

Katherine Gwyn

Dr. Robin Datta

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### American Identity and Foreign Policy

Throughout American history, public conception of the ideal American foreign policy has changed drastically. Although the tone of international affairs has evolved along with the country, there remains a distinctly American style of foreign policy in a balance of exceptionalism, expansionism, and isolationism. This essay will seek to explain the origins of this American style by looking individually at these three guiding values. The beginnings of American foreign policy stem from a need to develop a newly formed nation internally, distant from European powers geographically and politically. As the country matures, so do their international relations. Through Manifest Destiny and success in territorial growth, the United States finds grounds to adapt the values of exceptionalism and expansionism. Because of different and competing ideals, Americans have maintained a foreign policy that reflects the needs of the particular time and domestic priorities. Because of American foreign policy origins and the relationship between three guiding ideals, I argue that there is a distinct identity of difference that can persist through changes in domestic and international society helping to shape American foreign policy decisions. While there is not one prevailing orientation for American foreign policy, this identity helps bridge the gap between changes in policy and the public over time. The American identity of 'different' (and usually better) than others rests on an understanding of the values of unilateralism, exceptionalism, and expansionism, as well as the ways in which these ideas work together.

## ISOLATIONISM

Described by many as the value guiding early American foreign policy, the ideas of isolationism and unilateralism have a strong hand in shaping American identity and foreign policy. Generally, isolationism describes a policy approach that attempts to remove a state from foreign affairs altogether. Refining this concept, many use the term unilateralism to describe American political thought. This refers to a foreign policy of political detachment from other nations while allowing for foreign engagement at certain times when the state finds it useful. In practice, this could mean a country does not enter into formal political alliances but trades with other nations on their terms. Isolationism helped to lay the groundwork for a self-concept that was rooted in separating the self or country from others, the first step to develop the American identity of difference.

Origins of unilateralism in the United States derive from both the geographic situation and domestic priorities of a newly formed nation. Simply through its location in North America, the United States had the option to keep itself distant from European affairs. Additionally, early leaders believed that the nation's priority was to pursue internal growth. Following the American Revolution, many felt the need to distance the country from Britain and European systems in general. After fighting a harsh war, Americans also did not want to be drawn into more conflicts that seemed to define European relations at the time. As cited by Joyce Kaufman in *A Concise History of U.S. Foreign Policy*, George Washington expresses this in his farewell address: "The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our commercial relation to have with them as little political connection as possible" (37). Similar sentiments of isolationism continued to be the priority of early leaders, attempting to create favorable, but uninvolved relations with others and focusing on the domestic growth of the country.

Isolationism and unilateralism continue to influence the American identity of difference today. In many of the conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Americans across the country have called for a reorganization of national priorities to focus on the U.S over foreign involvement. A specific example of this, as discussed in Lecture: Exceptionalism, Isolationism, and Expansionism by Dr. Robin Datta, is the ‘America First’ campaign following the First World War. After fully abandoning isolationism and joining European conflict, Americans had a strong public backlash and desire to return to an isolationist approach to foreign affairs. More recently, the American public has returned to unilateral sentiments following September 11, 2001. The fear generated by the 9/11 attacks pushed the American public and the administration at the time to focus national interest on American priorities such as the War on Terrorism—a definitive example of American identity of difference. Additionally, unilateralism is seen in American opposition to the sovereignty of international organizations in certain instances (Kohut). While an isolationist policy rests on the desire to remain uninvolved with foreign affairs, this last example begins to point towards an attitude of self-reliance as a driver of foreign policy. This self-confidence takes us to the next guiding value of American identity: exceptionalism.

#### EXCEPTIONALISM

Apparent in many views of Americans, both domestically and abroad, exceptionalism describes attitudes of ‘better-than’ associated with the United States, its structures, and its values. This attitude manifests itself in powerful American nationalism, pride, and patriotism. In *The Problem of American Exceptionalism*, Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes describe this as “The City on a Hill Syndrome.” In short, this is the idea that the United States is the shining example of a better life that all people and countries must wish and work to be like; therefore, it is different and better than other nations. Exceptionalism in the United States has led to strong self-reliance and

optimism amongst the American public (Kohut). Both this self-reliance and optimism play a role in the origins and modern decisions of foreign policy.

Exceptionalism, like isolationism, has a deep seeded foundation in the American psyche. Early on, we find the roots of this ideal in the Errand in the Wilderness—the idea that Puritans in New England were on a mission from God (Datta). In *Errand Into the Wilderness*, Perry Miller describes the mission set by John Winthrop in 1603: “to improve our lives, to do more service to the Lord, to increase the body of Christ, and to preserve our posterity from the corruptions of this evil world” (Miller 5). With strong convictions and a mission to realize ideals for the greater good, this type of errand has been used to describe America’s exceptionalism and mission. In his essay *The Typology of America’s Mission*, Sacvan Bercovich draws connections between religion and America, comparing George Washington to Jesus Christ and The Constitution to the New Testament (154). In both instances, an exceptional group is cast with the task of venturing out to create an ideal world, different and better than societies of the past. Exceptionalism stems from this stance of excellence, creating a need to spread that excellence to others.

American exceptionalism has influenced foreign policy decisions in its ability to inspire deep pride and confidence in the country. As discussed in relation to isolationism, heightened self-reliance leads the United States to prefer to “go-it-alone” strategies in regards to foreign policy. The American public, for example, generally oppose sending troops to serve under United Nations commands or giving international organizations the final say on global environmental policy (Kohut). Both cases show that America views itself as different than other states serving under international organizations. As outlined by Datta, exceptionalism is composed of two factors: nationalism and purpose. Nationalism encompasses attitudes of greatness and superiority. The corresponding call to purpose generated from an exceptional

stance includes American ideas and actions that seek to bring great things to all of humankind or take on problems of enormous scale. American desire to spread their democracy and way of life is an example of attitude turned to ambition, leading to the third value of expansionism.

#### EXPANSIONISM

This concept is best understood by first exploring its origins in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Fed by ideas of exceptionalism and basking in the greatness of American freedom and democracy, the United States arrived at a policy of Manifest Destiny. Rather than just seeing their way as great, the United States now saw that they had a purpose—destiny—to advance these great ways, specifically in the New World. Through Westward expansion and South American interest as specified by the Monroe Doctrine, the United States began to successfully fulfill this destiny. While easily connected with exceptionalism, this practice seems in contention with the value placed on isolationism, especially at the time. Kaufman makes the important distinction that the U.S. early on did not enter into formal political alliances, but worked on an international level only to protect its interests and fulfill its purpose (Kaufman 38). Following the theme of difference, Americans now saw themselves not only as better but cast with a mission to expand their new ways. Expansionism to the United States, with this idea of purpose, meant not only territorial expansion but also that of its ideas and values, which we continue to see today.

Through this shift of priorities towards development, we see direct effects on U.S. foreign policy. From the 1803 Louisiana Purchase to the 1898 Treaty of Paris, the United States sought to gain territory for the purpose of expansion. As this became a greater motivating factor in American foreign policy, the importance of isolation seems to fade. Discussed in *Legacy of the War of 1812*, this war can be viewed as a victory of the expansionist (Legacy). Although ending in a stalemate, the effects of The War of 1812 on the American national identity laid the

groundwork for successful expansion campaigns to come. More recently, expansionism can be seen in the American desire to expand its vision of democracy. For example during the years of the Cold War, the United States saw themselves as strikingly different from the Soviet Union and used that identity to support decisions of foreign policy and expansionism.

#### COMING TOGETHER

Each of these three principles is evident in decisions of U.S. foreign policy, and each can be traced back to early years of the country. Today, the official mission of the United States in regards to international relations is “to shape and sustain a peaceful, prosperous, just, and democratic world and foster conditions for stability and progress for the benefit of the American people and people everywhere” (United States 7). With this in mind, as well as the foreign policies of recent times, it may be difficult to choose one policy of identity to sum up the United States. The given mission statement speaks plainly to ideas of American exceptionalism with the laundry list of traits associated with American ideals. The verb “shape” also gives nod to expansionism values, especially followed with the idea of a “democratic world.” Least seen in this statement is the isolationist value that dictated early American foreign policy. While isolationist sentiment may not be displayed in formal mission statements, it is evident in public opinion that isolationism are still alive and well, as seen in the general indifference that Americans feel towards foreign news and policy (Kaufman 3). Through the origins and developments of these values as well as the American foreign policy of today, it becomes clear that there is an individual style associated with United States identity and foreign relations.

Perhaps it is the geographic isolation or the founding of modern democracy that initially set America apart from other states. In any case, throughout history, the United States has always seen itself as different than other nations and therefore pursued foreign policy that put them in

positions of power or leadership. This point of view can be used to make sense both of early isolationism as well as Cold War campaigns for global democracy. Furthermore, this stance can be used to connect the seemingly incompatible values of isolationism, exceptionalism, and expansionism. While each view brings to light different American values and finds its strength in different eras of American history, they all espouse a common thread of American identity: the desire to be different and better.

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