereignty of each Latin American and Caribbean nation.” Contrary to past interventions, the U.S. would “not act abroad in ways that we would not tolerate at home.” At the same time, America would seek to promote human rights in Latin America
and take a greater role in the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (Carter 1977b).

In order to pursue “a more mature and historically just relationship” with Latin America, the U.S. would pursue a new treaty with Panama regarding the Panama Canal (Brzezinski 1983, 139). Carter hoped that a new treaty would “take into account Panama’s legitimate needs as a sovereign nation” (Carter 1977b). Feeling that the U.S. had forced Panama to sign the canal treaty under threat, Carter was determined to “correct” the “injustice” (Carter 1982, 155). Furthermore, it would be “a litmus test” for how the U.S., “as a superpower, would treat a small and relatively defenseless nation” (Carter 1982, 156) and would prove that the U.S. “was willing to work constructively to build more mature relationships based on mutual respect” (Brzezinski 1983, 134). The new treaty would give most of the land that was part of the Canal Zone back to Panama and allow Panama to take a greater role in operating the canal. The U.S. would maintain a military presence around the canal until the end of 1999, but would still have the right to send forces back to defend the canal from any threats. Additionally, the U.S. would, in emergencies, have the right to send warships through the canal (Carter 1982, 158). After a struggle, the treaty was ratified, helping the U.S. improve its “standing in Latin America” (Vance 1983, 147). For Carter, the ratification of the treaty “represented the ideal fusion of morality and politics: he was doing something good for peace, responding to the passionate desires of a small nation, and yet helping the long-range U.S. national interest” (Brzezinski 1983, 137). Ultimately, Carter felt that the U.S. should be “proud” of its more equal, “new relationship with Panama” (Carter 1980c).
Carter also sought to improve the U.S. relationship with Africa and show “exceptional global leadership” (Koh 2005, 119) in helping to solve some of the issues plaguing the continent related to human rights. He called for “the principle of majority rule to be the basis for political order” in southern Africa as part of “a peaceful resolution” (Carter 1977c). Secretary of State Cyrus Vance felt the U.S. needed to overcome distrust in Africa and exercise its necessary influence to meet these goals (Vance 1983, 256). Vance worked for peace in Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe), opposed apartheid in South Africa, and worked for Namibian independence from South Africa, believing that the U.S. could help “shape and guide the change in ways consistent with our values and interests” (Vance 1983, 313). To Carter, these efforts “placed America’s influence on the side of human forces that inevitably shape the future” (Carter 1980c).

Under Carter, the U.S. also sought to use its exceptional global leadership in the Middle East to achieve peace, notably by mediating disputes between Egypt and Israel. Carter decided to take a direct role by inviting Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to Camp David for talks rather than be muddled by “enormous controversy” and be “doomed to failure” in the United Nations (Carter 1982, 296). Carter’s own influence in the talks was vital to achieving an agreement; he often was the middleman between Begin and Sadat in working on proposals (Carter 1982, 366). Despite not utilizing the UN for talks, Carter did use United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 as a basis for negotiations, stipulating the “inadmissibility of territorial change by war” (Carter 1982, 375). Carter succeeded in securing two agreements. The first was supposed to allow the Palestinians to have more self-rule and provide for the withdrawal of Israeli military forces from the West Bank and Gaza, as
well as stopping the building of new Israeli settlements. The second returned the Sinai Peninsula to the control of Egypt, established security zones, and provided for diplomatic recognition of Israel by Egypt. Carter felt that the peace achieved by providing for the “mutual security” of Egypt and Israel was “of vital importance” to the Middle East and to the entire world (Carter 1978b). Even after the Camp David Accords, Carter also kept the U.S. involved in making proposals for the final peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, and Carter decided to visit the two countries in an attempt to secure an agreement (Carter 1982, 416). Though the treaty secured was not perfect, Brzezinski felt it ultimately reduced “the chances of renewed Arab-Israeli war” and “established the important precedents of trading territory and the dismantling of settlements for a binding peace treaty and elaborate security arrangements” (Brzezinski 1983, 288). President Sadat paid tribute to Carter’s efforts and pragmatic moralism, saying he valued pledges of support “from a leader who raised the banners of morality and ethics as a substitute for power politics and opportunism” (Carter 1979b).

While Carter’s approach to American exceptionalism focused on human rights and improving U.S. international standing, he also recognized the necessity of dealing with great power politics. In particular, he sought to build on Nixon’s initiative to improve relations with China, saying that he saw “the American and Chinese relationship as a central element of our global policy and China as a key force for global peace” (Carter 1977c). Therefore, Carter had the goal of normalizing relations with China both to “enhance the stability of the Far East” and give the U.S. an “advantage in the global competition with the Soviet Union” (Brzezinski 1983, 198). In December 1978, Carter officially recognized the communist government of the People’s Republic of China,
feeling that he was acknowledging “simple reality.” While Carter acknowledged that Taiwan was part of China, he still maintained that the U.S. would have “extensive, close, and friendly relations” with Taiwan (Carter 1978c) and continue to supply arms to Taiwan for its “well-being and security” (Vance 1983, 77). Despite normalizing relations, however, Carter was willing to broach human rights with the Chinese leadership (Brzezinski 1983, 407).

Carter also attempted to continue détente with the Soviet Union, but approached it in a way that reflected his beliefs about American exceptionalism. He hoped to use détente for moral persuasion, telling the “Soviet Union that one country cannot impose its system of society upon another.” Furthermore, Carter sought to engage not only in arms control, but arms reductions with the Soviet Union on nuclear weapons. Carter called the strategic arms race “morally deplorable,” admitting both U.S. and Soviet fallibility and advocating for an end to it (Carter 1977c); this would lead to his willingness to negotiate the SALT II agreement. While seeking to cooperate with the U.S.S.R., Carter was still willing to prod them on human rights abuses as well, hoping to “match Soviet ideological expansion by a more affirmative American posture on global human rights” (Brzezinski 1983, 54). Focusing on human rights would allow the U.S. to “focus global attention on the glaring internal weakness of the Soviet system” (Brzezinski 1983, 149). Carter expected that the Soviets would remain bound by the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Carter 1982, 146).

However, détente broke down, culminating in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, leading Carter to oppose the Soviet Union more firmly on ideological grounds in a manner consistent with the belief in the superiority of U.S. democracy. He referred to the
invasion as “a deliberate effort of a powerful atheistic government to subjugate an independent Islamic people” to its rule and said that neither the U.S. “nor any other nation which is committed to world peace and stability can continue to do business as usual with the Soviet Union.” As a result, Carter imposed sanctions on technology sales, Soviet fishing privileges in U.S. waters, and grain sales to the U.S.S.R (Carter 1980a). Furthermore, Carter chose to not send an Olympic team to the 1980 Moscow Olympics and worked to get other nations to join that effort as a moral rebuke to the Soviets. At the same time, the Carter Doctrine was announced, as Carter said that “an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region” would “be regarded as an assault on the vital interests” of the U.S (Carter 1980b).

In addition to condemning the Soviet Union for the invasion, Carter sought to counteract it. He believed the Afghans were “freedom fighters” and recognized that if they “could continue their courageous struggle, the Soviet leaders would have to settle for a long, drawn-out, and costly war” (Carter 1982, 472). Therefore, consistent with his idea of American exceptionalism, Carter believed it was morally right for the U.S. to support the mujahidin insurgency. Brzezinski saw the resistance as an opportunity to put the Soviets into their own Vietnam War. Therefore, Carter agreed to authorize covert assistance to the insurgents that would include “propaganda,” “economic assistance,” and “hard cash” (Kalb & Kalb 2011, 76-77). Furthermore, the U.S. began arming rebels and even promoted the training of militants. Looking back on the effort, Brzezinski felt that the U.S. did not get enough credit for building up an insurgency to force “a humiliating Soviet withdrawal” years later (Kalb & Kalb 2011, 81). During this period, the Soviets appeared ready to invade Poland, but Carter attributed them not taking this action to
being “bogged down in Afghanistan” and “condemned by most nations of the world” through U.S. efforts (Carter 1982, 585).

While Carter had to deal with the breakdown in détente, he also faced significant challenges with Iran that revealed his attitude toward American exceptionalism. Carter was willing to support the Shah of Iran, but had tried to persuade him to be more favorable toward human rights in his country (Carter 1982, 436). Still, when the Shah was struggling to hold onto power, Carter felt “there was no question” that “he deserved our unequivocal support” both because he was an ally and because of the “anti-American slogans and statements” from his opponents (Carter 1982, 440). When it became apparent the Shah would lose power, Carter disagreed on moral grounds with the suggestion from Brzezinski that the U.S. should support a military coup, believing it would be inconsistent with U.S. values and would show a continuation of passed flawed policies (Vance 1983, 331). Later, when Iranian students took Americans hostage from the U.S. embassy, Carter still showed restraint while saying their actions violated “the moral and the legal standards of a civilized world.” He tried to convince Iran’s leaders that “the real danger to their nation lies in the north, in the Soviet Union and from Soviet troops” in Afghanistan (Carter 1980b). Furthermore, Carter first attempted diplomacy, trying to gain the release of the hostages through the UN and International Court of Justice, but warned that harming the hostages would lead to severe retaliation (Carter 1980a).

Carter was not willing to give in to most of the Iranian demands because “it would have besmirched our nation’s honor to do so” and froze twelve billion dollars of their assets in the U.S. “to get their attention” (Carter 1982, 465-467). As diplomatic efforts failed, Carter also decided that a military option was needed for the honor and
reputation of the U.S. (Carter 1982, 507). Though the mission failed disastrously, Carter believed the rescue mission had been in “the cause of liberty” (Carter 1982, 522).

Throughout his last year in office and reelection bid, Carter continued to work for the freedom of the hostages in a way that he felt would not diminish the honor of America, eventually succeeding with his “cautious and prudent policy” as he left office in 1981 (Carter 1982, 594). Brzezinski felt that not engaging in a risky, dramatic retaliation of Iran out of American bravado and messianism showed the “moral strength” of Carter as he “succeeded in preserving both lives and our national interest” (Brzezinski 1983, 509).

Ultimately, the hostage crisis helped to cause Carter to lose his reelection bid. However, Carter was still proud of his foreign policy and the changes he had made consistent with his view of how America should act in the world. He said that the ability of his administration to pursue its policies without war was “the result of a careful exercise of the enormous strength of America.” Carter believed that if the U.S. began to view power “as an end in itself,” then it would “lose the best that is within us” (Carter 1980c). To Carter, the American “vision” still captured “the imagination of the world,” but the U.S. had to work diligently to maintain its standing internationally and not be self-righteous. Promoting human rights would do this in a consistent manner with American values:

I believe with all my heart that America must always stand for these basic human rights at home and abroad. That is both our history and our destiny. America did not invent human rights. In a very real sense, it’s the other way around. Human rights invented America. Ours was the first nation in the history of the world to be founded explicitly on such an idea. (Carter 1981)

Carter felt that American had “regained its special place of leadership” as a result of those efforts and continued to inspire oppressed peoples everywhere (Carter 1979a).
Brzezinski believed that the Carter Administration’s efforts led to America being seen at home and abroad as “standing for its traditional value of freedom” after enduring the difficult “years of Watergate and the Vietnam War” (Brzezinski 1983, 515). Carter believed his foreign policy was “based on an historical vision of America’s role” (Carter 1977c), but more specifically, his ideas and actions about human rights, improving U.S. global engagement and standing, limiting U.S. over-involvement and aggressiveness, and correcting past wrongs reflect an attitude toward American exceptionalism best described as pragmatic moralism.
9. **Barack Obama’s Pragmatic Moralism**

Repudiating what he viewed as the excessive unilateralism and overbearing self-righteousness of the Bush Administration, President Barack Obama’s attitude toward American exceptionalism has been consistent with *pragmatic moralism*. As part of these views, he has emphasized paying more attention to international opinion and restoring American moral leadership and authority, while limiting U.S. military involvement overseas as compared to the previous decade. In these efforts, Obama wanted to use America’s “exceptional global leadership and activism” (Koh 2005, 119) to build up goodwill among other nations, but at the same time, while trying to avoid them, he has been willing to resort to “double standards” (Ignatieff 2005, 7; Koh 2005, 116) if he deems it absolutely necessary. More so, Obama has explicitly defended his vision as consistent with American exceptionalism and U.S. history; he is the first sitting U.S. President to actually use the phrase “American exceptionalism” publicly (Gilgoff 2012).

At the beginning of his presidency in his first inaugural address, Obama called upon Americans “to choose our better history,” admitting American fallibility in foreign policy and arguing that not all aspects of past U.S. foreign policy would be consistent with his view of exceptionalism. His goal was the “reaffirming the greatness of our Nation,” but he also argued that “greatness is never a given” and is not inevitable; rather, “it must be earned.” Despite the economic crisis and the difficulties in American foreign
policy, Obama reassured the public, saying, “We remain the most prosperous, powerful nation on Earth.” Success would be determined by renewing America’s values; what would be “demanded” was “a return to these truths” and the embrace of “a new era of responsibility” (Obama 2009a).

However, Obama’s message was by no means simply criticizing past American mistakes. He sought to connect his message of renewal with America’s unique history in the same fashion as President Jimmy Carter had three decades earlier. He emphasized the U.S. commitment to democracy and freedom, warning “those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent” that they were “on the wrong side of history.” Still, he said that America under his leadership would be willing to “extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.” In this sense, Obama has been not as quick to embrace stark moral contrasts as other presidents. To Obama, “the source” of America’s “confidence” was “the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny.” Perhaps success was not an absolute given, but “the meaning of our liberty and our creed” was that the U.S. could provide extraordinary opportunities for its own people and would still play the vital role on the world stage. Addressing the country in the depths of the Great Recession, Obama specifically connected his vision of exceptionalism to the American Revolution. He told a story of how George Washington, “at the moment when the outcome of our Revolution was most in doubt,” had a message read to the public that said, “Let it be told to the future world…that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive…that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet [it].” Thus, Obama urged Americans to “brave once
more the icy currents and endure what storms may come” in order to carry “forth that
great gift of freedom” and deliver “it safely to future generations” (Obama 2009a).

Obama particularly wanted to embrace a vision of exceptionalism which would
emphasize less messianism; in other words, America could not pretend that it could
simply justify its actions by arguing that they were necessary for the safety and welfare of
the country and the world. He said that, in defending the nation, “we reject as false the
choice between our safety and our ideals.” Here again Obama connected his views to
America’s birth, saying that, “our Founding Fathers, faced with perils that we can
scarcely imagine, drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man, a
charter expanded by the blood of generations.” The U.S. would “not give them up for
expedience’s sake” because “those ideals still light the world.” Furthermore, the U.S. had
to understand that “our power alone cannot protect us, nor does it entitle us to do as we
please.” Again, Obama connected his views to an exceptionalist narrative, noting “that
earlier generations faced down fascism and communism not just with missiles and tanks
but with sturdy alliances and enduring convictions.” These past generations, to him, had
learned “that our power grows through its prudent use.” Even more importantly, “our
security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering
qualities of humility and restraint” (Obama 2009a). This was a full indictment against the
self-righteous confidence of messianism.

Much attention would soon after be paid to Obama’s response to a question about
American exceptionalism. He answered:

I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in
British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism. I am
enormously proud of my country and its role and history in the world. If you think
about the site of this summit and what it means, I don't think America should be
embarrassed to see evidence of the sacrifices of our troops, the enormous amount of resources that were put into Europe postwar, and our leadership in crafting an alliance that ultimately led to the unification of Europe. We should take great pride in that. (Obama 2009b)

Though many argued this meant that Obama does not believe America is exceptional, his public statements both before and after this interview clearly show a different story. He specifically even in that interview cited America’s “democratic practices” as “exceptional,” but did qualify his beliefs by saying, “we’re not always going to be right” (Obama 2009b). This demonstrated more humility than other presidents were willing to, essentially part of his strategy of improving international opinion of the U.S.

Indeed, Obama combined a faith in America’s goodness with the call both to live up to that goodness and to make the world think better of the U.S. He asserted that “those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents” would not win over the long-term because “our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken.” Furthermore, in living up to America’s “legacy” and “principles once more,” the U.S. would usher in a new era of “even greater cooperation and understanding between nations.” He promised renewed moral leadership, saying “to all the other peoples and governments,” from “the grandest capitals to the small village where my father was born, know that America is a friend of each and every man, woman, and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and we are ready to lead once more.” Obama was confident of America’s renewed leadership based on a view of exceptionalism that explicitly embraced overcoming the more difficult chapters in America’s history. He said “because we have tasted the bitter pill of civil war and segregation and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe” that “as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself, and that America must play its role in
ushering in a new era of peace” (Obama 2009a). Clearly, despite critics’ claims to the contrary, Obama’s interpretation of America’s role and history still embraced exceptional global leadership and an exceptional vision of the U.S.

Indeed, Obama began attempting to reconcile policy with his view of exceptionalism early on in his first term. Shortly before he took office as president, Obama had been briefed by outgoing CIA Director Michael Hayden on the “enhanced interrogation techniques” used by the CIA, which he had often criticized as torture that compromised America’s values during the 2008 campaign. These techniques included “isolation of the detainee,” “noise or loud music,” and “light in the cells 24 hours a day,” as well as the occasional use of “blindfolds” and the “limited use of shackles when moving a prisoner or when the prisoner was a danger.” Generally, these techniques were aimed at sleep deprivation. Other activities included “intimate” and supposedly “not violent” physical actions such as gentle slapping and shaking. Occasionally waterboarding had been used, including the subjection of one terrorist to the technique 183 times. Hayden actually was confident he had persuaded Obama to keep the majority of the CIA’s enhanced interrogation program after the meeting, but once Obama became president, he “abolished” the program and its techniques “even in its reduced form.” Instead, the CIA would have to follow guidelines consistent with “what was in the Army Field Manual.” To Obama and his allies, “Bush had tarnished the image of the nation, especially with the enhanced interrogation techniques and expansive electronic eavesdropping” (Woodward 2010, 54-56). To Obama, “abroad, America’s greatest source of strength” was “always” and unquestionably “our ideals” (Obama 2010a).
This was only part of how Obama viewed exceptionalism differently. He outlined even more clearly his view of America’s role in the world, international legitimacy, and the use of force in his address in Norway after he was controversially awarded the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize. Articulating a general belief in exceptionalism, Obama said that America’s “actions matter and can bend history in the direction of justice.” But doing this was complex and difficult. Obama noted that he came to accept the prize “with an acute sense of the costs of armed conflict, filled with difficult questions about the relationship between war and peace and our effort to replace one with the other.” He addressed the “concept of a just war,” noting that it was generally agreed upon that “war is justified only when certain conditions” are “met: if it is waged as a last resort or in self-defense; if the force used is proportional; and if, whenever possible, civilians are spared from violence.” More so, he embraced America’s role in trying to build a system that limited war, saying that, after World War II, “America led the world in constructing an architecture to keep the peace: a Marshall plan and a United Nations, mechanisms to govern the waging of war, treaties to protect human rights, prevent genocide, restrict the most dangerous weapons” (Obama 2009e).

However, while such efforts could limit war, Obama said the world had to acknowledge “a hard truth: We will not eradicate conflict in our lifetimes.” He reminded nations that sometimes force would “not only” be “necessary but morally justified.” As president, he said, “I face the world as it is and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people” because “evil does exist in the world.” Thus, to Obama, the idea “that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism; it is a recognition of history, the imperfections of man, and the limits of reason” (Obama 2009e). Unlike some
past presidents with full visions of permanently eradicating war, Obama held a slightly more sober, realistic view of the limits of the international community’s efforts to do so.

Obama specifically brought up this point both to draw attention to his desire to improve international opinion of the U.S. and to also criticize some nations for their views of the U.S. He said that “in many countries, there is a deep ambivalence about military action today, no matter what the cause.” Furthermore, this ambivalence was “joined by a reflexive suspicion of America, the world’s sole military superpower.” Obama admonished that “the world must remember that it was not simply international institutions, not just treaties and declarations that brought stability to a post-World War II world.” Though the U.S. had sometimes made some mistakes, “the plain fact” was that the U.S. had “helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms.” Continuing on this exceptionalist theme, he said that American efforts had “promoted peace and prosperity from Germany to Korea and enabled democracy to take hold in places like the Balkans.” The U.S. had “borne this burden not because we seek to impose our will,” but “out of enlightened self-interest, because we seek a better future for our grandchildren and grandchildren, and we believe that their lives will be better if others’ children and grandchildren can live in freedom and prosperity” (Obama 2009e). In essence, Obama argued that American exceptionalism had been necessary and desirable despite mistakes, and that both unilateralism and internationalism were important components of maintaining general world peace.

Still, though “the instruments of war” had “a role to play in preserving the peace,” Obama acknowledged a more sobering, humbling reality. He said, “And yet this truth must coexist with another: That no matter how justified, war promises human tragedy.”
Even wars and forcible actions undertaken by America would admittedly lead to much suffering and death. Thus, to Obama, the “challenge is reconciling these two seemingly irreconcilable truths: That war is sometimes necessary, and war at some level is an expression of human folly.” Obama then went on to argue that “standards that govern the use of force” would be among the only ways to try to mitigate this “human folly” – even by America – as best as possible. While he would “reserve the right to act unilaterally if necessary to defend my nation,” he was “convinced that adhering” to “international standards strengthens those who do and isolates and weakens those who don’t.” Furthermore, “America – in fact, no nation – can insist that others follow the rules of the road if we refuse to follow them ourselves.” For America to claim moral legitimacy in an exceptional way, America would have to pay attention to international opinion and standards, “for when we don’t, our actions appear arbitrary and undercut the legitimacy of future interventions no matter how justified” (Obama 2009e).

To Obama, America would continue to play a major role in working for world peace, including using force if necessary. However, he has been particularly willing to emphasize that “in a world in which threats are more diffuse and missions more complex American cannot act alone” or “secure the peace” alone. Since “force can be justified on humanitarian grounds,” America’s actions in concert with NATO and the UN would be vital. Obama also emphasized the embrace of a moral exceptionalism by having the U.S. “remain a standard bearer in the conduct of war,” which would “make us different from those whom we fight” and prevent losing “ourselves” by compromising “the very ideals that we fight to defend.” In addition to the prevention of torture, Obama also “reaffirmed America’s commitment to abide by the Geneva Conventions” and promised to close
Guantanamo Bay prison.\(^5\) More so, “the words of the international community” also had to “mean something” in enforcing strong sanctions as potential “alternatives to violence.” Pressure could only be effective if “the world stands together as one” (Obama 2009e).

In articulating a sober view of the world while embracing moralism, Obama did assert America’s belief that “only a just peace based on the inherent rights and dignity of every individual can truly be lasting.” He acknowledged that, in America, “there’s long been a tension between those who describe themselves as realists or idealists, a tension that suggests a stark choice between the narrow pursuit of interests or an endless campaign to impose our values around the world.” Rather than embrace either view, Obama said, “I reject these choices,” embracing a pragmatic middle ground that did not necessarily focus on stark moral contrasts. In his view, though “engagement with repressive regimes lacks the satisfying purity of indignation,” “only a crippling status quo” could be served by such an attitude because “no repressive regime can move down a new path unless it has the choice of an open door.” Obama noted that everyone, including the U.S., was “fallible” and could make mistakes despite “the best of intentions” or out “of pride and power.” Though he urged for some pragmatism, Obama called for a balance with idealism about human nature in approaching world peace, saying that:

> For if we lose that faith, if we dismiss it as silly or naïve, if we divorce it from the decisions that we make on issues of war and peace, then we lose what’s best about humanity. We lose our sense of possibility. We lose our moral compass. (Obama 2009e)

Though “oppression” would “always be with us,” that was no excuse not to “still strive for justice.” Obama called for an effort of international cooperation for “human progress,” which “must be our work here on Earth” (Obama 2009e).

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\(^5\) Obama would struggle to come up with a solution to close the prison and, to this point in his administration, has reneged on this promise.
Beyond just trying to improve international opinion of the U.S. in general, Obama specifically engaged in more outreach to the Muslim world, especially during the first few months of his first term. He called for “a new way forward based on mutual interest and mutual respect” (Obama 2009a). This was most evident in his journey to Cairo, Egypt. There, Obama acknowledged the “great tension between the United States and Muslims around the world.” He admitted that the U.S. was partly culpable for this, as part of the tension was rooted in “a cold war in which Muslim-majority countries were too often treated as proxies without regard to their own aspirations.” More explicitly, he noted the U.S. “role in the overthrow of a democratically elected Iranian government” (Obama 2009c).

Still, Obama urged understanding of how America and Islam had principles that “overlap,” including “principles of justice and progress, tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.” He specifically connected Islam to the American founding, and in a sense, American exceptionalism and uniqueness:

I also know that Islam has always been a part of America's story. The first nation to recognize my country was Morocco. In signing the Treaty of Tripoli in 1796, our second President, John Adams, wrote: "The United States has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquility of Muslims." And since our founding, American Muslims have enriched the United States. They have fought in our wars; they have served in our government; they have stood for civil rights; they have started businesses; they have taught at our universities; they've excelled in our sports arenas; they've won Nobel Prizes, built our tallest building, and lit the Olympic Torch. And when the first Muslim American was recently elected to Congress, he took the oath to defend our Constitution using the same Holy Koran that one of our Founding Fathers, Thomas Jefferson, kept in his personal library. (Obama 2009c)

Thus, he attempted to cut through stereotypes of America, just as he urged Americans not to stereotype against Muslims. He argued in a defense essentially explaining every aspect of what is perceived to make America exceptional:
America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire. The United States has been one of the greatest sources of progress that the world has ever known. We were born out of revolution against an empire. We were founded upon the ideal that all are created equal, and we have shed blood and struggled for centuries to give meaning to those words, within our borders and around the world. We are shaped by every culture, drawn from every end of the Earth, and dedicated to a simple concept: *E pluribus unum* – ‘Out of many, one.’ (Obama 2009c)

Acknowledging both U.S. errors and unfair stereotypes of America, Obama hoped to “not be prisoners to” the past and deal with problems “through partnership” and “shared” progress (Obama 2009c).

Obama emphasized a number of ways in which America and Islam could work together and shared interests. Though America was in Afghanistan, he argued that it was in everyone’s interest for the U.S. to combat terrorism, including Muslims who had been killed by terrorists more than people of any other faith. He acknowledged serious world disagreements over the Iraq War, and emphasized that the U.S. would treat it “as a partner, and never as a patron.” Obama unequivocally stated, “No system of government can or should be imposed by one nation by any other.” However, he still maintained a sense of America’s exceptionalism in saying the U.S. would be committed “to governments that reflect the will of the people” and respecting universal “human rights.”

Obama stepped back from the frequent arguments that Islam inherently disadvantaged women, noting that a number of “Muslim-majority countries” had elected “a woman to lead,” while “the struggle for women’s equality” continued in America and elsewhere. He called for a general broader engagement, saying that America would not just focus “on oil and gas” and would instead promote exchanges involving education, economic development, health care, energy, and the environment. Finally, trying to reconcile
America and Islam’s tensions, Obama argued that God in all religions would want peace (Obama 2009c).

Also in the first year of his presidency, Obama commenced a major strategy review for the war in Afghanistan, coming to a decision that also reflected pragmatic moralism. Unlike in Iraq, America, according to National Security Advisor and former General James L. Jones, was “not going to build that empire again” in Afghanistan. However, Obama’s basic strategy, though more limited, did incorporate basic elements of nation-building consistent with American democracy promotion, including “security,” “economic development and reconstruction,” and “governance by the Afghans under the rule of law” (Woodward 2010, 133-134). However, Obama also thought in terms of “opportunity costs” and “finite resources,” which was “a radical change from” President George W. Bush, “who was all in, win at all costs” (Woodward 2010, 167). Furthermore, Obama wanted to improve international cooperation in Afghanistan even if the U.S. would have the main responsibility there:

The president didn’t think Afghanistan should only be an American war, but there had been a tendency to Americanize it. ‘We didn’t consult, we didn’t ask, we didn’t listen,’ Jones said of the attitude toward other countries supplying troops. ‘We basically said, stand aside, we know how to do this. And we and the Brits will do this. The rest of you don’t even play. You French guys stay over there. The Germans, you won’t fight, so we don’t need you.’ Several in the room laughed at the mention of the Germans. ‘So what we’ve tried to do is rebalance the relationships, make people feel like they are contributing, even a small amount, but to make them feel like they’re valued and respected. We all know who’s going to do the bulk of the work.’ (Woodward 2010, 135)

While Obama was not thinking of “a Jeffersonian democracy in Afghanistan,” (Woodward 2010, 224), he did want his decision to have a surge of 30,000 troops to be framed in terms based on American exceptionalism. He urged his staff to give the speech “some lift that we’ve carried a special burden since the time of FDR” and that the speech
had to convey pragmatism, reflecting the fact that “the American people are idealists, but they also want their leaders to be realistic” (Woodward 2010, 306-307).

In his 2009 speech announcing the surge in Afghanistan, Obama emphasized that America had not asked “for this fight.” Furthermore, while he had disagreed with the war in Iraq, he believed the war in Afghanistan had been fought from a foundation of “domestic unity and international legitimacy” in reaction to 9/11. Responding to critics who argued Afghanistan was another Vietnam, Obama said that, unlike in Vietnam, the U.S. had been attacked and now had “a broad coalition of 43 nations that recognizes the legitimacy of our action”; international opinion mattered to making the cause justifiable. Since “the situation in Afghanistan” had “deteriorated,” Obama decided on the surge and narrowed the goal of America’s actions so that it would be “defined as disrupting, dismantling, and defeating” al-Qaeda. Such narrower goals were in reaction to the lost “balance” of the previous years, and Obama asserted that, “as president,” he would “refuse to set goals that go beyond our responsibility, our means, or our interests.” The U.S. would treat Afghanistan as a partner and would begin to transition out the increased troops in July of 2011. Reflecting his urging for the speech to be consistent with exceptionalism, Obama said that, despite mistakes, the U.S. had “underwritten global security for over six decades, a time that, for all its problems,” had ushered in “unparalleled progress and advancing frontiers of human liberty” in the world. Though “as a country” America was “not as young, and perhaps not as innocent” as before, Americans were “still heirs to a noble struggle for freedom,” and the war in Afghanistan was considered by Obama to be part of that story (Obama 2009d).
Related to Afghanistan was Obama’s decision to have U.S. Special Forces go into Pakistan in an operation that killed Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of 9/11 and the leader of al-Qaeda. This operation underscored Obama’s commitment to pragmatism. The U.S. did not tell Pakistan about the operation in its territory to make sure that the plan was not leaked by Pakistani intelligence to bin Laden. Furthermore, the U.S. technically violated Pakistan’s sovereignty, angering much of the Pakistani population. Obama noted that the American forces “took care to avoid civilian casualties” and that bin Laden’s death marked “the most significant achievement to date” in the U.S. efforts to defeat al-Qaeda. He delegitimized bin Laden as a fighter for Islam as a way to emphasize the good resulting from U.S. efforts, noting that bin Laden “was a mass murderer of Muslims.” More so, he reminded the world that, “Over the years, I’ve repeatedly made clear that we would take action within Pakistan if we knew where bin Laden was.” However, he emphasized that “counterterrorism cooperation with Pakistan” had helped lead to finding bin Laden in Abbottabad. Furthermore, he noted that the Pakistani government agreed with him “that this is a good and historic day for both of our nations.” Obama connected the killing of bin Laden to American exceptionalism in arguing that the successful mission was a reminder “that American can do whatever we set our mind to,” which was “the story of our history.” Ultimately, pragmatism had been necessary and “justice” had “been done” (Obama 2011c).

Unlike the Afghanistan War, Obama had run for president promising to end the Iraq War. He pledged to continue as a “partner with the Iraqi people,” but unequivocally asserted that “all of our troops are coming home” (Obama 2010a). Obama’s full view of the Iraq was expressed in his speech in Cairo: “Although I believe that the Iraqi people
are ultimately better off without the tyranny of Saddam Hussein, I also believe that events in Iraq have reminded America of the need to use diplomacy and build international consensus to resolve our problems whenever possible.” Making a reference to exceptionalism by invoking one of the Founders, Obama noted, “we can recall the words of Thomas Jefferson, who said: ‘I hope that our wisdom will grow with our power and teach us that the less we use our power, the greater it will be’” (Obama 2009c). To Obama, exceptionalism meant that American power was derived from moral legitimacy. However, he urged Americans “to turn the page,” doing so himself by admitting that, though he and President Bush had disagreed over the war, “no one” could “doubt President Bush’s support for our troops or his love of country and commitment to our security.” “Patriots” had been on both sides of the debate (Obama 2010b).

While American and international “unity” had been “tested,” Obama also believed Iraq could “seize the chance for a better future,” being responsible for its own security and elections (Obama 2010b). America would help Iraq “strengthen institutions that are just, representative, and accountable” (Obama 2011d). At the same time, America was strengthened by the drawdown and eventual end of fighting in Iraq. Obama felt America could better fight al-Qaeda without putting resources into Iraq. Furthermore, he felt that Iraq had taught the U.S. that, rather than just “military force,” “all elements of our power, including our diplomacy, our economic strength, and the power of America’s example” must be used to meet challenges (Obama 2010b). Most importantly to Obama, ending the war had strengthened “American leadership around the world” and was part of a broader “receding” of “the tide of war” in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus, the U.S. could concentrate on restoring “its economic strength” as well (Obama 2011d).
Obama’s *pragmatic moralism* also was clearly demonstrated in his efforts in Libya during the Arab Spring. Because protesters who demanded “universal rights” and an “accountable” government had been “met with an iron fist” of dictator Muammar Qadhafi’s military, the U.S. had decided to engage in a limited intervention with its allies. International legitimacy was achieved through sanctions, “an arms embargo,” the use of “humanitarian assistance,” and organizations including the United Nations, Arab League, and European Union “calling for an end to the violence.” Obama felt that, if there were no intervention, “Qadhafi would commit atrocities against his people,” “democratic values that we stand for would be overrun,” and “the words of the international community would be rendered hollow.” Exceptionalism and morality demanded some sort of action. The U.S. would not “deploy ground troops into Libya” and would embrace limits, only staying within the “well-defined goal” of protecting Libyan civilians. He embraced international opinion as important, saying, “American leadership is essential,” but that rather than “acting alone,” the U.S. would help shape “the conditions for the international community to act together.” The British and the French would lead the effort. Though America was assisting, Obama explicitly argued that change would only come if the “people of the Arab world” chose “to determine their own destiny” (Obama 2011b).

More generally, Obama embraced the Arab Spring as a democratizing movement across the Arab world, consistent with a belief in American exceptionalism. Though he viewed it as “ultimately up to the people of the region to decide their fate,” the U.S. would “advocate for those values that have served our own country so well” (Obama 2012a). Under Obama’s leadership, the U.S. had been “inspired by the Tunisian protests
that toppled” a dictator “because we recognized our own beliefs” in the aspirations of
Tunisians. In Egypt, The U.S. had broken with its past support of President Hosni
Mubarak and “insisted on change” because “our support for democracy ultimately put us
on the side of the people.” In Yemen, the U.S. had favored a leadership transition, as “the
interests of the people were no longer being served by a corrupt status quo.” The
legitimate intervention in Libya had been “because we had the ability to stop the
slaughter of innocents, and because we believed that the aspirations of the people were
more powerful than a tyrant.” Furthermore, the U.S., while not getting involved in Syria’s
civil war, constantly declared “that the regime of Bashar al-Asad must come to an end so
that the suffering of the Syrian people can stop and a new dawn can begin.” Similarly,
Obama continued to urge for sanctions to prevent Iran from gaining a nuclear weapon
and threatening the world (Obama 2012b). Though Senator John McCain has stated that
Obama’s lack of intervention in Syria’s civil war is “shameful” and has argued that
Obama “does not believe in American exceptionalism and doesn’t want America to lead”
(Robillard 2012), Obama’s reluctance to enter the war reflects more of a limited view of
how the U.S. should get involved in conflict and uncertainty over the forces that are
fighting more than an abrogation of belief in exceptionalism. Indeed, Obama’s support
for the Arab Spring was put in entirely exceptionalist terms; standing “up for these
aspirations” was “our founding purpose” and was shown by “our history.” He specifically
referred to Ambassador to Libya Chris Stevens, who had been killed by terrorists, as an
example of America’s commitment to Arabs having “liberty, dignity, justice, and
opportunity.” In his view, the events showed “that a rising tide of liberty will never be
reversed” (Obama 2012b).
Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Obama’s presidency has been the tremendous increase in the use of drones by the U.S. Even on this issue, though it clearly approaches a messianic belief in America’s justification for undertaking whatever actions it needs to, Obama’s views and efforts reflect a sense of \textit{pragmatic moralism}. At the beginning of his presidency, Obama had been informed that “the real, central threat” to the war in Afghanistan and to fighting terrorism in general was Pakistan (Woodward 2010, 105). This was how drones came to be so extensively relied upon to combat terrorism. When then-CIA Director Leon Panetta presented the expansion of CIA drone usage in Pakistan, Obama immediately approved the recommendation (Woodward 2010, 208-209). The program and general pressure on Pakistan’s government to cooperate more with the U.S. intensified after the failed SUV bombing of Times Square by Faisal Shazad, who had ties to Pakistan (Woodward 2010, 365).

In engaging in drone warfare, Obama “has placed himself at the helm of a top secret ‘nominations’ process to designate terrorists for kill or capture.” Obama makes the call himself if, when there is a chance to strike at a terrorist on this list, his family or other civilians are around him; then he makes “the final moral calculation.” This originally was in response to the first strike during his presidency killing innocent Pakistanis in addition to the target. In this sense, though there are many questions about the program, Obama has fully embraced the moral responsibility of decision-making regarding drones. According to advisors, as “a student of writings on war by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas,” Obama “believes that he should take moral responsibility for such actions.” Additionally, “he knows that bad strikes can tarnish America’s image and derail diplomacy” (Becker & Shane 2012). The efforts have also gained support from
seemingly unlikely sources. In particular, State Department lawyer Harold Koh – who as dean of the Yale Law School was absolutely critical of Bush’s counterterrorism policies – has repeatedly argued that the drone policy is the most moral avenue open to the U.S. (McKelvey 2012). These policies, though, have included the assassination of an American citizen in Yemen, Anwar al-Awlaki, who had called for attacks in the U.S. In this case, the Justice Department argued “that while the Fifth Amendment’s guarantee of due process applied, it could be satisfied by internal deliberations in the executive branch” (Becker & Shane 2012).

Ultimately, Obama’s attitude on drones combines both pragmatism and moralism. The drone usage is unquestionably a double standard in many cases. However, in fighting terrorism in this way, Obama “has hugely reduced the death toll both of American soldiers and Muslim civilians” as compared to fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet, drones are now to the international community “a provocative symbol of American power” (Becker & Shane 2012). The drone issue shows ways in which Obama “is willing to emulate” President Bush “and the ways he is not.” Essentially, Obama has relied “on his predecessor’s aggressive approach in one area to avoid” Bush’s “even more aggressive approach in others.” Drone strikes minimize issues of detention and torture and minimize casualties overall by preventing “American boots on the ground” (Baker 2013). Additionally, in the case of Yemen, while there is often public frustration with drones, the U.S. has the support of the Yemeni government and often of the Yemeni people in taking out leading al-Qaeda militants. This is partly because of the major toll on the Yemeni population caused by al-Qaeda violence (Worth, Mazzetti, & Shane 2013). The administration now is considering an establishment of drone bases in North Africa,
in consultation with allies, for the purposes of surveillance and coordination against terrorists (Schmitt 2013).

Overall, Obama has emphasized American exceptionalism – and particularly *pragmatic moralism* – in his belief that the U.S. has renewed its leadership and moral authority across the globe as compared to before he took office. He continues to believe “America’s moral example must always shine for all who yearn for freedom and justice and dignity” and that his efforts have “restored” U.S. “standing.” Obama feels he has strengthened alliances and the U.S. commitment to international cooperation and consultation. Furthermore, America emphasizes soft power as a way to gain influence and improve international opinion. He claims “the idea of America endures” (Obama 2011a). More so, Obama strongly pushes back at those who believe “America is in decline or that our influence has waned,” saying they do not “know what they’re talking about.” In his view, this is borne out by the fact that “opinions of America are higher than they’ve been in years” abroad. Fully asserting a belief in exceptionalism, Obama argues, “America remains the one indispensable nation in world affairs, and as long as I’m President, I intend to keep it that way” (Obama 2012a).

Indeed, into his second term, Obama continues to embrace the uniqueness of America and a support for democracy and freedom in manner consistent with *pragmatic moralism*. In his second inaugural address, he explained:

What makes us exceptional – what makes us American – is our allegiance to an idea, articulated in a declaration made more than two centuries ago: ‘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, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.’ ⁶ (Obama 2013)

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⁶ Obama’s use of the word “exceptional” in reference to American exceptionalism was actually only the second time “exceptional” has been used by a president in an inaugural address. This can be found by doing a search of “exceptional” in inaugural addresses on The American Presidency Project website. The only
He again renewed his emphasis that “enduring security and lasting peace do not require perpetual war,” and he reminded Americans that “we are also heirs to those who won the peace and not just the war.” Again focusing on international opinion and cooperation, Obama said, “America will remain the anchor of strong alliances in every corner of the globe.” The U.S. would support democracy everywhere “because peace in our time requires the constant advance of those principles that our common creed describes: tolerance and opportunity, human dignity and justice.” Once more, despite many challenges and moral complexities, Obama, in his own unique way but as have all presidents before him, called upon Americans to “carry into an uncertain future that precious light of freedom” (Obama 2013).

other time was Jimmy Carter in 1977, and he also used it in reference to American exceptionalism. This may very well be an effort by them to reassure the public of their belief in American greatness even though they were directing criticizing past foreign policy actions and attitudes.
10. An Overview of Presidents Since 1897: Beliefs, Context, and Interactions

The four types of exceptionalism that I have proposed – *messianic Americanism, messianic internationalism, realist exemplarism*, and *pragmatic moralism* – have in many cases interacted with each other over the last century as different philosophies of foreign policy have been advocated and different global contexts have presented themselves. Here, I overview the presidents I have not covered in my case studies to offer the full picture of how these four types of exceptionalism have mattered at different times over the last 116 years. I start with the year 1897 – William McKinley’s first year in office – as this time period was arguably when American power began to truly matter on a global stage.

**William McKinley’s Messianic Americanism**

*Messianic Americanism* is essentially the default type of American exceptionalism. It is very much related to the belief in Manifest Destiny from earlier in the 1800s. Though America had been more isolationist in foreign policy during the nineteenth century, this particularly shifted in a major way under the leadership of
President William McKinley, whose expressed views about American exceptionalism are best described as *messianic Americanism*.

Upon taking office, McKinley outlined his vision of what exceptionalism meant, saying America should continue to rely “upon the God of our fathers, who has so singularly favored the American people in every national trial.” In his view, God essentially preordained success for the U.S. Continuing on this theme of inevitable triumph, McKinley said that “no great emergency in the one hundred and eight years of our eventful national life has ever arisen that has not been met with wisdom and courage by the American people” because Americans had “fidelity to their best interests and highest destiny.” As a result, Americans had “advanced the cause of freedom throughout the world” (McKinley 1897).

While the U.S. wanted to “cultivate relations of peace and amity with all the nations of the world,” McKinley emphasized generally “keeping ourselves free from entanglement” in the tradition of President George Washington. As part of this, he emphasized the absolute goodness of America, arguing, “We want no wars of conquest” and “must avoid the temptation of territorial aggression.” For settling international disputes, McKinley advocated some sort of international arbitration; furthermore, he felt that it had been “reserved to the United States to have the leadership in so grand a work” (McKinley 1897).

McKinley would soon embrace policies related to *messianic Americanism* that more fully emphasized the use of U.S. power in the world. This would especially come to fruition in the Spanish-American War. McKinley considered Spanish treatment of Cubans “repugnant to the universal sentiment of humanity.” After the explosion of the
battleship *Maine*, the U.S. went to war with Spain. McKinley claimed that the American people and government deliberated appropriately after the shocking explosion, saying the willingness to study the issue was “striking evidence of the poise and sturdy good sense distinguishing our national character.” Of course, the U.S. decided Spain was responsible (McKinley 1898). McKinley felt he had done “all that in honor could be done to avert war, but without avail” (McKinley 1901a). Winning the war against Spain, the U.S. signed a treaty with the Spanish government that gave general control to the U.S. of Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Cuba, and Guam. McKinley argued that American rule would be helpful, as “Spanish rule must be replaced by a just, benevolent, and humane government.” He said, “As soon as we are in possession of Cuba and have pacified the island it will be necessary to give aid and direction to its people to form a government for themselves” (McKinley 1898). More so, he promised “the reconstruction of Cuba as a free commonwealth on abiding foundations of right, justice, liberty, and assured order.” Meanwhile, in the Philippines, McKinley was having the U.S. “continue the efforts already begun” to restore “order”; Americans were fighting “the insurgents” so that they would be able to eventually “afford the inhabitants of the islands self-government.” McKinley dismissed the insurgents as not reflecting meaningful opinion, as “by far the greater part of the inhabitants recognize American sovereignty and welcome it” as a guarantee “of order and of security for life, property, liberty, freedom of conscience, and the pursuit of happiness” (McKinley 1901a). These statements essentially articulate missions of nation-building and counterinsurgency, echoing forward to the twentieth century of *messianic Americanism* under the Bush Administration.
To McKinley, the U.S. was uniquely good and had a duty to spread its values to its newly acquired territories; he did not consider these actions to be even remotely a form of imperialism. During this time, too, McKinley formally annexed Hawaii (McKinley 1898). Furthermore, McKinley and Secretary of State John Hay increased their involvement in China. They asserted the Open Door policy there for commercial opportunities open to Americans, trying to prevent other powers from closing off Chinese markets. More so, they were willing to send U.S. marines, joining with other foreign troops, to put down the Boxer Rebellion (Schaller 2002, 30-32). After this event, they again reaffirmed the Open Door policy in an effort to prevent colonization, but “privately, Hay and McKinley approved contingency plans to ‘slice the watermelon’ and grab a naval base and some territory if China did fall apart” (Schaller 2002, 34). McKinley also wanted a “permanent increase” in size of the army and navy (McKinley 1898). Imperialism, guised in exceptionalism, was fully in motion.

Having been reelected as president, McKinley continued to even more fully embrace a more powerful active role for the U.S. in the world consistent with his attitude toward exceptionalism. He said that the victory against Spain had “imposed upon us obligations from which we cannot escape and from which it would be dishonorable to seek escape.” More so, he argued for a missionary conception of exceptionalism rather than isolationism, saying it would not hurt the uniqueness of the U.S. but rather would extend it. To him, Americans “take their love for” freedom “with them wherever they go, and they reject as mistaken and unworthy the doctrine that we lose our own liberties by securing the enduring foundations of liberty to others.” America’s efforts “under tropic
suns in distant seas” were a part of America’s exceptionalism, not a threat to it (McKinley 1901a).

Indeed, to McKinley, these efforts were part of “the high purposes of the American people,” and “in the fear of God” Americans would “make the bounds of freedom wider yet” (McKinley 1901a). He emphasized, even in his last public appearance before being assassinated, that nations could no “longer be indifferent to any other” because “God and man have linked the nations together”; he stated firmly, “The period of exclusiveness is past.” An active America, spreading freedom consistent with its exceptional ideals, was called for; more so, this would help with the “expansion of our trade and commerce.” In his last speech, McKinley called for an expansion of America’s “merchant marine” because they would “be messengers of peace and amity wherever they go” (McKinley 1901b). McKinley’s attitude toward exceptionalism clearly evolved to an active form of messianic Americanism. The U.S. in his view should maintain its “full and independent sovereignty.” Most importantly, success was preordained, as “opposition has confronted every onward movement of the Republic from its opening hour until now, but without success.” Rather, the American “Republic has marched on and on, and its step has exalted freedom and humanity” (McKinley 1901a).

William Howard Taft’s Messianic Americanism

Succeeding Theodore Roosevelt into office, President William Howard Taft also emphasized an attitude toward exceptionalism consistent with that of his immediate predecessors Roosevelt and William McKinley. American global power and influence had significantly increased by the time Taft became president. He sought to build on this work. Like Roosevelt, he argued for an expansion of the army and navy, saying that this
would be necessary for “the promotion of peace and international morality” and to help the U.S. “maintain its proper place among the nations of the world.” America would thus be able to “exercise its proper influence” and defend both itself and “its dependencies” (Taft 1909). Notably, Taft referred to America’s new territory as “dependencies,” distinguishing them from the colonies of European nations.

Taft sought to make sure American power would be used to help it promote morality, freedom, and America’s interest in the world. He argued that, if the U.S. never intended “to back up her assertion of right,” America would be unable to secure the Open Door in China (Taft 1909). International cooperation was not enough to promote favorable outcomes for the world. Taft and Secretary of State Philander Knox believed they were serving global interest in trying to maintain the Open Door, and they “hatched schemes to prevent both Russia and Japan” from “dominating” China. A noteworthy example was their attempt at “dollar diplomacy,” which was a plan of “constructing American-owned railroads in Manchuria as a way to counterbalance Japanese and Russian influence.” However, the plan failed due to “little enthusiasm” by investors (Schaller 2002, 35).

Like McKinley, Taft noted that, subsequent to the Spanish-American War, the U.S. had gained “a position of influence among the nations that it never had before.” Thus, he intended to continue to use this influence in a way consistent with his attitude toward exceptionalism. As Roosevelt did, Taft urged the construction of the Panama Canal, proposing “to devote all the energy possible and under my control to pushing this work on the plans which have been adopted.” To Taft, America was engaged in vitally important work for the country and the world; the project was “the greatest constructive
enterprise of modern times.” Additionally, Taft continued with previous policies in America’s dependencies. He believed that “the governments” in the Philippines and Puerto Rico were “progressing as favorably as could be desired.” In harmony with American values, the U.S. “in each dependency” was “upholding the traditions of civil liberty and increasing popular control,” which was naturally to “be expected under American auspices.” The U.S. was considered by Taft to be unquestionably good, and “the work which” the U.S. was “doing there” added “to our credit as a nation” (Taft 1909). Taft clearly embraced a notion of American exceptionalism best described as messianic Americanism.

**Warren G. Harding’s Messianic Americanism**

The Republican presidents of the 1920s firmly repudiated the messianic internationalism promoted by Woodrow Wilson during and after World War I. This era is often characterized as a return to pure isolationism, but this is an oversimplification of the times and not an accurate characterization. In particular, though not as militaristic as other presidents who embraced messianic Americanism, the basic tenets of this attitude were present in these presidents, starting with President Warren G. Harding.

Harding’s inaugural address, in addition to strongly condemning messianic internationalism, in many ways is one of the most direct, forceful articulations of American exceptionalism – and specifically messianic Americanism – ever offered by a U.S. president. Having “seen a world passion spend its fury,” in the war, Harding was grateful to “contemplate our Republic unshaken” and to have “our civilization secure.” Harding argued that “liberty” and “civilization” were “inseparable, and though both were threatened,” now that they were “secure” America had gained “profound assurance that
our representative government is the highest expression and surest” guarantee “of both.” Thus, Harding wanted to “utter” his “belief in the divine inspiration of the founding fathers.” Directly asserting exceptionalism, he said, “Surely there must have been God’s intent in the making of this new-world Republic.” More so, the world had looked with a “hopeful gaze on the great truths on which the founders wrought.” Though at first “the Old World scoffed at our experiment,” Harding argued America was now “an inspiring example of freedom and civilization to all mankind.” He declared that American success was truly inevitable, having “utter confidence in the supreme fulfillment” (Harding 1921).

In Harding’s view, American exceptionalism meant that the U.S. was best served by generally adhering to a “policy of noninvolvement in Old World affairs,” seemingly directly contradicting Woodrow Wilson. Rather, the U.S. should be “confident in our ability to work out our own destiny” and would try to avoid being “entangled.” The U.S. would “be a party to no permanent military alliance,” “enter into no political commitments, nor assume any economic obligations which” would “subject our decisions to any other than our own authority.” In effect, Harding was declaring without equivocation the supremacy of American sovereignty – Americanism to its fullest definition. However, to simply assume Harding was purely an isolationist would miss other crucial aspects of his views on U.S. involvement abroad. Harding argued, “We will accept no responsibility except as our own conscience and judgment, in each instance, may determine.” In other words, the U.S. would choose for itself when to be involved based on its interest and moral concerns; the resistance was to the idea of the League of Nations mandating American involvement in every overseas dispute. Furthermore,
Harding admitted recognizing “the new order in the world, with the closer contacts which progress has wrought” (Harding 1921).

In particular, Harding was eager to use America’s influence to promote peace and prosperity after the tragedy of war. He said that the U.S. wanted “to promote understanding” among nations and do its “part in making offensive warfare so hateful that Governments and peoples who resort to it must prove the righteousness of their cause or stand as outlaws before the bar of civilization.” This was not a goal so unlike Wilson’s; the difference was that Harding wanted to America to be free to pursue it however actively it so chose. He asserted that the U.S. was “ready to associate ourselves with the nations of the world, great and small, for conference” and “for counsel,” looking to understand “the expressed views of world opinion.” Through this, the U.S. hoped “to recommend a way to approximate disarmament and relieve the crushing burdens of military and naval establishments” (Harding 1921). Harding and Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes would put this into practice. Hughes organized the Washington Naval Conference, which resulted in an agreement among the U.S., United Kingdom, Japan, France, and Italy to limit their naval fleets in a tonnage ratio of 5:5:3:1.7:1.7 respectively. Furthermore, Hughes embraced Harding’s desire to use American leadership to promote peace; he began referring to the Department of State as “the Department of Peace” (Beinart 2010, 57).

Harding was also willing to selectively engage with the international community on issues of arbitration and a world court. The U.S. would be willing to suggest “plans for mediation, conciliation, and arbitration,” helping to “clarify and write the laws of international relationship” and establishing “a world court for the disposition” of various
issues if nations agreed to submit to it. This selective American engagement, however, was very different than Wilson’s internationalist vision; Harding took pains to explain this. He qualified his plans in saying that “every commitment must be made in the exercise of our national sovereignty”; the U.S. would not be subjected to anything it was not prepared to accept. More forcefully, Harding stated that “a world supergovernment is contrary to everything we cherish and can have no sanction by our Republic.” In asserting *messianic Americanism*, Harding pushed back at notions that this might be a selfish decision. He argued that it was “not selfishness,” “aloofness,” nor “suspicion of others,” but rather was “sanctity,” “security,” and “patriotic adherence to the things which made us what we are.” Indeed, Harding asserted that America’s goodness and interest in promoting freedom and world peace were not questionable:

> The unselfishness of these United States is a thing proven; our devotion to peace for ourselves and for the world is well established; our concern for preserved civilization has had its impassioned and heroic expression. There was no American failure to resist the attempted reversion of civilization; there will be no failure today or tomorrow. (Harding 1921)

Ultimately, Harding believed that America would “aspire to a high place in the moral leadership of civilization” worthy of its history and ideals. Rather than joining the League of Nations, he called for American influence to bring about a “strengthening of good will” to help “mankind” reach “a world-wide benediction of understanding.” This process would “inaugurate an era of good feeling” that would prove “essential to peace.” Harding was particularly keen to emphasize that “ties of trade bind nations in closest intimacy”; America’s commercial leadership could thus be used to promote peace in a manner reflecting *messianic Americanism*. Though “the world upheaval” of World War I
had “added heavily to our tasks,” Harding felt confident in America’s “high resolve,” reassured by “the God-given destiny of our Republic” (Harding 1921).

**Calvin Coolidge’s Messianic Americanism**

After Harding died in office, his successor, President Calvin Coolidge, continued to build on these efforts reflecting an attitude toward exceptionalism of *messianic Americanism*. Though “foreign policy was not as important to Coolidge” as domestic policy (Sobel 1998, 358), he believed America was the crucial nation in global affairs after World War I, saying, “Our own country is leading the world in the general readjustment to the results of the great conflict.” Despite perceptions of isolationism, Coolidge argued that Americans had realized they could not “live unto ourselves alone.” Therefore, the U.S. had “contributed of our resources and our counsel to the relief of the suffering and the settlement of the disputes among the European nations” (Coolidge 1925a). In this way, America was providing crucial “exceptional global leadership” (Koh 2005, 119). Coolidge embraced American exceptionalism prominently, saying that “because of what America is and what America has done, a firmer courage, a higher hope, inspires the heart of all humanity.” More so, Coolidge specifically spelled out an exceptionalist narrative of history:

Under the eternal urge of freedom we became an independent Nation. A little less than 50 years later that freedom and independence were reasserted in the face of all the world, and guarded, supported, and secured by the Monroe doctrine. The narrow fringe of States along the Atlantic seaboard advanced its frontiers across the hills and plains of an intervening continent until it passed down the golden slope to the Pacific. We made freedom a birthright. We extended our domain over distant islands in order to safeguard our own interests and accepted the consequent obligation to bestow justice and liberty upon less favored peoples. In the defense of our own ideals and in the general cause of liberty we entered the Great War. When victory had been fully secured, we withdrew to our own shores unrecompensed save in the consciousness of duty done. (Coolidge 1925a)
Coolidge fully asserted *messianic Americanism* in his belief that the U.S. would best serve the world by being “more and more American.” He felt that Americans could “best serve our own country and most successfully discharge our obligations to humanity by continuing to be openly and candidly, intensely and scrupulously, American.” Americanism would be the form exceptional global leadership would take and was what Coolidge felt reflected America’s “heritage” and “destiny” (Coolidge 1925a). To Coolidge, the U.S. was unquestionably good, as he argued that “it can be said of our country that in all its history it has never made preparations to attack any other country.” Thus, while advocating for general limitations on armaments, Coolidge was willing to argue for a strengthening of existing U.S. naval and air forces, particularly “for the protection of our commerce” (Coolidge 1928). He believed that, even though “our country represents nothing but peaceful intentions toward all the earth,” the U.S. had “to maintain such a military force as comports with the dignity and security of a great people.” Because America was uniquely moral and good, the world should see it not as “a menace, but an instrument of safety and peace” (Coolidge 1925a). This was consistent with the frequently articulated peace through strength argument of American presidents. Also a part of his plan of “fostering international commerce,” Coolidge supported a buildup of America’s merchant marine (Sobel 1998, 343), as had McKinley and Roosevelt before him.

Also contrary to an isolationist foreign policy, Coolidge revealed his attitude toward exceptionalism in his use of American troops abroad and other diplomatic actions. In China, “Coolidge adopted the classic American position of standing for the Open Door,” consistent with his predecessors. Furthermore, in 1928 during the civil war in
China, Coolidge decided to give official diplomatic recognition to the Nationalist
government that was fighting the communists; however, the war would continue much
longer (Sobel 1998, 352-353). In the Western Hemisphere, the U.S. “responded to
appeals for help to maintain order, protect life and property, and establish responsible
government” (Coolidge 1925a). Coolidge asserted that American forces “in Haiti,
Nicaragua, and China” were not in those “places for the purpose of making war, but for
the purpose” of maintaining “peaceful conditions” and protecting American rights. More
so, in regards to Haiti and Nicaragua, he said the U.S. was assisting “the peoples and
governments” in “establishing stability” and “maintaining orderly and peaceful
institutions in harmony with civilized society,” doing so “at their express invitation”
(Coolidge 1928). While asserting these claims of American duty and goodness, the
specific reason troops were in Nicaragua was because of “clashes between rival claimants
to the presidency,” one supported by the U.S. and another by Mexico. Despite many
efforts, troops were still in Nicaragua by the end of Coolidge’s presidency (Sobel 1998,
350-351).

American efforts to assist Europe in the aftermath of World War I were consistent
with Coolidge’s particular thoughts about the U.S. role in the world and the role of
government in society. He supported the Dawes Plan to help Europe, under which,
instead of the federal government, “private” American citizens “advanced large sums of
money to assist in the necessary financing and relief of the Old World.” Though the plan
was private in nature, the government under Coolidge had explicitly encouraged the
loans; in some ways, the Dawes Plan was a private, more limited version of the later
Marshall Plan after World War II. In general, Coolidge felt that, though “the physical
configuration of the earth” had “separated us from all of the Old World,” the “common brotherhood of man” had “united us by inseparable bonds with all humanity.” Making an exceptionalist appeal to the needed presence of American leadership in the world, Coolidge said, “We have not failed, nor shall we fail to respond, whenever necessary to mitigate human suffering and assist in the rehabilitation of distressed nations.” This mission was America’s, in Coolidge’s conception of exceptionalism, expressly because of America’s “vast powers and the place we hold in the world” (Coolidge 1925a).

Under Coolidge, the U.S. was also prepared to engage in other meaningful ways with the international community. He was especially eager to have the Senate approve of the U.S. joining the Permanent Court of International Justice. This would not be pure internationalism, however; importantly for Coolidge, “the court” appeared “to be independent of the” League of Nations. More so, in advocating for joining, he specifically spelled out the ways in which it protected U.S. sovereignty and the ability of America to make its own choices:

The proposal submitted to the Senate was made dependent upon four conditions, the first of which is that by supporting the court we do not assume any obligations under the league; second, that we may participate upon an equality with other States in the election of judges; third, that the Congress shall determine what part of the expenses we shall bear; fourth, that the statute creating the court shall not be amended without our consent; and to these I have proposed an additional condition to the effect that we are not to be bound by advisory opinions rendered without our consent. (Coolidge 1925b)

Instead of being led by the court, America would distinctly help lead the court. The U.S. would not “barter away” its “independence” or “sovereignty,” but because of “its position of leadership in the world” would “bear its full share of the responsibility” for helping the court in “the administration of even-handed justice between nation and nation” (Coolidge 1925a). Similarly, Coolidge emphasized American leadership in bringing about the
Kellogg-Briand Pact to outlaw war. Coolidge noted that it was the U.S. that “advocated” the pact’s “extension so as to include within the scope of the proposed treaty not only France and the United States, but also Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and Japan, and any other nations of the world that might care to join with these six powers in a common renunciation of war” (Coolidge 1928). In this way, the Coolidge Administration’s actions on the pact were consistent with an attitude of *messianic Americanism*.

Embracing messianism, albeit not as militaristically as other presidents, as well as Americanism, Coolidge asserted the absolute goodness of the United States. He believed “the encouraging feature of our country is not that it has reached its destination, but that it has overwhelmingly expressed its determination to proceed in the right direction.” America – the exceptional nation – would always march forward toward morality and progress, “supporting the cause of justice and honor among the nations” and the “advancement of religion” (Coolidge 1925a). American business, trade, and foreign investment would grow and prosper, consistent with America’s exceptional role in the world (Sobel 1998, 358). Ultimately, Coolidge completely believed in a religious mission for America. Rather than seeking “an earthly empire built on blood and force” and the gaining of “foreign dominions,” Coolidge felt “the legions” America “sends forth are armed, not with the sword, but with the cross.” America’s ultimate messianic purpose was to seek “the allegiance of all mankind” and “to merit the favor of Almighty God” (Coolidge 1925a).

**Herbert Hoover’s Messianic Americanism**

Like Harding and Coolidge, President Herbert Hoover held an attitude best described as *messianic Americanism*. He noted that America had “emerged from the
losses of the Great War and the reconstruction following it with increased virility and strength.” Thus, America had been able to play an exceptional role in contributing “to the recovery and progress of the world.” To Hoover, America had “given renewed hope and courage to all who have faith in government by the people,” remaining the exceptional, vital symbol of democracy to the world. Furthermore, America had earned admiration, as “the influence and high purposes of our Nation” were “respected among the peoples of the world.” America would only have good, moral purposes; “those who” had “a true understanding of America” knew it had “no desire for territorial expansion, for economic or other domination of other peoples” because “such purposes” were “repugnant to our ideals of human freedom” (Hoover 1929a).

Indeed, to Hoover, any people who disagreed with the notion of America’s moral goodness were simply “superficial observers.” He complained that “superficial observers fail to see that the idealism of America will lead it to no narrow or selfish channel, but inspire it do its full share as a Nation toward the advancement of civilization.” Indeed, the “advancement of civilization” was the very purpose of exceptional America. More specifically, Hoover’s goals – using mainly American influence and power – were “to advance the reign of justice and reason toward the extinction of force” and the permanent preservation of peace (Hoover 1929a).

In this sense, Hoover as well was not an isolationist, but rather embraced an exceptional global leadership role for America in working toward lofty goals for the world. He said, “The United States fully accepts the profound truth that our own progress, prosperity, and peace are interlocked with the progress, prosperity, and peace of all humanity” (Hoover 1929a). A major part of Hoover’s vision was that the U.S. would
“spread capitalism across the globe” (Beinart 2010, 64). Also like Coolidge, Hoover viewed U.S. involvement with the Permanent Court of International Justice and the Kellogg-Briand Pact positively. He believed the court “in its major purpose” was “peculiarly identified with American ideals and with American statesmanship”; thus, it was matched his views of messianic Americanism. Furthermore, American involvement was acceptable because of the various reservations put in place about adherence to it. Hoover claimed no ill intent by these reservations, saying they were “no special privilege or advantage,” but were only to “clarify” the U.S. relationship to the court (Hoover 1929a). Additionally, Hoover praised the Kellogg-Briand Pact for the renunciation of war “as an instrument of national policy” among the signatories and the specific American leadership of former Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg in bringing it to fruition, noting the signatories owed “its expansion to the proportions of a treaty open to the entire world” to American efforts (Hoover 1929b).

Hoover emphasized that the U.S. would not embrace messianic internationalism, saying, “Our people have determined that we should make no political engagements such as membership in the League of Nations, which may commit us in advance as a nation to become involved in the settlements of controversies between other countries.” Rather, “the independence of America from such obligations” would increase “its ability and availability for service in all fields of human progress” (Hoover 1929a). This again was an argument based on messianic Americanism; Hoover felt that the best way for the U.S. to help the world was actually to be separate from the League and act more out of the nation’s independent judgment. Essentially, Hoover’s belief in exceptionalism had a built-in insurance policy – “If the world lived up to our standards, great. If not, we could
survive perfectly well on our own” (Beinart 2010, 64). Hoover noted that “fortunately the New World” was “largely free from the inheritances of fear and distrust which have so troubled the Old World.” It would be up to the U.S. specifically, in keeping with the Monroe Doctrine, to preserve the Western Hemisphere as part of its global responsibilities. Hoover believed in the inevitability of U.S. success, saying, “I have no fears for the future of our country” because “it is bright with hope” (Hoover 1929a). Of course, Hoover’s confidence was in many ways not borne out. Domestically and globally, the 1929 crash of the stock market led to the onset of the Great Depression. Furthermore, the rise of totalitarianism began, leading up to World War II. Hoover limited himself to a “moral appeal” in the case of the Japanese invasion of China, trying to use adherence to the Kellogg-Briand Pact as an argument to end the violation. But he was unwilling to confront Japan more aggressively (Beinart 2010, 66). The bright hope of the U.S. would next pass to Franklin Roosevelt and his conception of American foreign policy that was a return to messianic internationalism.

**Harry S. Truman’s Messianic Internationalism**

Like Woodrow Wilson in World War I, Franklin Roosevelt in World War II pursued American leadership of the world in manner consistent with messianic internationalism. Similarly, after Roosevelt’s death shortly before the end of the war, President Harry Truman attempted to put his predecessor’s vision into a workable reality. Truman’s basic attitude toward exceptionalism was also consistent with messianic internationalism; he viewed America’s duty as promoting freedom and felt the best way to do so was to work in conjunction with the newly established United Nations organization. However, the shifting global context to the Cold War and Truman’s efforts
at American leadership and support of the UN after the other great powers had been
devastated by World War II also provided the beginnings of a shift back to messianic
Americanism by the time President Dwight Eisenhower took office. Indeed, there was
somewhat of “a contradiction in his thinking: Truman longed for a permanent peace and
held that the United Nations was the best vehicle by which to attain this goal,” but at the
same time, “he realized that the components of peace and the practical requirements of
American foreign policy were more profound and immediate” (Spalding 2006, 4).

The most immediate issue for Truman upon taking office was trying to end World
War II. After the victory against Nazi Germany in Europe, America had to ponder an
invasion of Japan to achieve victory in the Pacific. However, the development of the
atomic bomb allowed Truman to decide on a different option. Truman very much
attributed the development of the bomb to American exceptionalism (Costigliola 2012,
376). Indeed, he said the U.S. could “be grateful to Providence” that Germany had not
developed it; God had been on America’s side as America “spent two billion dollars on
the greatest scientific gamble in history – and won” (Truman 1945a). Deciding to use the
bomb, he later claimed that he had never doubted that it should be used, despite its
destructive power, essentially articulating a fully messianic conviction in America’s
righteousness (Truman 1955, 419). The U.S. would “completely destroy Japan’s power to
make war,” but would be willing to consider international controls for the bomb (Truman
1945a).

At this time, Truman was dealing with the more general task of what the postwar
world would look like, having gone to the Potsdam Conference to meet with the leaders
of Britain and the Soviet Union. Reporting to the American people on the conference,
Truman outlined a stark moral contrast between the victors and the defeated powers, especially in the case of Germany. He felt “the German people” were only “beginning to atone for the crimes of the gangsters whom they placed in power and whom they wholeheartedly approved and obediently followed.” Unlike Germany and other nations in Europe, the U.S. had been spared physical destruction, for which Truman was “grateful to Almighty God” for his favor. In outlining a postwar vision, Truman felt assured of America’s goodness; the U.S. wanted “no territory or profit or selfish advantage out of this war.” It would take a step toward even greater global power by maintaining “military bases necessary for the complete protection of our interests and of world peace.”

However, Truman assured the world directly that these actions would be made “by arrangements consistent with the United Nations Charter” (Truman 1945b). Having shown the destructive nature of atomic power, Truman said the United Nations would be “determined that there shall be no next war” and would remain “united and strong.” He opined that the Big Three should not allow an “aggressor in the future to be clever enough to divide us”; of course, the Cold War was already in its beginning stages. Truman again found divine purposes in the victory; speaking of Franklin Roosevelt and wartime British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Truman said, “Each of them seems to have been ordained to lead his country in its hour of greatest need.” The allies would not be overly vindictive; rather, out of goodness, they would attempt “to make Germany over into a decent nation” and bring it “back into a place in the civilized world.” More generally, foreshadowing the Marshall Plan, Truman said, “If we let Europe go cold and hungry, we may lose some of the foundations of order on which the
hope for worldwide peace must rest.” Truman waxed poetic, expressing a view of exceptionalism in what the victory meant:

Our victory in Europe was more than a victory of arms. It was a victory of one way of life over another. It was a victory of an ideal founded on the rights of the common man, on the dignity of the human beings, on the conception of the State as the servant – and not the master – of its people. A free people showed that it was able to defeat professional soldiers whose only moral arms were obedience and the worship of force. (Truman 1945b)

Freedom had unquestionably triumphed in the war. Truman argued “the basic proposition of the worth and dignity of man is not a sentimental aspiration or a vain hope or a piece of rhetoric”; rather, it was “the strongest, most creative force now present in this world.” Believing in inevitable success, Truman felt the U.S. and its allies would “march together to a lasting peace and a happy world” (Truman 1945b). Embracing internationalism, after the Potsdam Conference, Truman had no particular desire for another Big Three conference; “sharply reversing Roosevelt’s concept of the UN as run by the Big Three or Four, Truman believed,” if the UN worked properly, there would be no reason to have such conferences (Costigliola 2012, 383).

Regarding the United Nations, Truman did believe he was acting to fulfill the visions of Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt. He felt that the United Nations Charter had “given reality to the ideal of that great statesman of a generation ago – Woodrow Wilson” and had helped move the world “toward the goal for which that gallant leader in this second world struggle worked and fought and gave his life – Franklin D. Roosevelt” (Truman 1955, 293). Furthermore, he viewed the U.S. as leading the world in continuation of a journey that had started in the aftermath of World War I. To Truman, America was “trying heroically to implement the program which was started by Woodrow Wilson, was carried forward by Franklin Roosevelt, and was finally
consummated” at the San Francisco conference on the UN (Truman 1955, 540). Like Roosevelt, Truman wanted to get U.S. membership in the UN ratified by the Senate without creating “such opposition as confronted Woodrow Wilson” (Truman 1955, 46). Also like Roosevelt, Truman thought the UN would be based on “unity of the major powers, who would bear the chief responsibility, as well as the sovereign equality of all states, large and small” (Truman 1955, 104). His full hope for the UN was that it would “eventually work on the same basis as the union of the United States.” In the meantime, “it was important for us to make a start, no matter how imperfect” (Truman 1955, 271).

The UN would be particularly used to help end colonialism; Truman envisioned the U.S. working with the organization to help lead other areas of the world to self-government, including through UN trusteeships. He believed America had a history of doing so in Cuba, in the Philippines, and potentially in Puerto Rico, showing a messianic sense of America’s role in the world. Indeed, Truman, regardless of past American imperialism, asserted that “colonialism in any form is” naturally “hateful to Americans” (Truman 1955, 275).

However, despite his hopes for world peace, Truman quickly began to view the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin as being a threat to the world. Unlike Roosevelt, Truman was quicker to embrace this opinion, partly contributing to the Cold War (Costigliola 2012). Truman specifically felt that the Soviets were going against everything the UN stood for. Within days of taking office, Truman judged the Soviets to be behaving badly regarding Poland; instead of promoting democracy, they were supporting “a puppet regime of Russia’s own making” (Truman 1955, 23). More generally, Truman felt “it was now obvious” that “our agreements with the Soviet Union
had so far been a one-way street and that this could not continue” (Truman 1955, 77).

Truman had wanted to have Soviet help in fighting Japan, but this was a minimized consideration after the testing and use of the atomic bomb. Despite wanting general cooperation, Truman felt that Soviet communism was a threat to everything the U.S. had worked for in World War II. More so, he criticized the Soviets for failing to appreciate the U.S. position, saying, “The Russians simply did not understand – or would not – our peaceful intentions and our genuine desire” to cooperate “through the United Nations toward the establishment of a climate of peace” (Truman 1956, 214). Instead, to Truman, the Soviets had turned the UN “into a propaganda sounding board” (Truman 1956, 212). Indeed, he felt that for the UN to have a chance at being effective the U.S. had to confront the Soviets; his actions to try to force them out of Iran were an example. In no way did he view Soviet concerns as legitimate.

As the Cold War began, Truman essentially began to view the U.S. as being responsible for giving messianic internationalism a chance of working. In trying to achieve exceptionalist goals by pursuing “an international order” (Ruggie 2005, 304) and crusading for democracy (Hoffmann 2005, 226), Truman had two particularly important policies to implement his vision. The first was the Truman Doctrine, declared when the U.S. took responsibility for preserving Greece and Turkey from communism. Greece would need “assistance if it” were “to become a self-supporting and self-respecting democracy,” and Turkey would also need to be kept “an independent and economically sound state.” Truman argued that the U.S. was the “only country” currently “able to provide that help.” He specifically addressed concerns that the U.S. was undertaking unilateral action, not wanting to undermine the general attitude of internationalism.
Though it had been “considered how the United Nations might assist in the crisis,” “the situation” was “an urgent one requiring immediate action.” Thus, the UN “and its related organizations” were “not in a position to extend help of the kind” required. Indeed, to Truman, the U.S. was ensuring that the UN could still provide hope and machinery for world peace. In helping those countries maintain freedom, the U.S. would “be giving effect to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations” (Truman 1947a).

Announcing the Truman Doctrine, the president articulated a stark moral contrast characteristic of messianism, saying that “at the present moment in world history nearly every nation” had to “choose between alternative ways of life.” Everywhere, “the free peoples of the world” would “look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms.” Thus, Truman said:

I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures. I believe that we must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way. I believe that our help should be primarily through economic and financial aid which is essential to economic stability and orderly political processes. (Truman 1947a)

In Truman’s view, such major responsibilities had been forced upon the U.S. by the circumstances of the world.

Building on the Truman Doctrine, Truman soon would implement the Marshall Plan to help rebuild Europe and prevent those nations from falling to communism – part of the policy of containment. Again, Truman couched his actions in terms consistent with messianic internationalism. He noted that the UN Charter said “we are ‘determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.’” As part of seeking “lasting peace in a world where freedom and justice” were secure, Truman felt it was necessary to continue “the American tradition of extending a helping hand to people in distress.” The
Marshall Plan would be “the only assurance of the continued independence and integrity of” nations that constituted “a bulwark for the principles of freedom, justice and the dignity of the individual.” To not help Europe would be to “surrender” it “to totalitarian control” and allow the UN to fail (Truman 1947b). Truman felt the U.S. action was consistent with its exceptional destiny and goodness, later reflecting, “For the first time in the history of the world a victor was willing to restore the vanquished as well as to help its allies” (Truman 1956, 110). Truman took great pains again to emphasize how his policy was consistent with internationalism:

The relationship between this program and the United Nations deserves special emphasis because of the central importance in our foreign policy of support of the United Nations. Our support of European recovery is in full accord with our support of the United Nations. The success of the United Nations depends upon the independent strength of its members and their determination and ability to adhere to the ideals and principles embodied in the Charter. The purposes of the European recovery program are in complete harmony with the purposes of the Charter – to [ensure] a peaceful world through the joint efforts of free nations. (Truman 1947b)

Truman’s efforts to maintain peace faced further difficulties as the Korean War began. Consistent with his attitude toward exceptionalism and containment, Truman was determined not to allow the aggression by the North Koreans against the South stand without fighting it. Specifically, Truman felt that “the foundations and the principles of the United Nations were at stake” (Truman 1956, 333). In explaining U.S. actions, though there was no actual declaration of war, Truman emphasized that North Korea had challenged “the basic principles” of the UN Charter. To not respond would destroy “the hope of mankind that the United Nations would develop into an institution of world order.” The attack had shown “contempt” by the communists “for the United Nations,
since it was an attempt to settle, by military aggression, a question which the United Nations had been working to settle by peaceful means” (Truman 1950a).

Thus, the Security Council led by the U.S. passed a resolution calling for an end to the fighting (the Soviet Union had boycotted); when this was ignored, it recommended defending South Korea. Truman noted that he had broad international support and legitimacy for U.S. actions; “fifty-two of the fifty-nine member nations” supported UN action. Acting was “a matter of basic moral principle.” Indeed, Truman viewed the event as a watershed in proving that the UN could forcefully repel aggression by the communists with unity (Truman 1950a). More so, later in the war when General Douglas MacArthur wanted to expand the fighting into China, Truman chose not to be responsible for the start of World War III, particularly because this meant that the UN would have failed in its purpose and the actions would have been inconsistent with the terms of the UN mission (Truman 1956, 450). Indeed, America had ended up fighting the Chinese in Korea, despite Truman’s previous efforts to support the Nationalist government while having them join a coalition with the Communist Chinese. Truman later argued that America’s failed support of the Nationalists was not with an “intention to impose our will upon the Chinese people” (Truman 1956, 92). He also admitted the U.S. differed from other nations, such as Britain, over whether the Communist Chinese should have China’s seat at the UN (Truman 1950b). In Truman’s view, America’s righteousness regarding China was not questionable.

Other efforts of Truman reflected a sense of exceptionalism, but at the same time marked a recognition of changes in the global context that contributed to an underlying shift to messianic Americanism. The formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization
(NATO), to Truman, was part of the “evolution of American foreign policy” toward the goal of containing communism (Spalding 2006, 142). He emphasized that the alliance was consistent with the UN Charter. Additionally, the formation of NSC 68 spelled out a major, primary role of America in defending the entire free world with the long-term goal of defeating the Soviet Union (Spalding 2006, 185-186).

Overall, Truman’s attitude toward exceptionalism was relatively consistent with Wilson and Roosevelt. He sincerely sought to establish the legitimacy and functionality of the UN, while holding a messianic conception of America’s role of promoting freedom. As events shifted and relations with the Soviets deteriorated, Truman’s actions, while justified in internationalism, also marked a general change in U.S. foreign policy toward America assuming primary responsibility for collective defense. Thus, it was easy for subsequent presidents to embrace Truman’s views on messianism, but in practice have policies more consistent with Americanism. For Truman, faith in the exceptional success of the U.S. could not be doubted; what the U.S. had “achieved in liberty” would be surpassed “in greater liberty” through “faith in the Almighty.” He proudly understood that “events” had “brought our American democracy to new influence and new responsibilities,” consistent with the exceptionalist “faith which has inspired this Nation from the beginning” (Truman 1949).

**Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Messianic Americanism**

Truman had been an internationalist, but America’s fundamental position and responsibilities relative to other nations had shifted. President Dwight Eisenhower essentially embraced this shift to America having primary responsibility for maintaining the free world in a manner consistent with messianic Americanism. He did support the
UN, as the organization had earned approval and legitimacy. However, he was not content to sermonize about the UN and rely on U.S. action through it to pursue his containment of communism. Eisenhower’s main Cold War strategy would rely on nuclear deterrence as an umbrella to maintain overall freedom and the use of covert action to try to cheaply pursue a policy of rollback of communism (Beinart 2010, 129). More generally, Eisenhower “believed America was a force of moral leadership in the world and that its strength was indispensable to the cause of freedom” – an attitude completely consistent with American exceptionalism (Newton 2011, 136).

Facing the specter of communism, Eisenhower emphasized a stark moral contrast, declaring “that forces of good and evil are massed and armed and opposed as rarely before in history.” He believed his presidential inauguration was a summoning “to give testimony in the sight of the world to our faith that the future shall belong to the free.” Furthermore, the U.S. had reached “a summit unmatched in man’s history.” While the U.S. faced danger, it should be confident of its inevitable success, having faith “in the watchfulness of a Divine Providence” as America faced down enemies with “no god but force.” Indeed, Eisenhower proclaimed exceptionalism, saying that “destiny” had “laid upon our country the responsibility of the free world’s leadership” in the Cold War. The conflict was stark; “freedom is pitted against slavery” and “lightness against the dark.” To Eisenhower, America had exceptional responsibility; U.S. “strength and security” was “a trust upon which rests the hope of free men everywhere.” At the same time, he did pay tribute to the UN, saying the organization was “the living sign of all people’s hope for peace.” In a sense foreshadowing John F. Kennedy’s call for American action, Eisenhower said, “We must be ready to dare all for our country,” willing to embrace
sacrifice. This was because of a clear “truth” that “whatever America hopes to bring to pass in the world must first come to pass in the heart of America” (Eisenhower 1953).

Eisenhower’s first challenge as president was to end the Korean War. While continuing diplomatic efforts through the UN, he essentially decided that only a completely American threat could accomplish this goal. Since military unification would be impossible, he clandestinely had word passed on to the Chinese that he was willing to use nuclear weapons; this, in his view, helped end the war sooner (Beinart 2010, 128). America had saved South Korea, and it had done so through its own unilateral threat.

More generally, Eisenhower embraced a strategy of containment through nuclear deterrence and covert action for rollback that reflected messianic Americanism. Over time, he believed his strategy would ensure that America was inevitably successful; “peace was to be maintained until victory could be achieved through covert action and nuclear deterrence,” components of the “New Look” strategy (Newton 2011, 129). Nuclear deterrence not only worked in Korea, but Eisenhower used it in other situations as well. He wielded nuclear weapons as a threat to help prevent the Soviets from invading West Berlin. Furthermore, he threatened the use of nukes to prevent China from taking over the Quemoy and Matsu islands and more generally to provide safety for America’s ally Taiwan (Beinart 2010, 129). The strategy also allowed Eisenhower to save money and preserve America’s economic health (Newton 2011, 129). These weapons were not without consequence; one test destroyed the Bikini atoll (Newton 2011, 155). America’s power – consistent with exceptionalism – was, as part of this strategy, the vital force to preserve world peace and freedom.
The other principle aspect of Eisenhower’s New Look was rollback, specifically through covert action. This inherently relied on aspects of exceptionalism, particularly “double standards” (Ignatieff 2005, 7; Koh 2005, 116). In 1953, Eisenhower authorized regime change in Iran, toppling Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh. For Eisenhower, the question in deciding whether to use the CIA for this purpose was “whether to stand by and allow a nation of undeniable strategic consequence to drift or plunge into the Soviet orbit” (Newton 2011, 102-105). Eisenhower privately admitted that public knowledge of such covert activities, though unquestionably justified in his view, would arouse domestic and international embarrassment. Furthermore, it would hamper the U.S. ability to engage in more activities of what he viewed as a successful policy (Newton 2011, 108).

Covert action was authorized in Guatemala to combat the perceived threat of communism, and U.S. planes were even used when success of the coup seemed in doubt (Newton 2011, 168). In another example, the U.S. attempted to influence elections in Indonesia and then tried to change the government. While the covert action failed to change who was in power, it did make Indonesian leadership decide to be more independent of the Soviets (Newton 2011, 279). Other attempted coups by the CIA under Director Allen Dulles occurred in the Dominican Republic and the Congo. After the communist Fidel Castro took power in Cuba, Eisenhower began to have plans made for action against him (Beinart 2010, 129). To Eisenhower, covert action was a convenient type of exceptionalism; relatively cheaply, it allowed for attempts at rollback without a major commitment. Furthermore, just as communism could threaten free nations, in this way democratic action could be seen as a threat to communist ones.
Eisenhower also asserted *messianic Americanism* against the Soviets and Chinese. When Joseph Stalin died, he wanted to say something, even hinting that the Soviet people should consider contesting their leadership (Newton 2011, 126). He had U-2 planes routinely spy on the Soviet Union – another double standard – and after the program was discovered, he argued that the flights would have never been necessary if the Soviets were not so secretive (Newton 2011, 316). The launching of *Sputnik* into space by the Soviets spurred Eisenhower into action on America’s space program (Newton 2011, 255). Extending American protection to the world against communism, the administration announced what was known as the Eisenhower Doctrine for the Middle East, asserting American “authority to cooperate with Middle Eastern nations to protect their independence” and “to supply military aid” or troops if requested (Newton 2011, 258). This was put into practice when the U.S. invaded Lebanon to prevent communist subversion in a particularly strategic nation (Newton 2011, 271). Eisenhower also forcefully exerted American leadership of the world in the Suez Crisis. When Britain, France, and Israel attempted to take back the Suez Canal from Egypt, Eisenhower responded by undercutting America’s usual allies. Diplomatic pressure was applied at the UN, but more importantly, Eisenhower “applied economic pressure, denying his allies oil and refusing British access to capital during a run on the pound.” Thus, they were forced to abandon the project; Prime Minister Anthony Eden even left office (Newton 2011, 232).

To Eisenhower, the world was where America’s “full destiny” was, supporting “all peoples and all nations” who sought to “be free.” By contrast, communism’s purpose was “to seal forever the fate of those it has enslaved,” breaking their spirit and keeping
them in darkness. Thus, America’s full purpose had to be “the building of a peace with justice in a world where moral law prevails.” The stakes were even higher because, with nuclear weapons, “peace may be the only climate possible for human life itself.”
Eisenhower supported the UN, saying that “in that body rests the best hope of our age for the assertion of that law by which all nations may live in dignity.” However, through nuclear deterrence and covert action, as well as by America’s sheer position as the only nation matched in power with the ideologically opposite Soviet Union, Eisenhower had for the most part returned to a general attitude toward exceptionalism best described as *messianic Americanism*. America’s actions did not need to be legitimated through the UN or specifically consistent with its principles; they were legitimate to Eisenhower because they had been undertaken by America. Unlike some other presidents with this attitude, Eisenhower was not hostile toward international institutions, but he firmly embraced a strategy for anticommunism and the promotion of freedom that worked outside of that body. America would not “sell our own” sovereignty nor seek “to buy” the sovereignty of others (though covert action would suggest otherwise). Success for the U.S. in its mission would be inevitable and consistent with its exceptional history:

> We do not fear this world of change. America is no stranger to much of its spirit. Everywhere we see the seeds of the same growth that America itself has known. The American experiment has, for generations, fired the passion and the courage of millions elsewhere seeking freedom, equality, opportunity. And the American story of material progress has helped excite the longing of all needy peoples for some satisfaction of their human wants. These hopes that we have helped to inspire, we can help to fulfill. (Eisenhower 1957)

Eisenhower believed that the power of America, its free people, and its exceptional ideals would carry “far beyond our own frontiers, to the wide world of our duty and our destiny.” The United States would play the major role in allowing “the light of freedom”
to come “to all darkened lands,” “until at last the darkness is no more” (Eisenhower 1957).

John F. Kennedy’s Messianic Americanism

President John F. Kennedy came into office having sharply criticized the Eisenhower Administration for supposedly allowing the U.S. to fall behind the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Particularly at the beginning of his presidency, he fully embraced messianic Americanism, declaring that America was glad to take on the responsibility of preserving the entire free world, confronting communism, and “defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger” (Kennedy 1961). He would attempt to put this toughness into practice in Cuba and Vietnam, though later in his presidency before he was assassinated he appeared to begin to have doubts about his strategy.

In his inaugural address, much as Warren G. Harding had, Kennedy declared his firm belief in American exceptionalism and called upon the public to support his foreign policy and be prepared for great challenges. The “revolutionary beliefs for which” the Founding Fathers had fought were “still at issue around the globe,” requiring decisive American leadership. Famously, Kennedy specifically called for his generation of Americans to take on this leadership of the world:

We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans – born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage – and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world. (Kennedy 1961)

More so, Kennedy asserted that America would do anything to fulfill its destiny; it would “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend,” and “oppose
any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.” This statement essentially encapsulates all that messianic Americanism stands for – sacrifice, American leadership, and an unyielding belief in the triumph of freedom (Kennedy 1961).

Kennedy asserted absolute American goodness and benevolent intentions. He pledged to newly free states and Third World nations that “one form of colonial control” would not “have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny.” Furthermore, he warned these nations not to embrace communism and a relationship with the Soviet Union, saying “those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside.” He said that America would “help” those nations “help themselves,” but not out of any self-interest or “because the communists may be doing it,” but “because it is right.” America would especially be vigilant in preserving the Western Hemisphere. Kennedy did pledge renewed support to the United Nations, hoping to prevent it from “becoming merely a forum for invective”; this was a nod to internationalism, but at the same time revealed Kennedy’s thoughts that the UN had become muddled and that it would be America that would speak for the free peoples of the world. Kennedy did not just ask Americans to think about what “you can do for your country”; he told them to “ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.” America’s purpose would be divine; “here on earth God’s work must truly be our own” (Kennedy 1961).

In practice, Kennedy’s tough policy of messianic Americanism was met with major difficulties. Pressured by the CIA, he decided to put into motion the plan to oust Fidel Castro that had been formulated during the Eisenhower Administration. Cuban exiles would be dispatched to the island to lead an uprising. Thus, “Kennedy told the CIA
to go ahead with the plan, so long as it kept America’s fingerprints off it” (Beinart 2010, 146). His desire for secrecy was an admission of the double standard America was engaging in. When the invasion was failing, Kennedy backed off sending in American forces, “frightened of the international condemnation an all-out U.S. attack would bring” (Beinart 2010, 147). This decision does demonstrate a limit to Kennedy’s exceptionalism that he was not willing to publicly admit at the time. The Bay of Pigs fiasco would haunt Kennedy’s foreign policy and contribute to distrust of the military, but also importantly made him increasingly worry about needing to recover a tougher image – rather than a feckless one – consistent with messianic Americanism.

Cuba again became a major issue for Kennedy with the missile crisis. Discovering that the Soviets were placing offensive missiles in Cuba, Kennedy decided to use a blockade – called a quarantine – to challenge the Soviets rather than an invasion of Cuba. As a result, Soviet ships turned around. At the same time, Kennedy cut a deal with the Soviets, promising that the U.S. would not undertake a future invasion of Cuba and would withdraw its own missiles from Turkey. However, Kennedy forced this deal to appear as if America had won so that it would fit firmly with the image of messianic Americanism he wished to portray. He had forbidden the Soviets from exposing that America was eliminating its missiles in Turkey. Kennedy had avoided all-out conflict, which he had deemed to have a chance of “somewhere between one and three and even” (Beinart 2010, 155-156).

Kennedy embraced American leadership for the free world in other ways as well. One of his signature initiatives was the formation of the Peace Corps, which would carry “the spirit” of “American idealism” to “the far corners of the earth.” He proudly stated,
“There are, in fact, nearly a million Americans serving their country and the cause of freedom in overseas posts, a record no other people can match.” Another initiative showing America’s exceptional global leadership was the Alliance for Progress. The program helped Latin America by “feeding” many “school age children,” distributing textbooks, building schools, helping farmers, and building homes. In this way, America was taking care of “millions who were forgotten,” providing them with “new health and dignity.” Additionally, Kennedy embraced the Soviet challenge in space, promising Americans would surpass their achievements, including landing on the moon (Kennedy 1963a).

Another crucial part of Kennedy’s foreign policy that revealed his attitude toward exceptionalism was the U.S. role in Vietnam. Kennedy had been very firm that the U.S. would preserve South Vietnam against the North, viewing it as “a sort of touchstone of our will.” He began to greatly increase aid and the number of U.S. advisers in the country (Beinart 2010, 154). Withdrawing from South Vietnam would imply weakness and a failure to live up to America’s exceptional duty. Most notably, Kennedy approved a plan for a coup against South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem over concerns that he was planning to reach an accommodation with the North Vietnamese over reunification. Though Diem was promised “safe passage,” he ended up being killed, much to the horror of Kennedy (Beinart 2010, 159). America’s exceptional duty in Vietnam was already getting out of control.

Arguably, Kennedy realized this. He may have wanted to get out of Vietnam, having expressed thoughts to aides and leaders on a number of occasions about such a course of action. At the same time, he was worried what the impact of giving in to
communism would be. Thus, it is unclear if America would have withdrawn from Vietnam had Kennedy not been assassinated (Beinart 2010, 160). In other ways, too, Kennedy began merging his general attitude of *messianic Americanism* with some signs that can be considered a nascent form of *pragmatic moralism*. This was best expressed in his speech at American University in 1963. Kennedy still put forward many messianic arguments and promises. He hoped for a change in attitude from the communists to help world peace. America would still need overwhelming strength to preserve the free world. However, Kennedy also allowed that he was not seeking “a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war.” He also called upon Americans to “reexamine our own attitude,” which was “as essential” of that of the Soviets. In particular, he challenged Americans to not believe that peace was “impossible,” expressing both a messianic and moralistic conception that peace would be achieved. He also distinguished between the stark moral contrast of democracy versus communism as government systems and the lesser contrast between the people of each nation, saying, “We can still hail the Russian people for their many achievements.” Furthermore, Kennedy hinted at internationalism more distantly in the future, saying, though the UN was beset by “financial problems” now, it could someday “develop” into “a genuine world security system.” In the meantime, he asserted messianism in emphasizing that American forces were only “committed to peace” and “self-restraint,” as the U.S. would naturally “never start a war” (Kennedy 1963b). (Vietnam would prove otherwise.) Ultimately, Kennedy’s attitude toward exceptionalism conceptualized America’s role in the world in a *messianic Americanist* sense, but by the third year of his presidency, there were signs of the beginnings of *pragmatic moralist* thinking.
Lyndon B. Johnson’s Messianic Americanism

If Kennedy did have doubts about America continuing to preserve South Vietnam, President Lyndon Baines Johnson was not aware of them. Though the Great Society programs were his main passion, he felt he had a duty to Kennedy and to the world to follow through in South Vietnam. Living up to JFK’s foreign policy meant “seeing things through in Vietnam”; Johnson was “convinced” that American policies for Asia “were consistent with the goals the United States had been trying to accomplish in the world since 1945.” Borrowing Kennedy’s phrase, Johnson believed the U.S. was “still the keystone in the arch of freedom” (Johnson 1971, 42-43); LBJ’s vision was characteristic of messianic Americanism.

Indeed, Johnson’s attitude regarding Vietnam also stemmed from his beliefs about America’s role in the world. Like Kennedy’s, Johnson’s inaugural address essentially was a messianic ode to American exceptionalism. America had been “conceived in justice, written in liberty,” and “bound in union” so that it would “inspire the hopes of all mankind.” To Johnson, “the American covenant called on us to help show the way for the liberation of man”; more so, that would be the goal of his administration. Sacrifice would be necessary; “If American lives must end, and American treasure be spilled, in countries that we barely know, then that is the price that change has demanded of conviction and of our enduring covenant.” (It is striking just how accurately this statement does describe the difficulties America faced because of Vietnam – the sacrifices of life and money, as well as not truly knowing the country in which America was fighting.) Johnson called for Americans to live up to their “heritage”:

In each generation, with toil and tears, we have had to earn our heritage again. If we fail now then we will have forgotten in abundance what we learned in
hardship: that democracy rests on faith, that freedom asks more than it gives, and the judgment of God is harshest on those who are most favored. (Johnson 1965)

To Johnson, America had a duty to God to live up to its previous success and continuously overcome the doubts of its enemies. The United States would “bend” the world “to the hopes of man” (Johnson 1965).

While Johnson felt the U.S. would bend the world to its vision, in practice he would face enormous challenges trying to do this just with South Vietnam. Johnson believed he had to respond forcefully to attacks by the North Vietnamese against American ships in the Gulf of Tonkin (ignoring the fact that the first attack came as the U.S.S. Maddox conducted espionage and the second attack was dubious at best) (Beinart 2010, 164). His attitude regarding how to respond was rooted in his view of history and how World War II was able to occur:

Like most men and women of my generation, I felt strongly that World War II might have been avoided if the United States in the 1930s had not given such an uncertain signal of its likely response to aggression in Europe and Asia. (Johnson 1971, 46)

In essence, Johnson’s view was that the U.S. should have confronted challenges in the 1930s in a manner more consistent with messianic Americanism; the U.S. should have been clear that it would have responded strongly to challenges to freedom. As a result of the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Johnson asked Congress for power to respond; the result was the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that authorized the president to “take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against” U.S. forces “and to prevent further aggression” more generally (Johnson 1971, 118).

To Johnson, the choice was stark; if the U.S. did not respond, all of Southeast Asia might be “lost” to communism (Johnson 1971, 120). A “retreat from this challenge
would open the path to World War III.” Johnson and his advisors decided not to try to persuade the UN to act in conjunction with the U.S. (Johnson 1971, 148). He ignored international opinion on the issue; when pressed that France and other nations opposed increased U.S. involvement, Johnson responded “that he did not pay the foreigners at the UN to advise him on foreign policy” (Beinart 2010, 169). Johnson felt and knew that an increase of troops to help the South Vietnamese would primarily have to be a U.S. responsibility (Johnson 1971, 139). If America gave up on South Vietnam, Johnson feared a reprise of contentious debates over who lost China in the 1950s. Furthermore, U.S. allies would lose faith in American credibility and communists “would move to exploit the disarray” (Johnson 1971, 152).

In attempting to achieve his goal, Johnson, while keeping many aspects of the war secret, continued a steady increase of the American troop presence in Vietnam even up to 1968. By then, however, it was clear that Vietnam was sapping American willpower. In particular, the Tet offensive by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces demonstrated this. To Johnson, the Tet offensive against the South – the force and scope of which caught South Vietnam and the U.S. off guard – had been “a military defeat of massive proportions” for the communists. However, Johnson bemoaned that the morale of Americans eroded as a result of the demonstration of communist force; he reflected wistfully, “I wish I could report that the enemy failed as decisively” in demoralizing Americans. Still, Johnson asserted “that historians and military analysts will come to regard that offensive and its aftermath as the most disastrous Communist defeat of the war in Vietnam,” which of course would not be the case. The media’s reporting of the offensive further angered Johnson; he said, “The media seemed to be in competition as to
who could provide the most lurid and depressing accounts” (Johnson 1971, 383-384).

Despite atrocities on both sides and the terrible strain on the U.S. that Vietnam wrought, Johnson had no doubt of its necessity and good intentions – even as it cost him his dream of more Great Society programs as well as his chance for reelection. Despite massive protests, when Johnson announced that he would not run for reelection, he asserted America’s goodness and the necessity of the mission:

But let men everywhere know, however, that a strong, a confident, and a vigilant America stands ready tonight to seek an honorable peace – and stands ready tonight to defend an honored cause – whatever the price, whatever the burden, whatever the sacrifice that duty may require. (Johnson 1968)

While seeking peace with North Vietnam, Johnson was willing to continue with a nation-building mission; he believed the U.S. “had given 17 million South Vietnamese a chance to build their own country and their own institutions” (Johnson 1971, 529). Johnson’s views on other foreign policy issues also reflected messianic Americanism. He specifically explained how America had to be called upon to secure the free world, as “the world was not ready for a global solution.” Though the UN “had proved its worth in many situations,” it “did not have the peacekeeping machinery needed for universal order.” Furthermore, the impact of “the Iron Curtain” and the potential for a veto in the UN Security Council made Johnson feel the UN’s ability was limited (Johnson 1971, 348). In a great humanitarian effort, the U.S. assisted India during a grave threat of starvation; the U.S. sent food and also worked to change India’s farm policy to help the country going forward (Johnson 1971, 225). U.S. efforts in space, to Johnson, were affirmation of exceptionalism; Americans were proving “once more to be the sons of pioneers who tamed a broad continent and built the mightiest nation in the history of the world” (Johnson 1971, 286). In terms of the overall Cold War, Johnson was willing to
try to work with the Soviets, but did not expect any “miracles in terms of U.S.-Soviet relations” (Johnson 1971, 463).

At the end of his presidency, the impact of Vietnam could be seen on Johnson’s thinking about exceptionalism. He feared that the war had instilled in the American public a desire to return to isolationism (Johnson 1971, 492). To Johnson, this would be a failure to live up to exceptionalism and America’s duty to the rest of the world. Americans had to always “believe in ourselves”; the belief “in justice and liberty” and “that every man must” someday “be free” was vital and had to be acted upon (Johnson 1965). Indeed, Johnson felt Americans would “be a poorer and a weaker people if” they “ever abandon[ed] that belief” and “the courage to do what had to be done in times of great danger.” Despite his challenges, Johnson firmly believed the world would continue to depend upon a strong America. If America did not fully believe in itself and its mission, “the world” would “be a much more dangerous place for all mankind” (Johnson 1971, 531).

**Gerald Ford’s Realist Exemplarism**

Vietnam would change the presidential approach to American exceptionalism in the 1970s. Johnson’s successor, President Richard Nixon, steadily withdrew American troops while Vietnamizing the war. Furthermore, he focused his efforts on building a stable balance of power in the world, playing off the division between the Soviet Union and China. With Nixon resigning the presidency due to the Watergate scandal, new President Gerald Ford found himself in office at a very unique time. In the words of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger:

Gerald Ford became President at a time when American foreign policy had to come to terms with its limits. He presided over the final collapse of Indochina,
which resulted from decisions long antedating his presidency. But Vietnam was a symbol, not a cause, of the national trauma of the 1970s, which arose from the gap that had opened between historic convictions regarding America’s mission and the practical challenges of a new international environment. (Kissinger 1999, 1068)

Essentially, Ford became president when American exceptionalism was, compared to other periods in history, in major doubt. In his and Kissinger’s view, the U.S. had to adjust its expectations regarding exceptionalism to a world that demanded a more realist foreign policy; his approach was that of realist exemplarism.

To that end, Ford sought to continue the general foreign policy direction of Richard Nixon. He believed that Nixon’s efforts to forge a stable peace through a balance of power with the Soviet Union and China, playing off their division, had made the U.S. “once again the master of the international scene.” It allowed the U.S. to overcome the challenge of Vietnam “undercut[ting] our worldwide leadership role.” Ford kept Henry Kissinger in the administration, believing him to be “a total pragmatist who thought in terms of power and national interest instead of ideology.” Thus, Ford and Kissinger tried to “rearrange” international relationships “in a way that would be beneficial” to the U.S. (Ford 1979, 128-129). Furthermore, characteristic of realist exemplarism, creating a stable realist peace would allow the U.S., because of its exceptionalism, “to win the marathon” it was a part of over time (Kissinger 1999, 37).

The Ford Administration quickly faced major challenges in Vietnam. As North Vietnam violated the peace agreement, the U.S. did not respond with any force. In Ford’s view, he was unable to do this because of Watergate increasing suspicion of the presidency and the newly passed War Powers Act in Congress. Despite this, Ford did vigorously advocate for American monetary aid for South Vietnam and Cambodia in an
attempt to prevent their collapse. He reused the frequent argument that if the U.S. “did not stand up to aggression,” then “we would lose our credibility around the world” (Ford 1979, 249-250). However, Congress was not willing to increase aid. South Vietnam would collapse, and Ford had to oversee the evacuation of thousands of Americans and Vietnamese from the country (Kalb & Kalb 2011, 27).

Ford had a complex opinion regarding the American experience of the Vietnam War. He “had always thought that we were doing the right thing” in combating communism there, dating back to his service in the House of Representatives. However, Ford was willing to concede that there were many significant questions about the conflict. In particular, he wondered whether civilian and military leaders had “stopped to consider that our world commitments might already be too great,” as well as whether the U.S. understood conditions in Vietnam and had a clear strategy. In Ford’s view, “the answer” to all those questions was “probably no.” However, he did feel it might have been possible for the U.S. to win the war, but noted its tremendous cost of life, “U.S. prestige,” economic difficulty, and domestic conflict (Ford 1979, 248-249). Thus, his conception of U.S. involvement abroad was more limited than the messianism of other presidents.

Within a more limited context, Ford did look for ways to reassert American leadership on the world stage. An early test came almost immediately after the collapse of South Vietnam; the SS Mayaguez, an American merchant ship, was seized by the Cambodian military in international waters. In planning a rescue, discussions in the administration “very quickly” went from focusing on the incident itself to thinking of “the broader ramifications of America’s image in the post-Vietnam world” (Kalb & Kalb 2011, 30). Specifically, while the “first consideration” would be “the recovery of the ship
and her crew,” Kissinger and Ford “felt that we had to do more.” Indeed, they “wanted them to know that” the U.S. “mean business”; therefore, in addition to focusing on rescuing the ship, Ford authorized air strikes in Cambodia (Ford 1979, 279). The military operation would be relatively successful, as the crew was recovered (Ford 1979, 283).

Like Nixon, Ford worked on improving U.S. relations with the Soviet Union and China. With the Soviets, he continued discussions of arms control, building off of Nixon’s previous efforts and holding summits with Chairman Leonid Brezhnev (Ford 1979, 214). Ford preferred “quiet diplomacy” with the Soviets on human rights issues such as emigration as part of maintaining détente (Ford 1979, 138). However, Ford was willing to reference exceptionalism in advocating for new agreements; at Helsinki, Finland, he said that America was working “to promote peace and progress not only for ourselves but for all mankind” because America’s “vision has always been forward” (Ford 1975b). Additionally, he worked to engage more with China, meeting with Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping. Ford believed “that the Soviet Union had an implacable enemy in the PRC,” which the U.S. could take advantage of (Ford 1979, 337). Acknowledging that “our relations with the Communist countries are a basic factor of the world environment,” Ford said that he sought “to build a long-term basis for coexistence” through a balance of power. However, he pledged that America would “stand by” its “principles” (Ford 1975a).

More generally, Ford called for tending to American power to help regain some of America’s standing that had been damaged in Vietnam. Specifically, he wanted to develop “a resurgent American economy” that “would do more to restore the confidence of the world in its own future than anything else we can do.” Then the U.S. could show
that it was “able and willing to help other nations” and keep its place “as a leader among nations.” Indeed, Ford still believed that the well-being of the world did depend “on America’s determination and America’s leadership.” Ford even pardoned Richard Nixon partly out of consideration for how the trial of a former president would damage American prestige at a critical time (Ford 1979, 161). Focusing on the national interest and creating a stable balance of power, Ford felt that America would be able to “rebuild” its “political and economic strength,” allowing the U.S. “once again and for centuries more” to live up to its exceptionalism as “a stronghold and a beacon-light of liberty for the whole world” (Ford 1975a).

On America’s bicentennial anniversary, Ford explained that “we lead because our whole history says we must.” The U.S. would always stand for its exceptional ideals—that “liberty is for all men and women as a matter of equal and unalienable right.” The basic principles would not change even though the attitude was more consistent with realism. Indeed, Ford embraced exemplarism as well, saying that “the establishment of justice and peace abroad will in large measure depend upon the peace and justice we create here in our own country, where we still show the way” (Ford 1976). Overcoming Vietnam and managing relationships with the communist world powers was a crucial part of allowing America to recover. In Kissinger’s judgment, “the Cold War could not have been won had not Gerald Ford, at a tragic period of America’s history, been there to keep us from losing it” (Kissinger 1999, 40).

Ronald Reagan’s Messianic Americanism

President Ronald Reagan sought to correct for what he believed were the foreign policy flaws of both realist exemplarism and Jimmy Carter’s pragmatic moralism. He felt
that neither attitude had sufficiently asserted American greatness nor challenged
America’s foes as starkly as they should have; thus, he fully embraced an attitude of
messianic Americanism. In his view, the U.S. had lost confidence in its exceptionalism:

During the late seventies, I felt our country had begun to abdicate this historical role as the spiritual leader of the Free World and its foremost defender of democracy. Some of our resolve was gone, along with a part of our commitment to uphold the values we cherished. (Reagan 1990, 266)

In response, Reagan argued that the U.S. must “do whatever needs to be done to preserve this last and greatest bastion of freedom.” Americans had “never been unwilling to pay” the “price” that freedom required. To Reagan, the U.S., despite recent difficulties, always had “every right to dream heroic dreams.” The best “weapon” of the U.S. was “the will and moral courage of free men and women” – “a weapon our adversaries in today’s world do not have.” Affirming his belief in exceptionalism religiously, Reagan stated, “I believe God intended for us to be free” (Reagan 1981).

Indeed, because God favored America, Reagan admitted little to no fallibility on the part of the U.S. for its intentions in foreign policy. He was “shocked” by those who did not believe in America’s goodness, as Americans “were the most moral and generous people on earth” (Reagan 1990, 296). Though America had some “sad episodes” in its past, such as Vietnam, Reagan argued “any objective observer must hold a positive view of American history, a history that has been the story of hopes fulfilled and dreams made into reality” (Reagan 1983a). Reagan particularly pushed back at the pragmatic moralist view that Vietnam and other efforts by America had been unworthy causes; he proudly believed that the Vietnam War had been a “noble cause” (Kalb & Kalb 2011, 87).

Looking to overcome the loss of confidence resulting from the war, Reagan challenged Americans to live up to their exceptional heritage:
My fellow citizens, our nation is poised for greatness. We must do what we know is right, and do it with all our might. Let history say of us: “These were golden years – when the American Revolution was reborn, when freedom gained new life, and America reached for her best.” (Reagan 1985)

America would have to do this, as God had “called upon” the U.S. “to pass that dream” of freedom “to a waiting and hopeful world” (Reagan 1985).

This renewal of messianic Americanism required emphasizing stark moral contrasts and the reassertion of the effort to defeat communism as an entire philosophy. Reagan emphasized that the U.S. and other free nations rejected “the arbitrary power of the state” and refused “collectivism” because it stifled “all the best human impulses.” Free nations could “not hesitate to declare” the “ultimate” objective of defeating communism. Reagan wanted to have the U.S. specifically think about how it could “best contribute as a nation to the global campaign for democracy now gathering force,” unleashing the effort of “both the public and private sectors” for the task. America would “be shy no longer” (Reagan 1982). Communism was an example of “sin” and “the focus of evil in the modern world,” and America was called “by Scripture and the Lord Jesus to oppose it with all our might.” Reagan believed in the inevitability of U.S. success, arguing that communism was “another sad, bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages even now are being written” (Reagan 1983a). To help this process, Reagan sought “a crusade for freedom that” would “engage the faith and fortitude of the next generation” (Reagan 1982).

Most importantly for Reagan, the fight against communism called for a renewed distinction between America and the Soviet Union. Critical of détente, he said it was not possible to “ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire” or “call the arms race a giant misunderstanding.” To Reagan, this would “remove” the U.S.
“from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil” (Reagan 1983a). Moral contrast was essential. Indeed, Reagan believed that détente had been interpreted by the Soviets “as a freedom to pursue whatever policies of subversion, aggression, and expansionism they wanted anywhere in the world” (Reagan 1990, 265). Despite his belief in the evil of the Soviet system, however, “Reagan was actually more optimistic about the evolution of Soviet society than his predecessors” (Beinart 2010, 229). To begin with, Reagan felt that achieving peace and arms reduction with the Soviets would require “an increase in arms” (Reagan 1990, 294). Reagan “intended” to make clear to the Soviets “that we were going to spend whatever it took to stay ahead of them in the arms race” and, as an exceptional nation, “would never accept second place” (Reagan 1990, 267).

More than even increasing U.S. defense spending, Reagan intended for America to be responsible for the salvation of the entire free world against the Soviets through the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), known as “Star Wars” because many scientists and others felt it was not an achievable goal. To Reagan, “the creation of a defense” shield against nuclear weapons would allow a “change from a policy of assured destruction to one of assured survival” (Reagan 1990, 550). Successful research on the initiative would help allow the U.S., through its own actions and power, “to increase the safety of Europe and all the world” (Reagan 1987). In essence, this idea was messianic Americanism to its greatest extent; the U.S. would protect the world completely.

Even as he negotiated with Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, Reagan was unwilling to trade SDI for more Soviet reductions in missiles (Reagan 1990, 628). However, Reagan’s attitude toward the Soviet Union had shifted with Gorbachev in power. He noted:
Not once during our private sessions or at the plenary meetings did he express support for the old Marxist-Leninist goal of a one-world Communist state or the Brezhnev Doctrine of Soviet expansionism. He was the first Soviet leader I knew of who hadn’t done that. (Reagan 1990, 641)

The two leaders were thus able to come to an agreement on the INF treaty, resulting in the elimination of an entire class of nuclear weapons (Reagan 1990, 699). Reagan attributed this achievement to his arms buildup, arguing that “because we remained strong, the Soviets came back to the table” (Reagan 1987).

Even as he began to develop a better working relationship with the Soviets and Gorbachev, Reagan continued to challenge them ideologically in a manner consistent with messianic Americanism. The U.S. continued to provide aid to the mujahidin in Afghanistan to keep the Soviets in their own version of Vietnam. Reagan not only wanted to do this “as a weapon” against the Soviets, but he also viewed it as an assault on “the ideology of communism itself” (Kalb & Kalb 2011, 114). Additionally, Reagan challenged Gorbachev to allow greater freedom in Eastern Europe. In Berlin, he stated that “the question of freedom for all mankind” could not be determined “as long as this scar” of the Berlin Wall was “permitted to stand.” If the Soviets were to make an “unmistakable” signal of their intention to “advance” the “cause of freedom and peace,” “Mr. Gorbachev” would have to “tear down this wall.” Indeed, Reagan believed success on this would be inevitable, as the wall could not “withstand freedom” (Reagan 1987).

Reagan also sought to have the U.S. confront communism in other areas of the world. In Central America and the Caribbean, Reagan called for opposing communist regimes. He asserted unquestionable U.S. intentions, stating that it was “the ultimate in hypocrisy for the unelected Nicaraguan Government to charge that we seek their overthrow” while they were working to destabilize the democratically “elected
Government of El Salvador.” Indeed, Reagan emphasized that such movements were evil, saying “the goal of the professional guerrilla movements in Central America is as simple as it is sinister: to destabilize the entire region from the Panama Canal to Mexico,” posing a national security risk for the U.S. In response, Reagan wanted America to foster democracy and economic development in the region and assist those fighting for freedom (Reagan 1983b). In practice, this meant aid to the Contras in Nicaragua; Reagan believed they were focused on “the task of bringing democracy to Nicaragua in the same way that the freedom fighters who led the American Revolution brought democracy” to the U.S. (Reagan 1990, 477). Helping the region was “a moral duty” (Reagan 1983b).

A primary example of Reagan’s missionary sense was the decision to invade the island of Grenada. Reagan emphasized that Caribbean nations had asked the U.S. to undertake military action to “restore order and democracy” in Grenada, as well as rescue U.S. hostages from communists there (Reagan 1983c). Reagan “decided not to inform anyone in advance about the rescue mission,” including Congress, “in order to reduce the possibilities of a leak.” However, this was not the only reason; Reagan, asserting messianic Americanism, wanted to overcome the “post-Vietnam syndrome, the resistance of many in Congress to the use of military force abroad for any reason, because of our nation’s experience in Vietnam.” He felt the U.S. could not “remain spooked forever by this experience to the point where it refused to stand up and defend” freedom (Reagan 1990, 451). Succeeding in the mission in Grenada, Reagan said the U.S. had gotten “there just in time,” as Grenada “was a Soviet-Cuban colony, being readied as a major military bastion to export terror and undermine democracy” (Reagan 1983c). Around the same period, however, Reagan showed that Vietnam could not be overcome as completely as
he wanted; he was unwilling to use force in Lebanon after a terrorist attack that killed hundreds of U.S. marines in Beirut. The difference partly resulted from a perception of the enemy. While in Grenada the U.S. “saw a traditional enemy,” in Lebanon they faced an insurgency. The Pentagon felt more confidence in winning “a traditional war,” even if it were hypothetically against a large conventional enemy force (Kalb & Kalb 2011, 96).

Overall, Ronald Reagan believed that his foreign policy leadership had restored America’s confidence in its exceptionalism:

I think the nation had begun the process of spiritual revival that was so badly needed. It was once again striving to live up to that special vision of America expressed more than three hundred years ago by John Winthrop on the deck of a tiny vessel off the coast of Massachusetts, when he told the pilgrims gathered with him on the edge of the New World that they had the opportunity to create a new civilization based on freedom unlike any other before it, a unique and special “shining city on a hill.” (Reagan 1990, 299)

To Reagan, American success, especially with restored confidence, was inevitable and a part of God’s vision for the nation. In “this blessed land” of America there would “always” be “a better tomorrow” (Reagan 1985). Indeed, the U.S. victory in the Cold War confirmed Reagan’s beliefs. He felt that “democracy triumphed” because “it was a battle of values – between one system that gave preeminence to the state and another that gave preeminence to the individual and freedom” (Reagan 1990, 715). Reagan believed he had reasserted America leadership for the world, doing so with an attitude toward exceptionalism of messianic Americanism.

George H. W. Bush’s Messianic Americanism

Following Ronald Reagan, President George H. W. Bush came into power at an opportune time for an assertion of messianic Americanism, as the Cold War was showing signs of ending. However, Bush did not just seek a post-Cold War order that would allow
for world peace to be preserved and freedom to be advanced under American leadership. He also sought to overcome the legacy of Vietnam. Never having believed that Vietnam had been in any way wrong or that America had acted in questionable ways, Bush wanted to forge “a world order that was as much post-Vietnam as it was post-cold war” (Kalb & Kalb 2011, 129).

Bush proclaimed America’s place and destiny in the world in his inaugural address and subsequently during his presidency. He noted that “a world refreshed by freedom seems reborn” and that, “in a man’s heart,” “the day of the dictator is over.” Asserting America’s leadership in moving the world increasingly toward freedom, Bush proclaimed his vision of American exceptionalism:

We know what works: Freedom works. We know what’s right: Freedom is right. We know how to secure a more just and prosperous life for man on Earth: through free markets, free speech, free elections, and the exercise of free will unhampered by the state. (Bush 1989a)

Further embracing a messianic conception of America’s role, Bush argued that American exceptionalism was an absolute fact, saying, “We know in our hearts, not loudly and proudly but as a simple fact, that this country has meaning beyond what we see, and that our strength is a force for good.” Thus, because America knew “what government” was “best,” it “must act upon it.” The U.S. would use its power “to serve people” as they moved “toward democracy through the door to freedom” (Bush 1989a). Indeed, because of America’s efforts during the Cold War, Bush believed that the world could “move beyond containment and once and for all end” the Cold War; America had the right to “dare to imagine a new world” (Bush 1989b). Furthermore, Bush called for a confidence in America’s greatness and goodness, unequivocally declaring, “This is a fact: The final
lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory” (Bush 1989a). In other words, the U.S. must return to its larger world task.

This sense of American mission was put into action in Panama. Invading the nation ruled by dictator Manuel Noriega, Bush stated clear U.S. goals, which were “to safeguard the lives of Americans, to defend democracy in Panama, to combat drug trafficking, and to protect the integrity of the Panama Canal treaty.” He did acknowledge Vietnam implicitly in saying that the U.S. would try “to withdraw the forces newly deployed to Panama as quickly as possible.” Bush asserted the absolute goodness of the U.S. and the need for specifically American action, saying that “the Panamanian people want democracy, peace, and the chance for a better life in dignity and freedom.” Thus, the U.S. would “seek only to support them in pursuit of these noble goals” (Bush 1989c). The military operation resulted in the capture of General Noriega, and Bush asserted that “his apprehension” would “send a clear signal” that the U.S. was “serious in its determination” to promote peace and freedom, in this case through stopping drug traffickers. Bush believed that “a free and prosperous Panama” would “be an enduring tribute” to the exceptional efforts of the U.S. (Bush 1990). More so, Bush had successfully defied domestic and international criticism; “to the astonishment of many foreign observers, U.S. troops were in fact greeted as liberators” (Beinart 2010, 253). The successful operation seemed to demonstrate an increasing demand for America’s exceptionalism to be put into action.

American action would be viewed as even more necessary after Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. Initially, Bush increased the number of U.S. troops in the Middle East and essentially made the effort to go to war before dealing with some
other considerations. Still, Bush simultaneously molded and showed deference to international opinion in working to gain UN support for the war. Notably, Bush had made his decision for war prior, and Secretary of State James Baker, who was working on obtaining such a resolution, complained that it would be “nothing more than a diplomatic fig leaf.” Indeed, both consulting Congress and gaining UN support were secondary concerns focused on a desire for greater support. More so, confronting Iraq’s aggression was vital to Bush’s hopes for a post-Cold War world; he “sincerely believed that if Iraq could seize Kuwait with impunity, then all of his hopes for a new world order would come crashing down” (Kalb & Kalb 2011, 143-144). As the U.S. military and coalition forces began working to repel Iraq’s forces from Kuwait, Bush argued that success would be inevitable. He noted America’s good intentions; the goal was “not the conquest of Iraq,” but “the liberation of Kuwait.” Articulating a stark moral contrast, Bush argued it was necessary for America to act, as Hussein had “systematically raped, pillaged, and plundered a tiny nation, no threat to his own.” The “challenge to the freedom of all” that such actions posed had to be addressed, and Bush did emphasize that America had gained international support in the form of forces from twenty-eight countries. Bush directly confronted the specter of Vietnam, saying the war would “not be another Vietnam.” This would be because U.S. troops would “have the best possible support in the entire world” and would “not be asked to fight with one hand tied behind their back.” A successful operation would mean the continuance of Bush’s “new world order,” and Bush referenced internationalism in embracing “a credible” UN using “its peacekeeping role to fulfill the promise and vision” of its founders (Bush 1991a).
The mission in Iraq was a resounding success, and Bush declared it “a victory for the rule of law and for what is right.” While proclaiming it as a victory for the international system, Bush also asserted the primacy of America’s role in the Middle East; “no one” would “work harder for a stable peace in the region” than the U.S. He called upon the nation to do “what will enable this nation to play the leadership role required of us.” In other words, Americans would have to do what was required of exceptionalism. To Bush, the victory in Iraq was the “first test,” and America “passed that test” by going “halfway around the world to do what is moral and just and right,” while asking “nothing in return” (Bush 1991b). Crucial to Bush’s idea for a new order, he believed Vietnam had been overcome, saying the U.S. had “kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.” However, despite this feeling, Bush clearly still felt somewhat constrained by Vietnam, choosing not to go into Iraq with American troops to try to remove Hussein from power. Rather, he tried to encourage Iraqis, including generals, to do this (Beinart 2010, 259-260). Once again, Bush’s vision had largely been successfully implemented.

Toward the end of his presidency, Bush spoke candidly about his entire philosophy of America’s role in the world, revealing even more his attitude of messianic Americanism:

This afternoon I would like to just share some of my thoughts on the past few years and on America’s purpose in the world. My thesis is a simple one. Amid the triumph and the tumult of the recent past, one truth rings out more clearly than ever: America remains today what Lincoln said it was more than a century ago, “the last best hope of man on Earth.” This is a fact, a truth made indelible by the struggles and the agonies of the 20th century and in the sacrifice symbolized by each towering oak on Simpson Drill Field here at Texas A&M University. The leadership, the power, and yes, the conscience of the United States of America, all are essential for a peaceful, prosperous international order, just as such an order is essential for us. (Bush 1992)
Exceptionalism was real to Bush, and it had won. Bush happily declared American victory in the Cold War, noting that the prospect of welcoming “the Soviet Union back into the world order” was not “too ambitious” an “aim” for “the American people.” Because of “the grit of our people and the grace of God,” the Cold War had been won. Americans had made the necessary sacrifices, demonstrating “that they would shoulder whatever defense burden” was needed for victory. In addition to American perseverance during the Cold War, Bush emphasized his view of the absolutely vital nature of American leadership in ending it:

In recent years, with the Soviet empire in its death throes, the potential for crisis and conflict was never greater, the demand for American leadership never more compelling. As the peoples of Eastern Europe made their bold move for freedom, we urged them along a peaceful path to liberation. They turned to us. They turned to America, and we did not turn away. And when our German friends took their hammers to tear down that wall, we encouraged a united Germany, safely within the NATO alliance. They looked to America, and we did not look away. And when the people of Russia blocked the tanks that tried to roll back the tide of history, America did not walk away. (Bush 1992)

Even more importantly, Bush argued it had specifically been “only America” that could “manage” the “danger” of who would control Soviet nuclear weapons. American leadership had “undermined the confidence” in communist systems, resulting in a peaceful “end of a titanic clash of political systems,” which would “be a source of pride for every American” (Bush 1992).

Beyond expressing a view of American victory in the Cold War consistent with messianic Americanism, Bush also expressed his conviction going forward that, because of the American victory, messianic Americanism would be even more possible to implement in the world. The U.S. now had “a unique opportunity to see the principles for which America has stood for two centuries, democracy, free enterprise, and the rule of
law, spread more widely than ever before in human history.” While America would not bear “the world’s burdens alone,” it would need to be the primary leader; “success” would “require American vision and resolve” and the “commitment” to the exceptionalist idea that “our Nation’s destiny lies in the hope of a better world” made possible “by American leadership.” To do any less would be distinctly unexceptional; Bush particularly noted that the “failure to respond to massive human catastrophes like that in Somalia would scar the soul of our Nation.” The United States would have to live up to its destiny, as “history” was “summoning us once again to lead” (Bush 1992). The expression of George H. W. Bush of an ideal of messianic Americanism essentially served as a preview for the more expansive arguments made by his son a decade later.

**Bill Clinton’s Pragmatic Moralism**

President Bill Clinton had a different attitude toward exceptionalism than Bush and Reagan before him, holding a view of America’s role in the world more consistent with Jimmy Carter’s pragmatic moralism. In particular, he did not assert that the U.S. was infallible in its foreign policymaking, and he was willing to embrace multilateralism and international opinion while still asserting America’s interests. Clinton and his administration “were still more multilateral than the emerging post-cold war conservatives” and were not “ideologically hostile to international institutions.” However, “they did want America firmly in command” (Beinart 2010, 284). Especially in the early years of his administration, Clinton was more focused on developing the economy, embracing limits on foreign interventions because he did not believe the U.S. could expend the resources (Beinart 2010, 268). However, Clinton firmly articulated a belief in American exceptionalism:
From our birth, America has always been more than just a place. America has embodied an idea that has become the ideal for billions of people throughout the world. Our Founders said it best: America is about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In this century especially, America has done more than simply stand for these ideals. We have acted upon them and sacrificed for them. (Clinton 1995)

To Clinton, it was clear that America would have to “continue to lead the world we did so much to make” on issues such as the “economy, the world environment, the world AIDS crisis, the world arms race,” and generally promoting freedom. He noted that, as the Cold War had ended, “the new world is more free but less stable.” In this way, he was not as triumphant in declaring the end of the Cold War as George H. W. Bush had been. But the cause of “democracy and freedom” in other lands would continue to be “America’s cause” (Clinton 1993). Still, Clinton firmly rejected the concept of the U.S. essentially preserving world peace through its own hegemony, repudiating the messianic idea of Theodore Roosevelt in saying, “America cannot and must not be the world’s policeman” (Clinton 1995).

Despite occurring decades before, the Vietnam War had a significant influence on Clinton’s presidency, as it had influenced Carter’s earlier. Clinton had opposed the war in his youth and worked to avoid getting drafted. Unlike Reagan and Bush, Vietnam was present in Clinton’s foreign policy thoughts as something to be avoided rather than overcome (Kalb & Kalb 2011, 150-153). Clinton would not assert messianic Americanism to cure the syndrome. This belief was even more firmly entrenched by Clinton’s experience dealing with the humanitarian crisis in Somalia. American troops were still there even after Bush left office. Contrary to Bush, Clinton sought to leave Somalia and essentially give responsibility instead to the United Nations for the largest nation-building mission it would have had in decades. His desire to get out of Somalia
became an absolute urgency when eighteen American soldiers were killed in the Black Hawk Down incident (Kalb & Kalb 2011, 168-169). While Clinton wanted to punish General Mohamed Farrah Aidid and the perpetrators, he realized that, even by successfully killing or capturing him, the U.S. “would own Somalia” (Clinton 2004, 552). A nation-building mission was not consistent with Clinton’s foreign policy attitude.

Clinton’s emphasis on foreign policy limits came into play regarding Rwanda as well. The “memory of Somalia” and preoccupation “with Bosnia” led Clinton to do little to help stop the massive genocide (Clinton 2004, 593). In Rwanda, the U.S. was not even willing to use its equipment to shut down the RTLM radio station that was broadcasting hateful propaganda, as such action might “violate the American principle of freedom of speech” (Kuperman 2001, 92). However, to Clinton, “the failure to try to stop Rwanda’s tragedies became one of the greatest regrets of” his presidency (Clinton 2004, 593).

Indeed, showing a sense of fallibility, Clinton would later go to Rwanda and apologize for inaction. Even more importantly, for humanitarian reasons, “Rwanda became the anti-Vietnam: a parable about the horror of not going to war” (Beinart 2010, 274). In this sense, *pragmatic moralism*, despite a general sense of limits as compared to messianic conceptions of exceptionalism, could also mean recognizing situations where it was imperative for the U.S. to act.

This imperative to act would matter in Bosnia and Kosovo, but Clinton still approached these crises with an attitude of *pragmatic moralism*. Initially, in 1993, he sent Secretary of State Warren Christopher – a former member of the Carter Administration – to consult with European allies about air strikes, wanting to take into account international opinion. When the Europeans rejected the idea, he chose not to take action
(Beinart 2010, 270). However, as ethnic violence tore the Balkans apart, action was increasingly called for, as international institutions were failing. The UN in Bosnia was symbolizing “pitiful weakness in the face of genocide”; “even among liberals, the vision of a UN-led order was losing its luster.” Thus, the U.S. began to make decisions on how to deal with Bosnia through NATO rather than the UN (Beinart 2010, 278-282). The U.S. led NATO airstrikes, while at the same time, Clinton demonstrated exceptional global leadership in having Richard Holbrooke work to arrange a ceasefire agreement. The agreement included the presence of NATO and U.S. troops as peacekeepers (Kalb & Kalb 2011, 175-176). Clinton noted that “the terrible war in Bosnia” was a case of “stark” and “immediate” necessity of “American leadership.” While he embraced limits in emphasizing “that American ground troops should not fight a war in Bosnia” because it was an ethnic conflict, he was committed to “easing the suffering of the Bosnian people.” Clinton also referenced Vietnam, clearly stating that America’s mission would “be precisely defined with clear, realistic goals that can be achieved in a definite period of time” (Clinton 1995).

As violence also occurred in the Serbian province of Kosovo, Clinton realized he needed to take action for moral reasons there as well. On this, he also paid attention to international opinion, being persuaded by British Prime Minister Tony Blair to lead an international effort “to rid Europe of [Yugoslavian President Slobadan] Milosevic” (Kalb & Kalb 2011, 181). To stop Milosevic’s efforts against the Kosovars, the U.S. pressured him to withdraw Serbian troops from Kosovo in favor of NATO peacekeepers, or else NATO would commence air strikes. Significantly, “America was now dictating internal affairs, telling Belgrade to remove soldiers from part of its own country” (Beinart 2010,
It was a step that did set a precedent for George W. Bush’s actions against Iraq four years later. To Clinton, though, it was clear that “ending this tragedy” was “a moral imperative.” He discussed having learnt lessons from “Bosnia just a few years ago” when “the world did not act early enough to stop that war.” The U.S. would use its airpower to foster peace and end the tragedy, but Clinton again made clear, “I do not intend to put our troops in Kosovo to fight a war.” He further argued that not acting “would discredit NATO” and the idea of international action (Clinton 1999b). For Clinton, the air campaign would be, for the most part, stunningly successful.

Many other actions too during the Clinton presidency demonstrated his emphasis on diplomacy, limited military force, cultivating international opinion, and embracing American exceptional global leadership. At the beginning of his presidency, he felt it was important to authorize a broad aid program to Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union (Clinton 2004, 506). He had been prepared to send American troops to quell a crisis in Haiti, but the threat worked instead (Clinton 2004, 618). Indeed, in his general efforts to foster democracy in Haiti, Clinton felt he had shown “the wisdom of multilateral responses in the world’s trouble spots,” allowing nations to work together, “spread the responsibilities and costs,” and “reduce resentment against the United States” (Clinton 2004, 649). Clinton’s successful efforts to help end violence in Northern Ireland, leading to the Good Friday Accord, were another example of such cooperative leadership (Clinton 2004, 784). He came close to securing a Middle East peace agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians. Also in the Middle East, Clinton rejected stark moral contrasts by going to Syria; “no American President had been there in twenty years because of Syria’s support for terrorism and its domination of Lebanon,” but Clinton
“knew there would never be security and stability in the region unless Syria and Israel were reconciled” (Clinton 2004, 626).

Furthermore, engaging with China, he also “wanted Chinese citizens to see America supporting human rights,” while he also “wanted Chinese officials to see that greater openness wouldn’t cause the social disintegration” they “feared” (Clinton 2004, 793). Like Carter, Clinton wanted to emphasize U.S. respect for Latin American nations, and he wanted to use the Summit of the Americas to “show that America was determined to be a good neighbor” (Clinton 2004, 637). He launched limited missile strikes against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, narrowly missing Osama bin Laden (Clinton 2004, 803). In Iraq, Clinton advocated containment. Since Iraq had “defied its obligations to destroy its weapons of terror,” America undertook Operation Desert Fox, destroying facilities through air strikes (Clinton 1999a). Again embracing American leadership, Clinton felt the U.S. would have to continue also focusing on stopping “the spread of nuclear weapons and missiles” to other nations as well (Clinton 1999a).

Clinton’s presidency – and his attitude of pragmatic moralism – came full circle with his visit to Vietnam. He had made the decision earlier to establish normal relations with the country (Clinton 2004, 665). On his trip, he did refer to the atrocities committed by all sides in the war, such as the use of Agent Orange by the U.S.; he was “always on the brink of saying ‘I’m sorry,’” without explicitly doing so. Still, he did admit to Prime Minister Pham Van Khai that he had opposed the war, though he clarified that he believed it had been “an honest mistake” by the U.S. (Kalb & Kalb 2011, 151).

Ultimately, Clinton did believe that America was “the world’s indispensable nation.” He called for the nation to never undertake actions that would result in losing
“the balance of its values” (Clinton 1997). Fearing the unilateralism of Republicans, he criticized their opposition “to the test ban treaty, the climate change treaty, the ABM Treaty, and the International Criminal Court” (Clinton 2004, 951). He called for more engagement with the UN than would be found under messianic Americanism; to start, the U.S. would have “to pay our dues and our debts” to the organization. NATO, in Clinton’s view, would also need to be strengthened (Clinton 1999a). Overall, through his vision of pragmatic moralism and American exceptionalism generally, Clinton believed that he was leading America into “a new century” with “America’s bright flame of freedom spreading throughout all the world” (Clinton 1997).

**Exceptionalism Into the 21st Century**

Of course, George W. Bush came into office reasserting messianic Americanism, especially after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Iraq came to be regarded by many as another Vietnam War. Rejecting the messianism and unilateralism of the Bush Administration, Barack Obama once again brought to the presidency an attitude of pragmatic moralism, trying to restore international esteem of America. However, the continued presence of the U.S. in Afghanistan and the increasing reliance on drone usage present more questions about American exceptionalism. Looking forward, it is of course clear that U.S. presidents will continue to embrace American exceptionalism, but what approach and what issues will be salient will be determined.
11. Discussion and Conclusion

The Overall Picture

In examining this study of presidential attitudes toward the idea of American exceptionalism, it is fairly clear that messianic Americanism has been the dominant strain among presidential attitudes during the last 116 years of U.S. global power. In the time period this study covers, there have been twenty presidents examined; of these, twelve (60%) have attitudes most consistent with messianic Americanism. Essentially, this is the default type of presidential attitude toward exceptionalism. Indeed, this is also arguably consistent with those presidents in the nineteenth century who advocated Manifest Destiny and the expansion of the American empire (see Hietala 2003). Comparatively, the other three types of attitudes have occurred much less frequently over the long-term. Three of the twenty presidents (15%) held attitudes best described as messianic internationalism, and three also (15%) held attitudes of pragmatic moralism. The least occurring type is realist exemplarism with only two presidents (10%) having an attitude fitting those characteristics.
Simply examining the frequency of the different types of presidential attitudes toward American exceptionalism does not at all tell the whole story, however. The context of when a president comes to power is clearly important, particularly for presidents who do have attitudes that break from the standard of messianic Americanism. This is readily apparent when examining which presidents had attitudes of messianic internationalism. These three presidents – Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Harry Truman – all were presidents during a world war at some point. In the cases of Wilson and Roosevelt, America had still not yet reached a superpower status. That these presidents would embrace both a messianic sense of mission and a specifically internationalist goal for a world order is not surprising in circumstances of world war. While the United States under their leadership was clearly advocating for democratic ideals and freedom, America also had to make common cause with a number of other...
allies in its efforts. In World War I, Wilson led the U.S. as an associate power of the other significant powers in the alliance – Great Britain, France, and Russia. During and after the war, he pushed strongly for the League of Nations as the embodiment of his postwar vision. In World War II, the U.S. was closely allied with Great Britain and Russia, and FDR also wanted China to be a part of the postwar Four Policemen. FDR would work to create the United Nations, which along with the Four Policemen strategy was the vision of his postwar world order. Though Truman assumed the office of the presidency near the end of the war, he nevertheless was influenced by FDR’s attitude, the job of finishing off the war itself, and a feeling of seeking to fulfill a general vision of Wilson and FDR. In many actions, Truman tried to legitimate the UN as a world body, though of course American power relative to the rest of the world had increased to the point where a return to *messianic Americanism* was probably inevitable. As would be expected, World Wars I and II had a tremendous impact on presidential foreign policy, and its consistency with attitudes of *messianic internationalism* is unsurprising.

Looking at those presidents with attitudes of *realist exemplarism* – Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford – one also sees the absolute importance of context. Nixon’s attitude in Congress and as vice president earlier in his career would be better described as *messianic Americanism*; he sought out communists in the government and berated the Truman Administration for losing China to communism. However, his attitude clearly shifted by the time he became president. There were two major occurrences that influenced this shift. The first was the Vietnam War. It was readily apparent, in Nixon’s view, that Vietnam was an example of America doing too much and essentially overextending itself. Moreover, the war was creating extreme divisiveness domestically.
Second, Nixon recognized the growing split between the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. Thus, Nixon saw an opportunity for a new foreign policy – essentially a new type of attitude toward American exceptionalism. He would try to end the war in Vietnam honorably, not completely repudiating the commitments of Johnson, but would also focus on Vietnamizing the war and minimizing the American commitment there. This would be part of the broader goal of the Nixon Doctrine – lessening American commitment alone to other areas of the world. Furthermore, Nixon would embrace formulating a new balance of power favorable to the U.S., as America would play off the fears of both the Soviet Union and China. Over time, the creation of a stable peace would favor American goals of freedom, democracy, and capitalism. After Nixon’s resignation, Gerald Ford embraced essentially the same vision; having Secretary of State Henry Kissinger stay on ensured that these ideas would generally continue in his administration.

*Pragmatic moralism* also has to be understood in context, as has been illuminated in earlier explanations. Whereas Nixon did not question U.S. intentions in Vietnam, Jimmy Carter fundamentally viewed the war as wrong. Moreover, other U.S. actions in foreign policy had been wrong to Carter as well. Both the messianism of Johnson and others and the realism of Nixon and Ford had made Carter feel the need for a new approach to American foreign policy. In focusing on human rights and cultivating international opinion of the U.S., while admitting American fallibility, Carter sought to, in his view, restore American foreign policy to the fundamental values of American exceptionalism. In a similar vein, Bill Clinton’s focus in foreign policy on avoiding any sort of Vietnam-like quagmire was a clear reflection of the importance of that war. The same has been true of Barack Obama. Much like Carter with Vietnam, Obama came to
office seeking to correct for, what in his view, had not been a war that should have been undertaken, as well as other perceived foreign policy abuses. This attitude fundamentally has occurred in response to perceptions of American misbehavior and over-stretches in the international realm.

Certain cases of messianic Americanism, though the default attitude, also can be illuminated through examining context. Many of these cases occurred at a time when American global power was reaching new heights. For William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, the U.S. was emerging onto the international scene as a truly global power. For Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson (and, despite his more internationalist attitude, Harry Truman), the U.S. was now a superpower and the only comparable power to the Soviet Union. Finally, George H. W. Bush’s attitude is not surprising considering America had won the Cold War.

One other point is important to make regarding context. In this study, one of the limitations is that I am relying on presidents’ rhetoric in speeches and explanations in their memoirs for what their attitudes truly are toward exceptionalism. I have in many cases tried to counteract that through the use of biographies and secondary sources as well. Admittedly, presidents’ personal views may not match up perfectly with their rhetorical stances about America’s role in the world. However, this would not negate the attitudes that I have found in presidents in this study. It would actually place even more emphasis on context. If a president theoretically did not believe anything he was saying about exceptionalism, but still said it, that would mean he believed the public and world arguably expected him to hold that attitude toward exceptionalism. I believe that my study does give insight into both the personal views of presidents and the context they
operated in, but even if those private views differed significantly from their expressed views, the results of this study regarding presidential attitudes would be the same.

**Interactions Between Attitudes Toward Exceptionalism**

In addition to context, and as shown in the overview of presidents earlier, there also have been many cases of the types of exceptionalism interacting. The **messianic Americanism** of Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover was a clear reaction to the **messianic internationalism** of Woodrow Wilson. While Franklin D. Roosevelt’s **messianic internationalism** was more related to World War II, it also was in response to his perceptions of the isolationist qualities found in **messianic Americanism** under Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover. Though they both had similar attitudes toward exceptionalism, John F. Kennedy essentially tried to out-messianic Americanist Dwight Eisenhower, arguing that the U.S. had fallen behind in the Cold War. Richard Nixon’s attitude of **realist exemplarism** was in response to the excesses culminating in Lyndon Johnson’s **messianic Americanism**. Jimmy Carter’s **pragmatic moralism** was a direct repudiation both of **messianic Americanism** and **realist exemplarism**. Subsequently, the reassertion of **messianic Americanism** by Ronald Reagan was pushing back at both Nixon and Ford’s **realist exemplarism** and Carter’s **pragmatic moralism**. George W. Bush’s **messianic Americanism**, particularly in response to 9/11, was partly in reaction to his perception of the weakness of Bill Clinton’s **pragmatic moralism**. Finally, Barack Obama’s **pragmatic moralism** was a full indictment of Bush’s **messianic Americanism**.

**Partisanship and Exceptionalism**

It is also interesting to note that the types of exceptionalism in this typology can generally be broken down by party. With the exception of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon
Johnson, all of the presidents with attitudes of *messianic Americanism* were Republicans – William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, Dwight Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush. The three presidents with attitudes of *messianic internationalism* – Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Harry Truman – were all Democrats. Only two presidents had attitudes of *realist exemplarism*; both Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford were Republicans. Finally, the three presidents with attitudes of *pragmatic moralism* – Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama – have all been Democrats.

![Presidents' Attitudes Toward American Exceptionalism by Party Affiliation](image)

*Messianic Americanism* and “Muscle-Flexing Wars”

However, perhaps the most interesting finding of all from this study is the connection between presidents with attitudes toward exceptionalism of *messianic*
Americanism and the concept of “muscle-flexing wars” as defined by Stephen Skowronek. In his work, Skowronek (1997) connects this concept to his own typology of presidents in “political time” (30), linking it in particular to presidents who fit the “politics of articulation” in his regime sequence (36). As he states, “little wars of dubious provocation figure prominently in the work of the great orthodox-innovators” (342).

Skowronek (2008) notes that “the Constitution ensures that all of America’s wars will bear the face of a president,” but that “all wars are not the same.” He distinguishes two groups. The first includes the Civil War, World War I, World War II, and Afghanistan; these are wars that resulted from “much more than imperial ambition.” Conversely, to Skowronek, there are other wars “that stand apart from these by virtue of their national ambition, political arrogance, and imperial presumption” – the “muscle-flexing wars.” These wars “include the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War, the Spanish-American War, the Vietnam War,” and the Iraq War (162). A number of characteristics specifically distinguish these wars. First, all of the muscle-flexing wars are “of dubious provocation,” involving “a pattern of stretching evidence, manipulating circumstances, and overreaching conclusions.” All of these wars involved an “impulse to vent American power idealistically” (163). Furthermore, because muscle-flexing wars have “shaky initial pretexts,” they “tend to be quick to exhaust their political support” (165).

While in Skowronek’s (2008) typology of political time these wars were undertaken by presidents during the politics of articulation, it is also clear from the time period of this study that the three examples of muscle-flexing wars he gives from 1897 onward – the Spanish-American War, Vietnam, and Iraq – all occurred under presidents with attitudes consistent with messianic Americanism – William McKinley (with
Theodore Roosevelt soon to follow), Lyndon Johnson, and George W. Bush. Indeed, these wars did occur under presidents “whose dreams of a transformed nation stood on the brink of fulfillment” (164). Not only are these muscle-flexing wars, but also they were supposed to be short, overwhelming victories for the U.S. The Spanish-American War mostly met these criteria (although there was resistance in the Philippines), but of course Vietnam and Iraq did not. Ideology is important in the decision to go to war in Skowronek’s conception of muscle-flexing by presidents in periods of articulation, and ideology is obviously extremely important in my own conception of these wars as being undertaken by presidents with attitudes of *messianic Americanism*.

**Further Research**

There are many different avenues for further research on presidents and American exceptionalism to take. Though I chose in this study to focus on *Presidential American Exceptionalism* starting with William McKinley and the end of the nineteenth century, it would be valuable to examine presidential attitudes toward exceptionalism all the way back to George Washington. Of particular interest might be attitudes toward Manifest Destiny, especially the disputes over whether and how much the U.S. should expand across the continent. The belief in Manifest Destiny would seem to be particularly connected to *messianic Americanism*, but it would be valuable to examine this in more depth.

Another avenue of research would be to examine other alternative attitudes toward exceptionalism that may have been put forward by presidential candidates that never were elected to office. For example, some presidential candidates have been truly isolationist; an evaluation of their views might lead to considering another type of
attitude toward exceptionalism. Alternatively, it is conceivable that there could be candidates who would be anti-exceptionalists; in other words, they might view America as an immoral aggressor in foreign policy. Research in this area would both possibly determine other attitudes toward exceptionalism and call into question why candidates with such attitudes did not attain sufficient support to be elected.

Finally, comparing presidents’ attitudes toward exceptionalism to the attitudes that leaders of other nations hold toward their own role in the world would be valuable and fascinating. America is not the only nation to believe it is in some way exceptional. I believe that this study is particularly important because America has greater capacity to act on exceptionalism than any other nation in the world. However, studying other leaders’ attitudes toward their countries’ exceptionalism would be revealing as a comparative project. In particular, comparing American presidents’ attitudes with those of British prime ministers during the height of the British Empire might yield some interesting commonalities. Furthermore, it would be especially interesting to examine the rhetoric and attitudes of British leaders during the decline of the Empire and during the present day to see how such attitudes adjusted to changing circumstances. This could offer clues into possible changes in the attitudes of U.S. presidents depending on America’s relative power position in the world over the next century. Additionally, comparisons nations that do not have a history of global power would yield insight into just how much all countries may or may not feel especially exceptional.

**Conclusion**

It is undeniable that the ideology of American exceptionalism matters to presidential foreign policy in terms of presidential attitudes, decisions, and justifications
for actions. Of course exceptionalism is not by *any* means the only factor in presidential foreign policymaking, but it is nonetheless important to consider how American exceptionalism tangibly can matter to attitudes and policies. This study of *Presidential American Exceptionalism* fills a gap in the literature of political science by examining how presidential attitudes toward the concept have differed and have also been similar across different periods in time, as well as some of the implications of these different attitudes. Perhaps naturally then the question arises: is one type of presidential attitude toward exceptionalism better than the rest?

To some extent, I would argue that the better inquiry might focus on what characteristics of exceptionalism might be best and what types of exceptionalism might be best for certain contexts. Any of these types of exceptionalism taken to an extreme can lead to negative consequences. This is nowhere more apparent than in the case of a number of the presidents with attitudes of *messianic Americanism*. The catastrophes of the wars in Vietnam and Iraq are reminders of the pitfalls both of too much messianism and too much unilateralism; the result was international condemnation and deep domestic division. However, realism taken to an extreme can also lead to the lack of moral direction in foreign policy. The focus on morality and limits of *pragmatic moralism* could lead to timidity in situations when action might be desirable or necessary in some form, such as Rwanda. As the League of Nations and subsequently the United Nations have shown, relying on complete international agreement and enforcement also has not been realistic.

Each of these types too has their own positive characteristics. Unilateralism can be necessary if the world is not willing to act on a vital issue, if the U.S. needs to engage
in pure self-defense, or if the U.S. is truly the only nation capable of solving a problem. Internationalism does rightly emphasize the desirability of having a durable international system in which nation-states try to cooperate with one another and abide by codified international law. Machinery for peace is valuable. Realism offers recognition of considering national interests and limits on power, particularly the idea that the U.S. cannot achieve all of its goals at once sustainably. More generally, messianism embraces a sense of national purpose and mission, which can be needed in many situations. America’s role in World Wars I and II are prime examples. It is important to have a sense of purpose to foreign policy.

There are a number of characteristics of pragmatic moralism in particular that I would argue are desirable for presidential foreign policy. While America is unquestionably the world’s superpower, for the sake of international standing, the U.S. should have some humility in foreign policy. Admitting fallibility in certain instances is a truer recognition of morality than even messianism; this allows America to strive to do its best in connecting foreign policy to American values. The recognition of limits – both morally in terms of what is justifiable and tactically in terms of what can be achieved – can also be necessary, particularly in times when economic recovery is important both domestically and arguably for our foreign policy power. Finally, just brushing aside international opinion of American action out of hand or assuming that the world will always view America positively is a foolish, naïve strategy. Reasonably trying to cultivate a positive international view of the U.S. can have many tangible benefits for presidential foreign policy. Overall, these are generally desirable characteristics in my view for U.S. foreign policy to have. But, I will add the more general caveat that,
depending on the context, certain types of attitudes toward exceptionalism may be better than others to dealing with world problems.

Debates continue over whether America is truly an exceptional nation. In this work, I have moved past this debate because I believe presidents assume – and want to assume – that American exceptionalism is real. They each are truly the Exceptionalist-in-Chief. It is in their interest for their legacies to be seen as leading an exceptional nation. Furthermore, there is absolutely no denying that America’s history, power, influence, and general sense of mission regarding freedom and democracy are extraordinary in world history. The United States has been needed many times by the world. At the same time, having prudence and humility in foreign policy is a better course than brushing off the rest of the world as solely dependent on America. If American exceptionalism is to be real, I would argue that a certain degree of moral vision and restraint is necessary for foreign policy. We as Americans must understand that sometimes ideals can be badly abused and misused in the very name of promoting and safeguarding those ideals. If we are truly to be a democratic society that values liberty, we cannot always say that the ends justify the means because of our special, necessary role in the world. This would corrupt the very values we stand for, and if our values are corrupted and decayed, our ideals essentially cease to exist in reality. The American people have a right to know what their presidents’ attitudes toward exceptionalism are so they can make a judgment about what kind of foreign policy is consistent with what our nation stands for. American exceptionalism can only be as real for us and for the world – and more importantly as good for the world – as presidents, politicians, and citizens make it.
References


Exceptionalist-in-Chief


