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“The Greatest Nation on Earth”

The different types of American
exceptionalism articulated in presidential
rhetoric

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Abstract

‘American exceptionalism’ is a concept that has frequently been referenced in presidential rhetoric over the years. The concept entails the distinct belief that the United States is unique, if not superior, when compared to other nations. As a result of their exceptional history and culture the U.S. have a distinct, arguably God given, destiny to fulfil in the world. The underlying aim of this paper is to determine how presidents differ in their belief towards the concept of America exceptionalism. In order for me to achieve this I intend to analyse the speeches of four presidents; John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, to determine the different types of exceptionalism articulated in their rhetoric. I will be creating my own typology, based off several already established typologies, that is made up of four categories; *messianic exceptionalism*, *global exceptionalism*, *internationalist exceptionalism* and *rejectionist exceptionalism*. This typology will be used to help categorize the different types of exceptionalism conveyed in presidential rhetoric. The results of this paper show that *messianic exceptionalism* is the most dominant form of exceptionalism, with Kennedy, Reagan and Bush all conveying it in their rhetoric. The biggest difference can be found in the rhetoric of Obama which reflects *global, internationalist and rejectionist exceptionalism*.

Key Words: [American exceptionalism, United States, Presidency, Speeches, Rhetoric, Typology]

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1. Introduction

“It is a common observation here that our cause is the cause of all mankind, and that we are fighting for their liberty in defending our own.”

- Benjamin Franklin (1777)

In a world beset with disparities ranging from power to wealth and resources it is not surprising that a certain hierarchical structure has developed in the global context where some countries have emerged as world leaders. Arguably the United States of America has acquired this status as a global leader, not only due to its power and wealth but to the exceptional nature behind its history and culture. The notion of seeing the United States (U.S.) as exceptional is not a contemporary belief but an ideology that has been integrated into the nation’s identity since its founding¹. As such the concept of ‘American exceptionalism’ has been used as a fundamental tool by presidents of the U.S. to create and maintain a sense of unity within the nation. For centuries Americas ‘exceptional’ nature has been invoked by politicians to convey ideas of hope and greatness that not only portrays the U.S. as a great nation, but a nation that is both unique and greater to any other country.

Ultimately the concept of American exceptionalism has become a fundamental part of the United States presidency and with the U.S. emerging as a global power at the end of the nineteenth century, rhetoric associated with the concept has become more and more frequent in presidential speeches and policies. Public discussion of the term has also increased drastically; Terrence McCoy, in an article published in the *Atlantic*, found that the term ‘American exceptionalism’ was referenced 457 times in national US publications from 1980-2000 with this figure rising to 2,558 times in the 2000s. But from 2010-2012 this figure has once again exploded, leaping into print and online publications roughly 4,172 times². Therefore it is not surprising that the idiosyncratic nature or the ways in which the U.S. differ from the rest of the world has been a constant topic of discussion and in recent years a topic tackled by several scholars.

¹ Weiss, David & Edwards, Jason A. (2011). “Introduction: American Exceptionalism’s Champions and Challengers”. Pg. 1, In *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays*, eds. Jason A. Edwards & David Weiss. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc, 11-30. p. 1.

² Terrence McCoy, “How Joseph Stalin Invented American Exceptionalism”, *Atlantic*, 15 March 2012. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/03/how-joseph-stalin-invented-american-exceptionalism/254534/>. 03/05/14.

1.1 Purpose

The debate over American exceptionalism has taken flight over the last decade. Some argue the concept underlines God's distinct blessing on the United States, or America's unique role in the world, while others consider it nothing more than an extreme form of nationalism or a cover for imperialism³. In this paper I define the term American exceptionalism as the "distinct belief that the United States is unique, if not superior, when compared to other nations"⁴ and due to its unique origins, historical evolution and national credo, the U.S. have a distinct, God given, role to play in the world⁵. Regardless the concept of American exceptionalism has become an integral part of U.S. national identity⁶ and as such the concept has reoccurred in presidential rhetoric over the years.

Presidents have different understandings and have taken different stances regarding the concept of American exceptionalism. During both his campaign and presidency President Barack Obama has faced criticism regarding his attitude towards the concept. Former Vice President Dick Cheney has stated that the main difference between Obama's foreign affairs approach and that of his predecessor George W. Bush is that Obama does not believe in American exceptionalism. He carried on to add that he did not consider that Barack Obama "believes that the U.S. is an exceptional nation, and the whole concept that the world is a safer place and a more peaceful place, when the U.S. is powerful"⁷. This sentiment has been shared by other critics such as Mitt Romney who has asserted that President Obama "doesn't have the same feelings about American exceptionalism that we do"⁸ and even underlining Obama's supposed tendency to apologize for America's mistakes and misdeeds⁹. This criticism Obama has faced regarding his apparent distancing from the concept of American exceptionalism can be detrimental for him as by 'rejecting' the concept, that is a integral part of the nations identity, he can in turn be seen as denying the unique character of the United States and

³ Robert R. Tomes, "American Exceptionalism in the Twenty-First Century," *Survival* 56:1 (February–March 2014), p. 28.

⁴ Weiss, David & Edwards, Jason A. (2011). p. 1.

⁵ *Ibid.* 1.

⁶ Neumann, Rico, and Kevin Coe. (2011). "The Rhetoric in the Modern Presidency: A Quantitative Assessment." In *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays*, eds. Jason A. Edwards & David Weiss. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc, 11-30. p. 12.

⁷ **Dick Cheney: President Obama does not believe in American exceptionalism.**

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/blog/inside-politics/2013/dec/9/dick-cheney-president-obama-does-not-believe-ameri/>. 03/05/14.

⁸ **The End of American Exceptionalism**

<http://www.nationaljournal.com/magazine/the-end-of-american-exceptionalism-20140203>. 04/05/14.

⁹ *Ibid.*

can therefore be seen un-American or un-patriotic. At its surface the criticism Obama has faced may seem merely a squabble between two competing presidential candidates but herein lies a deeper debate over foreign policy, one that rages between two extremes; “American exceptionalism” and “isolationism”¹⁰. As I have stated above, American exceptionalism contends that the U.S. is a unique nation that has a special role to play in the world, but the competing doctrine of isolationism, holds that the U.S. can no longer afford to “carry out the noble mission of racing to put out the fires lit by others”¹¹.

It is from this criticism Barack Obama has faced, concerning his stance towards the concept of American exceptionalism that ultimately provided the inspiration for this paper. What interested me specifically was his embrace of the concept compared to previous U.S. presidents, and therefore in this paper I intend to address the claim that Obama does not believe in American exceptionalism and consequently does not consider the U.S. as exceptional. In order for me to establish this, I intend to analyse the rhetoric of four U.S. presidents to uncover whether themes surrounding the concept of American exceptionalism can be found. The four presidents I intend to use are; John F. Kennedy, Ronald Regan, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Furthermore, as I have stated above the concept of American exceptionalism can and has been interpreted and used in different manners, so therefore I intend to also look at the different ways in which these presidents have articulated the concept in their rhetoric, to see if there are clear differences between them.

1.2 Research Questions

As I have stated above, the underlying purpose of this paper is to uncover how presidential rhetoric has differed between presidents concerning the concept of American exceptionalism. Considering this there are also several questions I intend to answer through my analysis, they are as follows;

- I) What are the different types of American exceptionalism that can be conveyed in presidential rhetoric?
- II) How do these types vary between the different presidents?
- III) How has Barack Obama chosen to use the concept, if at all?

¹⁰ Chomsky, Noam. “The Obama Doctrine”. *Truthout*, October 6, 2013
<http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/19251-the-obama-doctrine>. 16/05/14.

¹¹ Ibid.

1.3 Material

In order for me to achieve the aims set up above, namely how presidents differ in their belief or stance towards the concept of American exceptionalism within their time in office, I need to draw upon a source that represents the attitudes and visions of these presidents. Determining the different attitudes presidents have had concerning American exceptionalism requires me to analyse the rhetoric used by them. Therefore I intend to draw upon presidential speeches as my main source of material. I chose to look at speeches because they provide the main source of rhetoric concerning American exceptionalism, as they portray the views and visions of presidents. I intend to focus on major speeches such as Inaugural and State of the Union addresses, but also speeches given to address important events or foreign policy issues as these will give a good picture of the different president's attitudes and views regarding the character and strength of the United States.

In analysing presidential rhetoric I intend to draw upon speeches made by four different presidents; John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. For John F. Kennedy I will be analysing his Inaugural Address made in 1961 as well as his address at the University of Washington's 100th Anniversary Program delivered in the same year. In determining Ronald Reagan's rhetoric, I will be drawing upon his Inaugural Addresses, the first made in 1981 and the second in 1985, as well as his Farewell Address delivered in 1989. The bulk of my analysis will be focused on formal addresses made by George W. Bush and Barack Obama (I further elaborate on this in my methodology section) and therefore I intend to draw upon a larger selection of their speeches. Considering Bush, I will be looking at his first and second Inaugural Address, delivered in 2001 and 2005, his remarks to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks in 2001 and both his 2004 and 2005 State of the Union Address. Finally in determining Obama's rhetoric I will be analysing his first and second Inaugural address, delivered in 2009 and 2013, I will also be looking at the remarks he made at the 2009 news conference in Strasbourg as well as his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize made in the same year. Finally I will be analysing Obama's 2010 State of the Union Address and his Address to the United Nations General Assembly in 2013.

One concern when selecting material for this paper was the question of objectivity. As such I limited myself to speeches delivered by the different presidents when they were in office. For the scope of this paper and with some presidents having delivered more

speeches than others, I limited my speech choices between State of the Union and Inaugural Addresses but also speeches given at important milestones or to mark special events. Even with these limitations in place I still found that there was a considerable amount of material to choose from, so therefore, to abstain from randomly picking, I chose presidential speeches that had had attracted a lot of attention, either from what was said or the context they was delivered in. Obviously, my choice of speeches will affect both the analysis and eventual results of this paper and if I had chosen a different set of speeches, my findings may have been completely different.

In this paper I also drew upon a considerable amount of secondary literature that consisted mainly of academic books and papers as well as newspaper articles. The secondary material I used provided a foundation of basic knowledge and information concerning the concept of American exceptionalism. The material explored the history and development of the concept as well as its use in contemporary political discourse and aided in the development of this papers theoretical and methodological framework. The academic works I utilized were carefully selected with regard to their contribution, relevance and application. There also provided different perspectives that contributed in achieving the aim of this paper.

1.4 Previous Work

American exceptionalism is a concept that has been around since the founding of the U.S. nation and has become a fundamental element of America's national identity. Even with its deep roots in history public discussion of the concept has increased only in the last couple of years. Nevertheless it is a topic that has become very popular in academic writings and a lot of ink has been spilt over the concept. In the academic world the concept has been used by various scholars to explain America's distinct cultural traditions, how the nation differs from Europe as well as America's peculiar approach to social welfare policies¹². Also the bulk of scholarship on American exceptionalism focuses on defining the concept and identifying its historical roots and possible use¹³. Seymour Martin Lipset, arguably the greatest authority on American exceptionalism, argued that "It is impossible to understand a country without seeing how it varies from

¹² Koh, Harold Hongju. 2005. "America's Jeekyll-and-Hyde Exceptionalism." *In American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*, ed. Michael Ignatieff. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 112.

¹³ Neumann, Rico, and Kevin Coe. (2011) p. 13.

others”¹⁴ further stating that traits that have characterized America from its founding have resulted in the nations exceptional status. A handful of scholars in the field of human rights have also tackled the concept and have created typologies to argue that there are different forms of American exceptionalism (which I elaborate on further along in this paper). Even though there has been a growing interest in the concept of American exceptionalism, less attention has been paid on how presidents employ the rhetoric of American exceptionalism and if they invoke different forms of the concept¹⁵.

¹⁴ Lipset, Seymour Martin, *American exceptionalism: a double-edged sword*, 1. ed., W.W. Norton, New York, 1996, p. 17.

¹⁵ Neumann, Rico, and Kevin Coe. (2011) p. 13.

2. Theoretical Framework

With the aim of this paper focussed on U.S. president's use of rhetoric associated with the concept of American exceptionalism, it is only fitting for my theoretical perspective to centre on this ideology. Broadly speaking the concept of American exceptionalism is grounded in the belief that the U.S. is a unique nation that is inherently different from any other nation and therefore has a special role in the world. This concept has long been associated with American presidency and was featured prominently in the 2012 U.S. presidential elections, with it playing a central part in debates concerning the overall vision of restoring America's role in world affairs¹⁶. Regardless American exceptionalism is not merely a rhetorical tool, it is not just a belief or concept but "an interwoven bundle of ideas that together represent an American creed or ideology"¹⁷. As such, the concept has become an integral part in what makes up the U.S. national identity.

2.1 History of the Term

American exceptionalism is by no means a contemporary belief, but has its roots and has developed since the founding of the U.S. nation. The idea arguably originated from a sermon given aboard the *Arbella* by John Winthrop, the then governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in 1630. The vessel was bound for the United States and Winthrop famously spoke of how the new community, he and his colonists were to create, would be a "city upon a hill" watched by the whole world¹⁸. Winthrop laid out the belief that America would be a model land with a specific and unique destiny, a destiny that had been bestowed on Winthrop and his fellow Puritan colonists by God himself¹⁹. Subsequently, Winthrop's famous words have been called upon by presidents, from John Adams and Abraham Lincoln to more recent presidents like Ronald Reagan and George

¹⁶ Robert R. Tomes (2014), p. 27.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁸ John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity", Winthrop Papers, vol. II, 1623-1630 (Massachusetts Historical Society, 1931), p. 295.

¹⁹ Madsen, Deborah L., *American exceptionalism*, Edinburgh Univ. Press, Edinburgh, 1998, p. 18.

H. W. Bush, who have used them to convey the long established idea of American exceptionalism²⁰.

Although Winthrop provided the necessary foundations for what became known as American exceptionalism, French historian Alexis de Tocqueville has been credited with creating the social scientific idea of exceptionalism²¹. Tocqueville aspired to determine why American democracy thrived, while it failed to take hold in France and other parts of Europe. Tocqueville found that the American system and the American people possessed some unique qualities and described the United States situation as “quite exceptional” stating that “it may be believed that no other democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one”²². Tocqueville emphasised that America was a unique place that was inherently different from any other place in the world, even admiring U.S. leaders who he argued governed more efficiently than those in Europe at that time²³. These unique characteristics, Tocqueville noted, defined the U.S. national identity and what became known as the “America Creed”²⁴. A second aspect of American exceptionalism that Tocqueville observed, once again built off Winthrop’s famous words. Tocqueville not only argued that the U.S. was an exceptional nation, but a nation that had a specific destiny and role to play in human history, even encouraging all democratic nations to emulate the example it had set²⁵.

Even though Alexis de Tocqueville has been credited as the first person to describe the U.S. as exceptional, the first likely use of the phrase American exceptionalism came from a very unlikely source. In 1929 communist leader Jay Lovestone and John Pepper suggested that the American Communist party could pursue a different course to communism than the Soviet Union had taken, claiming that U.S. capitalism constituted an exception to Marxism's universal laws²⁶. Lovestone informed Stalin in Moscow that

²⁰ Viotti, Paul R., *American foreign policy*, Polity, Cambridge, 2010, p. 109-110.

²¹ Ceaser, James W. “The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism”, *American Political Thought*. (Spring 2012), Vol. 1 Issue 1, p. 5.

²² Tocqueville, Alexis de, *Democracy in America*, Trans. by Henry Reeve Wordsworth, Ware, 1998, p. 190.

²³ Edwards, Jason A. “Contemporary Conservative Constructions of American Exceptionalism”. *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, Vol. 1, No.2, 2011, p. 43.

²⁴ The ‘American Creed’ consists of “liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire,” Lipset, Seymour Martin, *American exceptionalism: a double-edged sword*, 1. ed., W.W. Norton, New York, 1996, p. 19.

²⁵ Weiss, David & Edwards, Jason A. (2011). p. 2.

²⁶ Friedman, U. “American Exceptionalism; A Short History”. *Foreign Policy*, July 2012, (194), p. 24.

the American proletariat wasn't interested in revolution, to which Stalin replied that he end this "heresy of American exceptionalism"²⁷ and thus the term was born.

2.2 American Exceptionalism and U.S. Presidency

Despite its varied early connotations, the concept of American exceptionalism has become a fundamental element of U.S. national identity and has shaped how the American people and political elite see America's (often privileged) place in the world. American exceptionalism in itself is an "ethos tied to an American creed of individuality, liberalism, progressivism and pragmatism"²⁸ and as such the concept has been reflected in presidential rhetoric, as presidents often seek to, not only reinforce the image of their nation, but to connect their policies with the idea of America's unique destiny and role in the world.

With the concept of American exceptionalism deeply embedded in America's national identity, it is not surprising that it has been drawn upon by political elite. The values rooted in the concept influence not only the way politicians see and understand the world but also the way they choose to act²⁹. These moral principles that are drawn from both secular and religious sources become an integrated component of presidential rhetoric and converge into 'moralism'; "the moral-laden discourse" used frequently by presidents and policy makers that "reflects their thinking or provides justification for the policy choices they make"³⁰. This morally charged rhetoric used by presidents is noticeable by the frequent referencing of Winthrop's famous words, with presidents raging from John Adams in the nineteenth century to George W. Bush in the twenty first repeatedly highlighting America's unique and God favoured status in the world.

Presidential rhetoric, especially in speeches, is key to understanding how different presidents have viewed or where influenced by the concept of American exceptionalism, be it from their personal beliefs or the extent to which exceptionalism has impacted policy decisions. Presidential rhetoric plays a considerable role in reinforcing and shaping

²⁷ Terrence McCoy, "How Joseph Stalin Invented American Exceptionalism", *Atlantic*, 15 March 2012. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/03/how-joseph-stalin-invented-american-exceptionalism/254534/>. 03/05/14.

²⁸ Robert R. Tomes (2014), p. 28.

²⁹ Viotti, Paul R (2010), p. 108.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

how America's image is perceived both at home and abroad. With modern president's increasing reliance in the use of rhetoric, in what can be described as "rhetorical presidency"³¹, speaking to the public has become a fundamental function of the office³². Therefore themes surrounding the concept of American exceptionalism are and will carry on to be referenced in presidential rhetoric as the belief that the U.S. is an exceptional nation has become part of the ideology of what it means to be American and therefore, denying America's unique status in the world in turn contradicts this ideology and goes against the countries national identity³³.

³¹ Tulis, Jeffrey. 1987. *The Rhetorical Presidency*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 4.

³² Neumann, Rico, and Kevin Coe. (2011), p. 13.

³³ Steven G. Calabresi, "*A Shining City on a Hill*": *American Exceptionalism and the Supreme Court's Practice of Relying on Foreign Law* (2006) 86 B.U. L. REV, p.1345.

3. Methodological Framework

In this paper I intend to analyse the rhetoric used by presidents in their speeches, in relation to the concept of American exceptionalism. As I have outlined above, through this analysis I will establish the different forms of exceptionalism each president has chosen to convey (if at all) and how these forms vary between them. In order for me to achieve these aims, I intend to draw upon specific sources, the choice being presidential speeches. In evaluating these speeches I intend to employ a content analysis, to look for words or phrases that are associated and often used with the concept of American exceptionalism. Any language that refers to the U.S. as being a vital nation, having a mission, having unique ideals or inspiring and helping others all constitute as examples of American exceptionalism. As such I have to make some subjective decisions on what specific words and phrases mean and how presidents have chosen to apply them. However, since all the analysis was carried out by me alone and I applied the same criteria for each president the results should be consistent and reliable.

Inevitably, the policies Obama and his administration choose to implement will be compared to those of his predecessors and as such his stance towards the concept of American exceptionalism will fall to the same scrutiny. A lot of the criticism Obama has faced regarding his stance towards exceptionalism stems from the stance George W. Bush himself had on the concept. Therefore the majority of my analysis will be spent on determining the differences in beliefs towards American exceptionalism between Barack Obama and George W. Bush. However I will also be analysing the rhetoric used by John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan, to provide a reference point and a way to compare how the belief may have changed over time, between different presidents and under different circumstances.

While this analysis will help me identify traits associated with American exceptionalism in presidential rhetoric, it does not help in determining the different forms of the concept presidents have chosen to use. To achieve this aim I intend to draw upon a typology to help characterize different forms of American exceptionalism. The reason I chose to use a typology as a method, was due to their functional use as an analytical tool and a classification system. A typology provides a means of ordering and

comparing different elements and clustering them into categorical groups³⁴. The development of a typology is helpful as it, not only contributes to the academic field, but it offers a distinct way of examining presidential rhetoric as well as American exceptionalism. With help from already established typologies I have chosen to create my own that will help me distinguish the different types of exceptionalism expressed by the different presidents.

3.1 Existing Typologies

3.1.1 *Michael Ignatieff*

Michael Ignatieff highlights three separate forms or elements that make up American exceptionalism; *exemptionalism, double standards and legal isolationism*. Exemptionalism refers to how America supports multilateral agreements “but only if they permit exemptions for American citizens or U.S. practices”³⁵. Exemptionalism also involves the practice of including reservations when negotiating and signing human rights conventions. Ignatieff argues that for the most part American ratification of international rights conventions is symbolic as ratification occurs on the condition that U.S. domestic law supersedes the provisions of those conventions³⁶. The second element Ignatieff highlights is double standards and refers to the way the U.S. judges itself by standards different from those it uses to judge other countries, as well as judging its friends by standards different from those it uses for its enemies³⁷. The third and final element of American exceptionalism Ignatieff takes up is legal isolationism, which refers to the reluctance of the American judges to accept or be guided by other foreign jurisdictions³⁸.

3.1.2 *Harold Hongju Koh*

Harold Koh has also developed a typology that builds off some of Ignatieff's points. He breaks the categories down into positive and negative faces, what he describes as “Jekyll-and-Hyde” exceptionalism, and offers four general faces; *distinctive rights, different labels, the*

³⁴ D. Harold Doty and William H. Glick. “Typologies as a Unique Form of Theory Building: Toward Improved Understanding and Modelling”, *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Apr., 1994), pp. 231.

³⁵ Ignatieff, Michael. 2005. “Introduction: American Exceptionalism and Human Rights.” In *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*.ed, Michael Ignatieff. Princeton University Press, Princeton, p. 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5-7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

*“flying buttress” mentality, and double standards*³⁹. His first category contends that America has a distinctive rights culture that has grown out of its unique social, political and economic history following, that as a result rights protected by the First Amendment receive greater emphasis than other rights in the U.S.⁴⁰. Secondly Koh argues that the U.S. has used ‘different labels’ for the same concepts; choosing to see torture as cruel and unusual punishment for example; which, Koh argues, shows the U.S. refusing to accept a universally accepted human rights standard⁴¹. Koh’s proposed third face of American exceptionalism uses Louis Henkins dubbed “flying buttress” mentality, where the U.S. is willing to support the structure of human rights but only from the sidelines as they are unwilling to subject themselves to the rules and limitations of that structure⁴². The final face, which is also part of Ignatieff’s typology and which Koh deems the most problematic face, is double standards and is when the U.S. proposes that a rule applies to them differently than it does the rest of the world⁴³. Koh follows on by proposing an overlooked face, America’s exceptional global leadership. He explains this as U.S. being the only remaining superpower capable of sustaining international law, democracy and human rights, claiming that U.S. participation can be a determining factor in success or failure; as witnessed in both Rwanda and Kosovo⁴⁴.

3.1.3 John Ruggie & Stanley Hoffman

John Ruggie has also created a typology but his embraces a two-faced version of exceptionalism. Ruggie’s first face of exceptionalism looks at the U.S. engagement in achieving a stable international order. This form of exceptionalism taps into the “American’s sense of self as a nation”⁴⁵ to create an international order that resonates with values and ideals that the American people see as their own. Ruggie’s second face embraces the idea that from the outset the U.S. has sought to insulate itself and has a perceived need to safeguard the special features that make the U.S. unique, from external interference⁴⁶. Stanley Hoffman also offers a two faced typology that mirrors Ruggie’s. He describes his first face of exceptionalism as ‘crusading and militant’ explaining that

³⁹ Koh, Harold Hongju. (2005) p. 111,

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 113.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 114.

⁴² Ibid., p. 115.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 116.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 119.

⁴⁵ Ruggie, John. 2005. “American Exceptionalism, Exemptionalism and Global Governance,”. In *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*. Ed., Michael Ignatieff. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p. 304.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 305.

the U.S. has “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”⁴⁷. He, like Ruggie, considers isolationism a face of exceptionalism, offering the U.S. as a “beacon of light”⁴⁸, a nation for other countries to emulate, but also a nation unwilling to get involved in others fights⁴⁹. These similar typologies provide two quite conflicting faces of exceptionalism; the contrast between isolationism and crusading.

3.1.4 Stephen Walt

While the scholars above provide typologies that categories different forms of American exceptionalism, Stephen Walt provides a polarized view, claiming that American exceptionalism is nothing more than a myth. Walt considers that the United States is not exceptional and simply acts like most other great powers. He contends that when Americans proclaim their exceptional status they are “simply the latest nation to sing a familiar song”⁵⁰, as great powers such as the Soviet Union, Great Britain and France have all viewed themselves as special as well⁵¹. Following on, Walt opposes the idea that the U.S. is a uniquely virtuous land that somehow ‘behaves’ better than other nations, claiming that one has only to look at America’s questionable historical record to contradict any claims about America’s moral superiority⁵². Once again Walt criticises the U.S. for taking “too much credit for global progress” while accepting “too little blame”⁵³ for the consequences that result from their actions. Finally the notion of the U.S. being ‘blessed’ by God himself and therefore claiming it cannot fail is once again criticised by Walt who claims the U.S. is fooling itself by claiming to have a divine mission to lead the rest of the world as several other nations have had this same belief, yet but have ultimately fallen⁵⁴.

⁴⁷ Hoffmann, Stanley. 2005. “American Exceptionalism: The New Version.” *In American Exceptionalism And Human Rights*, ed. Michael Ignatieff. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 226.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Walt, Stephen M. “The Myth of American Exceptionalism” *Foreign Policy*. November 2011. p. 72.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 73-4.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

3.2 My proposed typology

While the typologies above are very useful, using one of them alone will not suffice in achieving my goal. Therefore I intend to utilize the relevant aspects of each typology to create a hybrid typology that will allow me to base my analysis on. I will be utilizing double standards and exemptionalism outlined by Koh and Ignatieff as well as Koh's distinct rights culture and overlooked face that deals with America's exceptional global leadership. I will also be using Ruggie's idea of America 'pursuing an international order' as well as Hoffman's crusading and isolationism approach. Finally I will also be taking inspiration from Walt's approach towards American exceptionalism.

The first proposed type of exceptionalism centres on the religious component of exceptionalism and therefore I have decided to name it *messianic exceptionalism*. Going back to Winthrop's sermon this category focuses on the U.S. fulfilling a mission from God. As such, presidents demonstrating this type of exceptionalism focus on the United States unique ideals (grounded in their constitution and distinct rights culture) and promote a messianic vision of the American role in promoting democracy and freedom abroad. This category employs religious rhetoric about the U.S. fulfilling a mission from God and the role they have in spreading their ideals around the world. The U.S. represents a force of good and is tasked with spreading liberty around the world but double standards can come into play as the same rules and ideals promoted by the U.S. do not apply to them.

My second proposed category of exceptionalism is similar to the first as it also embraces the uniqueness of America and the belief in the U.S. having a mission in the world. It differs though in that presidents demonstrating this type of exceptionalism agree on America's vital role in the world but not because of a messianic destiny but because of America's 'exceptional global leadership'. What is underlined in this category or what makes America exceptional is their rich culture and traditions, its vast economy and its military might. As such I have decided to label this category *global exceptionalism*. This category also focuses on the U.S. having 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.

The third type of exceptionalism once again acknowledges that the U.S. has a leading role in the world, but it differs in that it does not completely embrace the idea of

American exceptionalism. Presidents who fit into this category do not necessarily consider the United States as completely exceptional and acknowledge its flaws but they still believe that the U.S. are leaders in promoting democracy and are able to recognise the necessity of international cooperation. President in this category are more inclined to recognise other countries as equal and are able to admit that America is not a sole leader in the world. This category favours an internationalist over a unilateralist approach and will there be called *internationalist exceptionalism*

The typologies above provide categories for presidents who embrace the idea of exceptionalism in their rhetoric, be it in different ways. As such, for the betterment of my analysis it would be necessary to also categorize rhetoric that rejects the notion of American exceptionalism. Therefore, my final proposed category does not categories a form of exceptionalism, but instead builds off Stephen Walt’s approach towards the concept. Presidents who fit into this category do still acknowledge uniqueness of America, be it its history, culture or role in the world, but they do not accept the notion that the U.S. is *more* unique than any other country. This category rejects the idea of American exceptionalism but still recognises the U.S. as a powerful leader that is unique, but is no more powerful or unique than any other world leading nation. This proposed category shall be named *rejectionist exceptionalism*.

Type of exceptionalism	Characteristics
<i>Messianic exceptionalism</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.S. is a unique nation • Religious rhetoric is used • The U.S. has a specific destiny/mission from God • The U.S. represent a force of good fighting an evil
<i>Global exceptionalism</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.S. is a unique nation • U.S. are exceptional due to their ‘global leadership’ • Rhetoric that promotes their strong economy, military, history, culture & population • U.S. interests and safety most important
<i>Internationalist exceptionalism</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not a complete rejection of American exceptionalism • Still considers America a leader in promoting democracy • Acknowledges U.S. flaws • Encourages international cooperation • Recognise other countries as equals
<i>Rejectionist exceptionalism</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rejection of the concept of American exceptionalism • The U.S. are still unique and powerful, but no more than any other world leading nation • Rhetoric that portrays the U.S. as equal to other nations

4. Analysis

In this section I intend to analyse presidential rhetoric from speeches given by John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. I will be using my typology to help categorize rhetoric associated with American exceptionalism to determine the different stances the presidents have had towards the concept as well as identify which of the four groups (in my typology) the presidents fit into.

4.1 John F. Kennedy 1961-1963

Even though his presidency lasted just over a mere 1000 days, John F. Kennedy was a popular leader through most of his time in office. Described by some as embodying charisma, grace, vigour and purpose⁵⁵ his leadership brought a new excitement to the capital city. He himself admitted though, that his first year in office was a complete disaster, ranging from the Bay of Pigs fiasco to his stand off with the Soviet Union⁵⁶. His short spell as president saw both its successes, with his contribution to the reshaping of the Cold War, and failures, the crises in Cuba and Vietnam, but regardless his bold stance and policies excited the general public and revigorated their sense of national pride and patriotism⁵⁷. In this section I intend to analyse Kennedy's first Inaugural Address (1961) as well his address at the University of Washington's 100th Anniversary Program (1961).

John F. Kennedy came into office in 1961, after a presidential campaign very critical of the Eisenhower Administration. Not only had Kennedy criticised his predecessor's weak stance towards the Soviet Union, that allowed them to catch up with the U.S., but also charged its administration with a lack of conviction and decision in their leadership⁵⁸. Kennedy pledged a stronger leadership, declaring in his inaugural address that he was prepared to take on the responsibility of "defending freedom" for the entire free world, in America's "hour of maximum danger"⁵⁹. Kennedy called upon

⁵⁵ Brinkley, A. (2012). John F. Kennedy. New York: Times Books, p. 2.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁸ Kennedy, John F. "A Democrat Looks at Foreign Policy" *Foreign Affairs*. Oct57, Vol. 36 Issue 1, p. 44.

⁵⁹ John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961. *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=8032>.

American's to accept the challenges the nation faced as "the same revolutionary beliefs" the Founding Father had fought for were "still at issue around the globe" cementing his belief that rights of man come not "from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God"⁶⁰. Kennedy called for the American people to fulfil their leadership role in the world stating;

"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."⁶¹

Kennedy outlined in his address the special destiny the U.S. nation had in fulfilling the spread of freedom and democracy around the world, even claiming that the U.S. were prepared to "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty"⁶². Kennedy's address underlined the unyielding spirit of the U.S. nation and the sacrifice they were willing to endure to guarantee the triumph of freedom around the world.

In his inaugural speech, Kennedy was not timid in asserting the benevolent intentions of the U.S., promising not to allow one former form of colonial control to merely be "replaced by a far more iron tyranny". Kennedy's pledge was aimed at the Soviet Union warning that "those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside"⁶³. He once again promised to help those "struggling to break the bonds of mass misery" not out of self interest but "because it is right"⁶⁴ reinforcing his belief in the U.S. as a shining beacon in the world. Kennedy famously requested that American's ask not what their country could do for them, but what they could do for their country, once more outlining the special destiny of the nation, a destiny shared by God as "here on earth God's work must truly be our own"⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Later on in his presidency, Kennedy carried on the theme he presented in his inaugural address, asserting the specific role the U.S. had in preserving and promoting freedom and democracy in the world. He emphasised that in order for mankind's future freedom to survive, America "must face up to any risk that is necessary" claiming that as long as global liberty is jeopardised the U.S. "will never surrender" as Americans are always "determined to defend the frontiers of freedom"⁶⁶. This belief was once again embraced later in Kennedy's address where he claimed that Americans "more than any other people on earth" bear burdens and accept risks "unprecedented in their size and their duration" not for themselves "alone but for all who wish to be free"⁶⁷. Kennedy wanted to assert that America was the leader and shining beacon of the free world.

4.1.1 Summary: John F. Kennedy

From the speeches that I have chosen and analysed, there are several reoccurring themes that are evident in John F. Kennedy's rhetoric. Frequently Kennedy refers to the role America must play in guaranteeing freedom and liberty around the world. He was adamant that the U.S. would be willing to "pay any price" to assure the enjoyment of liberty in the world and is clear in presenting America as a force of good, fighting for those in need, against an evil threatening freedom. As such these traits are consistent with and reflect *messianic exceptionalism*. Kennedy also regularly employed religious rhetoric, claiming that the mission the U.S. had in safeguarding freedom is one that God has bestowed on them, as they are doing "God's work" and as such they were unlikely to fail. The use of religious rhetoric and claiming the U.S. has a specific destiny once again reflects *messianic exceptionalism*.

⁶⁶ John F. Kennedy. Address in Seattle at the University of Washington's 100th Anniversary Program. November 16, 1961. *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8448>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

4.2 Ronald Regan 1981-1989

During his eight year presidency, spanning from 1981 to 1989, Ronald Reagan spoke several million words of carefully prepared remarks to the public. Regan was elected during one of America's most troubled times⁶⁸. The U.S. economy had been in decline for 16 years as a result of tax increases, misguided spending, pandering to unions and a sizable amount of ill-advised governing⁶⁹, not to mention the looming threat of the spread of communism. Regardless from an early stage the Reagan administration adopted aggressive policies towards these problems and arguably with his magnetic rhetoric and Hollywood experience, Reagan was well known as a "great communicator"⁷⁰. In spite of this Regan still came under fire, being described as a lazy, ignorant and mean spirited individual, who regularly let his subordinates handle business of the office⁷¹. Whether he was liked or hated Regan debatably has become America's most dominant politician of the last 60 years⁷². In this section I will be analysing Reagan's first and second Inaugural Address' (1981 and 1985 respectively) as well as his Farewell Address in 1989

President Ronald Reagan, at the beginning of his time at office, sought to correct the foreign policy flaws of his predecessor Jimmy Carter, who he felt had steered America in the wrong direction and lost confidence in what made the U.S. exceptional, stating that the nation "had begun to abdicate this historical role as the spiritual leader of the Free World and its foremost defender of democracy"⁷³. In response, Reagan in his first inaugural address in 1981 quickly sought to remind the nation of its exceptional status stating that "few of us stop to think how unique we really are" adding that the U.S. has shown a watching world that they are a "united people pledged to maintaining a political system which guarantees individual liberty to a greater degree than any other"⁷⁴. Reagan from the offset urged Americans to recall the achievements of their founders, by underlining the unique quality of their political system that promoted self-government and individual freedom. A reoccurring theme in Reagan's first inaugural address was the superior status America had in the world. He stated that regardless of the hardships the

⁶⁸ Muir, W. K. (1992). *The bully pulpit: The presidential leadership of Ronald Reagan*. San Francisco: ICS Press.p.1.

⁶⁹ Harold Miller, "Was Ronald Reagan the Greatest President and Leader of our Time?" *The Central New York Business Journal*, Volume 25, No. 36 - September 9,2011.

⁷⁰ Viotti, Paul R (2010), p. 193.

⁷¹ Muir, W. K. (1992) p. 7-8.

⁷² Steven G. Calabresi (2006), p. 1370.

⁷³ Reagan, Ronald, *An American life*, Hutchinson, London, 1990, p. 266.

⁷⁴ Ronald Reagan, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981 *The American Presidency Project*.
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=43130>. 20/05/2014.

U.S. may have faced they must “do whatever needs to be done to preserve this last and greatest bastion of freedom”⁷⁵.

This theme re-appears later in his address, as he describes the U.S. as “special among the nations of the Earth” asserting that they were “too great a nation”⁷⁶ to limit themselves to small dreams. It is safe to say that President Reagan believed in and was prepared to parade America’s greatness. He declared that the reason why the U.S. had achieved so much and “prospered as no other people on Earth” was due to unleashing the energy and individual genius of Americans “to a greater extent than has ever been done before”⁷⁷. Regan continued by stating that freedom and dignity was more “available and assured here (the U.S.) than in any other place on Earth”⁷⁸. Regan asserted that the U.S. has fought harder and paid a higher price for freedom and the advancement of dignity, then any other nation in the world, once again emphasising the greatness and superiority of the U.S. nation and its inhabitants.

Following on, Reagan once again reiterates the unique position he feels the U.S. possesses in the world and the need for the nation to revert back to its founding principles, claiming that the U.S. “will again be the exemplar of freedom and a beacon of hope for those who do not now have freedom”⁷⁹. Reagan in his first inaugural speech also presents a messianic vision asserting that the U.S. is a “blessed land [...] a nation under God” claiming also that “God intended for us to be free”⁸⁰. Once again, reaffirming his belief that the U.S. is nation blessed by God himself, Reagan claims that “with God’s help” the U.S. will be able to resolve the problems confronting the nation.

In his second inaugural address, Reagan began much where he left off, describing the U.S. again as a “blessed land” and a nation that “is poised for greatness”⁸¹. He challenged the American people to live up to their unique and exceptional heritage, asserting that America “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”⁸². Reagan claimed that America has a role in the world as a purveyor of freedom and God has “called upon”

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ronald Reagan, Inaugural Address, January 21, 1985. *The American Presidency Project*.

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=38688>. 20/05/2014.

⁸² Ibid.

them to spread that dream freedom “to a waiting and hopeful world”⁸³. In Reagan’s mind, America “a nation still mighty in its youth and powerful in its purpose” was destined to succeed; with the blessing from God there would always be “a better tomorrow”⁸⁴.

In his final farewell address, Ronald Reagan once again artfully reminded his fellow American’s of the exceptional and unique role their nation held in the world. Considering the major obstacles he faced during his term and the successes of actions, Reagan noted that “because we’re a great nation, our challenges seem complex” but as long as the nation sticks to its founding principles “the future will always be ours”⁸⁵. He also asserts the leadership the U.S. has shown in the world claiming that he “meant to change a nation, and instead, we changed a world”⁸⁶. Reagan sums up his presidency by referring back to John Winthrop’s famous biblical imagery stating that “I’ve spoken of the shining city all my political life”, once again claiming the U.S. to be “God blessed” and “still a beacon, still a magnet for all who must have freedom”⁸⁷.

4.2.1 Summary: Ronald Reagan

During his presidency and as is evident through his rhetoric, Reagan was determined to reassert the unique status of America. He did this by referring back to the achievements and the ideals America’s Founding Fathers stood by, claiming that by sticking to them the U.S. would be able to overcome any challenge. Reagan, like Kennedy, also regularly utilized religious rhetoric, as he too considered the U.S. to be a “blessed nation” a “shining city upon a hill”, he also considered that the U.S. had a specific destiny to be a “beacon of hope” for those in need. As such this rhetoric, like Kennedy, reflects *messianic exceptionalism*.

Nevertheless in Reagan’s rhetoric, a lot of emphasise was placed on the will of the American people who he credited for much of the success the U.S. had faced. In this sense Reagan was leaning towards *global exceptionalism* as he frequently references America’s uniqueness as well as the global leadership they have shown, claiming that together they sought out to change a nation by ended up changing the world.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ronald Reagan, Farewell Address, January 11, 1989. *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29650&st=farewell+address&st1=> 20/05/2014.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

4.3 George W. Bush 2001-2009

George W. Bush had a controversial start to his presidency, with several re-counts and a judicial verdict ultimately handing him the presidential campaign victory over Al Gore. At the end of his two term administration, Bush left as arguably one of the most controversial and unpopular presidents in modern history, labelled as both divisive and stubborn in his leadership⁸⁸. Regardless of his misgivings and questionable policies and even though he left office widely scorned, Bush did claim to have left office with one major success. Pundits have claimed that succeeded leave having succeeded in creating an anti-terror infrastructure that continues to benefit the U.S. today⁸⁹. In this section I will begin by analysing Bush's first Inaugural Address (2001) followed by his remarks to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks (2001). I will then be looking at his State of the Union Addresses from both 2004 and 2005 and finally his second Inaugural Address (2005)

As his term as president began Bush did not take long to acknowledge America's exceptional nature. In his inaugural address, Bush delved into the unique history of the nation stating how the U.S. had transformed from a "slaveholding society" into a "servant of freedom [...] a power that went into the world to protect but not possess, to defend but not to conquer"⁹⁰. Here Bush articulates the belief in America's greatness, in the belief that they are a beacon of light in the world. This view was once again expressed as Bush stated how "America's faith in freedom and democracy was a rock in a raging sea" and how the seed of democracy "was taking root in many nations". Not only did Bush express the belief in the U.S. leading the world towards freedom and democracy, he believed this role was destined to succeed as the U.S. was "guided by a power larger than ourselves, who creates us equal, in His image"⁹¹. Bush, several times in his inaugural address, references the destiny the U.S. nation has in upholding freedom and democracy urging Americans to "live up to the calling we share" as Americans are "generous and strong and decent" and as long as they are bound by "grand and enduring ideals" "no

⁸⁸ Campbell, Colin, Bert A. Rockman, and Andrew Rudalevige, eds. *The George W. Bush Legacy*. Washington, DC: CQ Press, p. XIII.

⁸⁹ **The Bush Legacy:** http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/charles-krauthammer-the-bush-legacy/2013/04/25/b6de6efa-add8-11e2-8bf6-e70cb6ae066e_story.html. 22/05/14.

⁹⁰ George W. Bush, Inaugural Address, January 20, 2001, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25853>. 22/05/14.

⁹¹ Ibid.

wrong can stand against it” even contending that if America does not “lead the cause of freedom, it will not be led”⁹².

Following the terrorist attacks against the U.S. on September 11th 2001, Bush addressed the nation claiming the attacks had targeted America’s “way of life” and their “very freedom” considering the acts as a mere attempt to “frighten our nation”⁹³. Bush held strong in the belief that al-Qaeda could not damage “the foundation of America” or “dent the steel of American resolve” as they were the “brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world” and no one could “keep that light from shining”⁹⁴. Bush, addressing the attacks, had claimed to have seen “evil, the very worst of human nature” but was adamant that America would rise and carry on “forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world”⁹⁵. Once again Bush was quick to express that the reason the U.S. was attacked was because they were a beacon of light in the world, they were a nation united in their quest to spread ideals of democracy and freedom around the world.

In his State of the Union address in 2002, Bush began by praising the U.S. military for their service in Afghanistan and Iraq, stating that they had not only “saved a people from of starvation” but had also “freed a country from brutal oppression”⁹⁶. This once again reflects the exceptional status Bush believed America had as purveyors of freedom in the world. This belief was bolstered by Bush claiming that America’s “cause is just” and he intended to take action in countries such as Iraq, North Korea and Iran because some governments would be “timid in the face of terror”⁹⁷ and if they did not intend to act, America would. Bush was in awe of not only “the might of the United States military” but the “courage and compassion, strength and resolve” of the American people⁹⁸. These states that threatened world freedom were described by Bush as constituting an “axis of evil” and there were not allowed to prevail as the U.S. had been “offered a unique opportunity” and had an obligation to prevent this, but regardless the U.S. were up for the task as “God” would be “near”⁹⁹. Bush was adamant that U.S. victory was inevitable claiming “I know we can overcome evil with greater good”

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ George W. Bush, Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks, September 11, 2001, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=58057>. 22/05/14.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ George W. Bush, Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union January 29, 2002, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29644>. 22/05/14.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

because when all's said and done “America will lead by defending liberty and justice because they are right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere”¹⁰⁰. Bush was unyielding in his resolve that “evil is real” and therefore “must be opposed” but he was also aware that the U.S. had been “called to a unique role in human events”¹⁰¹. Bush accepted the role the U.S. would play in guaranteeing freedom and liberty in the world but he was also steadfast in declaring to all nations that America would “do what is necessary to ensure our nation’s security”.

This stance reappeared once again in Bush’s 2004 State of the Union address where he claimed that America was a “nation called to great responsibilities” declaring that through military action the U.S. were “bringing hope to the oppressed and delivering justice to the violent”¹⁰². He followed in this vein claiming that “America is a nation with a mission, and that mission comes from our most basic beliefs” maintaining that due to the leadership role America has taken “the world is changing for the better”¹⁰³. Bush was confident that America was on the right path claiming that “our Nation is strong and steadfast. The cause we serve is right, because it is the cause of all mankind” but he also made it clear that safety of the country was paramount and therefore asserted that “America will never seek a permission slip to defend the security of our country”¹⁰⁴

In his second inaugural speech, Bush began by praising the unique qualities of the U.S. that stem from the Founding Fathers, claiming that America should “celebrate the durable wisdom” of the constitution and “recall the deep commitments that unite our country”¹⁰⁵. He followed by stating that survival of liberty in the U.S. depended largely on the “success of liberty in other lands” claiming that “America’s vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one”¹⁰⁶. Bush believed that the “Best hope for peace in our world” was “the expansion of freedom in all the world” and he held that the U.S. was capable and willing to guarantee this because “Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation”, Bush was unyielding in his belief that the safety of freedom and liberty in the world was in America’s hand as they had the “ultimate goal in ending

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² George W. Bush, Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, January 20, 2004, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29646>, 26/05/14.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ George W. Bush, Inaugural Address, January 20, 2005, *The American Presidency Project* <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=58745>. 23/05/14.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

tyranny in our world¹⁰⁷. Once again Bush touched upon the inevitable success the U.S. would have in their destiny, a destiny grounding in nation's founding. He claimed that America "proclaims liberty throughout all the world and to all the inhabitants thereof" following that with renewed strength, the U.S. were "ready for the greatest achievements in the history of freedom"¹⁰⁸. Bush was not shy either in proclaiming the strength of the U.S. nation stating that "America's influence is considerable" but regardless his main duty was to "protect this nation and its people"¹⁰⁹.

4.3.1 Summary: George W. Bush

During his presidency, as it is evident from the chosen speeches, Bush employs rhetoric similar to that of Kennedy. He, as Kennedy did, repeatedly utilizes religious rhetoric, claiming the U.S. to be a blessed land and nation under God. Bush, once again similar to Kennedy, is also very vocal of the special destiny the U.S. has in spreading freedom and liberty around the world. As such this stance is in line with *messianic exceptionalism*.

Bush also repeatedly emphasises the morally just cause the U.S. are fighting against a force that he labels "an axis of evil". He frequently describes the U.S. nation as a beacon of hope in a dark world, implying that without the superior strength of the U.S., freedom and dignity can be lost in the world, defining deep moral contrasts between the U.S. and its enemies. Adding to this, Bush also claims that the U.S. are exceptional because of their 'global leadership' which is evident in the rhetoric Bush employs to describe the strength of the American military and economy as well as the bravery and resolve of the U.S. people. Finally in several of his speeches, Bush is adamant in making it clear that his major concern is guaranteeing the safety of the U.S. nation as that is vital over anything else. This, as it did with Reagan, reflects *global exceptionalism*.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

4.4 Barack Obama 2009- Present

Barack Obama came into office at a time of dramatic political change in the United States. Not only did Obama have to face one of America's worst economic crises but he also inherited two costly wars from his predecessor. As such, considering the challenges his administration has faced and is facing, Obama's time in office has tended to focus on bolstering America's image abroad but more significantly Obama has strived to change the policies and politics of the American nation¹¹⁰. Not surprisingly, even disregarding Obama being the first African American to be elected president, he has generated a lot of interest from the press, public and scholars¹¹¹. As I outlined at the beginning of this paper Obama has faced a lot of criticism for his attitude towards American exceptionalism and his 'un-American' stance towards both international and domestic issues. Yet ironically he is the first sitting president in the last 82 years that has actually uttered the phrase American exceptionalism¹¹². In this section I will begin by analysing Obama's Inaugural Address (2009) followed by his news conference in Strasbourg (2009). I will then look at his remarks on accepting the Nobel Peace Prize (2009) and his 2010 State of the Union Address. Finally I will be analysing his Address to the United Nations General Assembly (2013) and his second Inaugural Address (2013).

At the beginning of his presidency in his inaugural address, Obama, akin to his predecessors, established his belief in the principles of America's Founding Fathers claiming that regardless of the problems the U.S. may be facing, America has stayed strong because the "people have remained faithful to the ideals of our forebears and true to our founding documents"¹¹³. Obama did not hesitate either in listing the setbacks the U.S. faces claiming that "the challenges we face are real. They are serious, and they are many" but Obama was adamant that they "will be met"¹¹⁴. He understood that the U.S. is a great nation but argued that "greatness is never a given. It must be earned" but regardless of problems the nation faces, Obama still considered America to be "the most

¹¹⁰ Edwards, George C., *Overreach: leadership in the Obama presidency*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 2012, p. 1.

¹¹¹ Watson, Robert P. (red.), *The Obama presidency: a preliminary assessment*, SUNY Press, Albany, N.Y., 2012, p. xi.

¹¹² Friedman, U (2012).

¹¹³ Barack Obama, Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009, *American Presidency Project* <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=44.25/05/14>.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

prosperous, powerful nation on Earth”¹¹⁵. He was very critical of America’s past but assured that during his presidency he would help pick America up and dust itself off “and begin again the work of remaking America”¹¹⁶. Obama was resolute in his belief that the U.S. must make a change, that what is required of them “is a new era of responsibility” where every America understands that they have duties to themselves their “nation and the world” but also that in order to achieve this, they must revert back to values set out by America’s Founding Fathers, namely “honesty and hard work, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism”¹¹⁷

Obama was adamant that the welfare of the world was dependent on “mutual interest and mutual respect” following that those who “cling to power through corruption and deceit [...] are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist”¹¹⁸. Obama also noted that America’s previous generation faced similar dangers but were able to defeat them not only with “missiles and tanks but with sturdy alliances and enduring convictions” because America’s “security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint”¹¹⁹. This stance Obama had, based on cooperation and mutual aid, differed hugely to the stance Bush had, who was more reliant on military action to guarantee freedom and liberty in the world. Obama expressed this belief once again, making it clear that “power alone cannot protect us” and neither does it “entitle us to do as we please” Obama therefore believed that America could not justify its actions based solely on the argument that it necessary for the world (as some of predecessors had done) claiming that “we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals”¹²⁰. Despite this Obama was still firm in his belief that America did have a vital role to play in the world, a role in “ushering in a new era of peace” where he urged American’s to “brave once more the icy currents and endure what storms may come” for that is the “meaning of our liberty and our creed”¹²¹.

Obama received a lot of attention after his remarks at a news conference in Strasburg in 2009. When asked what his opinion was regarding American exceptionalism, the concept that America is uniquely qualified to lead the world, he replied by saying;

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

“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 [...] and if you think of our current situation, the United States remains the largest economy in the world. We have unmatched military capability. And I think that we have a core set of values that are enshrined in our Constitution, in our body of law, in our democratic practices, in our belief in free speech and equality that, though imperfect, are exceptional.”¹²²

If one takes into account what Obama first says, then it seems that he believes that there is nothing unique about American exceptionalism, as it is a belief shared by the British and the Greeks. Obama more or less states that every nation is great in its own way and by claiming that every country can be thought of as exceptional, by definition, none really are. Regardless Obama’s reply did stop there as he still asserted that America has the largest and strongest military and economy in the world as well as a core set of values, stemming from their constitution, that are exceptional. Therefore Obama’s stance towards the concept is quite complicated as he both admits to America’s exceptional status but also recognises “the value and wonderful qualities of other countries” or that America is not “always going to be right, or that other people may have good ideas, or that in order for us to work collectively, all parties have to compromise, and that includes us”¹²³. All in all Obama concluded his answer by stating that for the U.S. to be a global leader its must first “create partnerships” as working together is necessary when America “can't solve these problems alone”, even reiterating his point by stating that “America can’t meet our global challenges alone; nor can Europe meet them without America”¹²⁴.

Another controversy during Obama’s presidency was him being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009. The irony in awarding Obama the prize was the fact that he was a leader of a nation that was still at war in two countries. Obama was clear in stating that he would stand idle as the safety of American’s was threaten as “evil does exist in the world”¹²⁵. He was adamant of reminding the world though that America had sacrificed a

¹²² Barack Obama, The President's News Conference in Strasbourg, April 4, 2009, *American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=85959&st=strasbourg&st1=.25/05/2014>.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Barack Obama, Remarks on Accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, December 10, 2009, *American Presidency Project* <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=86978&st=&st1,25/05/14>.

lot to guarantee freedom and liberty in the world claiming 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” further claiming that “we have borne this burden not because we seek to impose our will”¹²⁶ but to guarantee a better future for children and grandchildren in the world. Once again Obama asserted that the America’s “commitment to global security will never waver” but also conceded that “America cannot act alone”¹²⁷ as alone peace cannot be secured. Obama is ultimately arguing that the exceptional status of the U.S., from its military might to its goal of securing liberty and freedom to all, was necessary in maintaining a world peace. Obama believed that the use of force was necessary in certain circumstances but he was clear in that America “must remain a standard bearer in the conduct of war” as that is what “makes us different from those whom we fight”¹²⁸. Obama ended his address by accepting that “oppression will always be with us” but that we must still “strive for justice”¹²⁹ as well as for peace.

Obama, in his State of the Union address in 2010, was resolute in his belief in the goodness of American ideals and resolve, praising the America people for their strength, professing that he had “never been more hopeful about America’s future”¹³⁰. He once again emphasised that “America must always stand on the side of freedom and human dignity” as America’s greatest source of strength had “always been our ideals” also claiming that it was these ideals and “values that built America”¹³¹. This attitude was reflected again in Obama’s address to the United Nations General Assembly in 2013. Obama pledged that America would “not stop asserting principles that are consistent with our ideals” further stating that disengaging in the wars they are fighting would be a mistake as it would create a vacuum of leadership that “no other nation is ready to fill”¹³². Obama argued that America should stay engaged and believed “the world would be better for it” claiming that he considered America exceptional “in part because we have shown a willingness through the sacrifice of blood and treasure to stand up not only for our own narrow self-interests, but for the interests of all”¹³³.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Barack Obama, Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, January 27, 2010, *American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=87433,25/05/14>.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Barack Obama, Address to the United Nations General Assembly, September 24, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-pressoffice/2013/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly,25/05/14>.

¹³³ Ibid.

Obama's second inaugural address, mirroring his first, was filled with references to the optimistic future he had for America as well as the undying faith towards the ideals of the Founding Fathers. He began by asserting that what makes America "exceptional- what makes us American-is our allegiance to an idea articulated in a declaration made more than two centuries ago" 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"¹³⁴. Obama was keen in expressing the bright future he felt the U.S. could achieve, as "America's possibilities are limitless, for we possess all the qualities that this world without boundaries demands" but he was cautious to point out that America's moral "journey" was still unfinished and that should act "knowing that our work will be imperfect"¹³⁵. Regardless, Obama still believed that America's obligations "are not just to ourselves, but to all posterity" and he was adamant that "America will remain the anchor of strong alliances in every corner of the globe" urging American to "carry into an uncertain future that precious light of freedom"¹³⁶.

4.4.1 Summary: Barack Obama

The analysis of Obama's rhetoric, in the chosen speeches, provides a very interesting broad set of results. Obama's rhetoric does reflect some of the beliefs shared by the previous presidents but it also illustrates a stance not evident with any of the other leaders I have chosen to analysis. Similarly to the Kennedy, Reagan and Bush, Obama is clear in stating that that the U.S. has a very important role in guaranteeing freedom and liberty in the world. He too considers the U.S. to be the most powerful and prosperous nation in the world and repeatedly emphasised their unwavering commitment to global security. Moreover Obama repeatedly reflected on the ideals set out by the Founding Fathers, maintaining they where what make America exceptional. Unlike the other leaders, very little religious rhetoric was found, with Obama instead claiming that their specific destiny in the world stemmed from the values set out in the constitution. All this reflects *global exceptionalism* as Obama was not shy in claiming U.S. economic and military superiority, while contending its exceptional status.

Nevertheless, Obama frequently addresses the contrast between a flawed American past and a brighter American future he intended to create. Obama was vocal in admitting

¹³⁴ Barack Obama, Inaugural Address, January 21, 201, *American Presidency Project* <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=102827>, 26/05/14.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

America's flaws and even though he acknowledged U.S. power he believed it shouldn't allow them to do what they want. Obama believed that America could not justify its actions based solely on the argument that it necessary for the world. He was very vocal in highlighting that America could not act alone but are reliant on help from other nations to achieve the spread of freedom around the world. Obama still considered America a leader in promoting democracy, but acknowledged its flaws and encouraged international cooperation which is in line with *internationalist exceptionalism*.

Furthermore Obama's rhetoric arguably reflects *rejectionist exceptionalism* as well. He claims that the U.S. is unique and powerful, but also contends that this belief was shared by the Brits and Greeks about their own nation. Obama more or less claims that all nations are great in their own way and that the U.S. is no more unique than any other world power. He admitted that the U.S. is not always going to be right and that other countries may also have good ideas, cementing his belief that the U.S. is equal to other nations.

5. Conclusion

American exceptionalism is a belief that is deeply rooted in America's national identity and as such it is a concept that is and will carry on to be featured in presidential rhetoric as well as influence foreign policymaking. It is quite apparent that, considering the various forms and themes associated with the concept, the term should not be used carelessly as this paper has shown that there are different forms its can be articulated through.

The purpose of this paper initially stemmed from the criticism Barack Obama has faced considering his stance towards the concept of American exceptionalism. He has namely been accused of not believing in the concept which in itself has lead to more criticism that attempts to delegitimize his patriotism. In order for me to determine if there was any truth behind the claims made against Obama I decided to analyse the rhetoric used by him in formal addresses to uncover if themes associated with the concept of American exceptionalism could be found. Determining this was not the sole purpose of this paper, as I also applied this same method of analysis to three other presidents to uncover the different ways in which the presidents have articulated the concept in their rhetoric. In order for me to examine the different types of exceptionalism expressed by the presidents, I created a typology, which combined different aspects of already established typologies. My typology was composed of four groups; *messianic exceptionalism*, *global exceptionalism*, *internationalist exceptionalism* and *rejectionist exceptionalism*, which where used to categorize presidential rhetoric to determine the different forms of exceptionalism articulated and how they differed between the four presidents.

From the speeches I chose to analyse, Ronald Reagan utilized rhetoric that referred to America's unique characteristics stemming from the ideals set forth by the nations Founding Fathers. Reagan also regularly used religious rhetoric claiming America to be a blessed land that was fulfilling a destiny set forth by God even referencing Winthrop's famous sermon by describing the U.S. as shining city upon a hill. Nevertheless Reagan also emphasised the will and character of the American people and the global leadership the U.S. showed in the world. As such Reagan's rhetoric reflected both *messianic exceptionalism* and *global exceptionalism*. John F. Kennedy also regularly employed religious rhetoric claiming that America's destiny stemmed once again from Gods will and that America had a fundamental role in guaranteeing freedom and liberty, emphasising that

the U.S. would act as a shining beacon in the world. Kennedy's rhetoric was very consistent with *messianic exceptionalism*. George W. Bush also articulated rhetoric very similar to both Kennedy and Reagan. He too employed religious rhetoric claiming U.S. success was inevitable because God was on America's side, which once again reflects *messianic exceptionalism*. Bush was also very vocal in emphasising the strength of the U.S. military and the morally just cause they were fighting for. Bush's rhetoric portrayed stark moral contrasts between a force of good (America) and a force of evil (America's enemies) underlining the global leadership the U.S. showed. All this is very consistent with *global exceptionalism*. Finally Barack Obama, unlike the previous presidents focused very little on articulating religious rhetoric, instead focusing on America's global power and resolve. He emphasised the greatness of the nation and the leadership role they inhabited in the world, reflecting *global exceptionalism*. However Obama also acknowledged U.S. flaws and admitted that the U.S. could not achieve its aims alone, encouraging international cooperation which encompasses *internationalist exceptionalism*. Obama's rhetoric also reflected *rejectionist exceptionalism* as he expressed that the U.S. are no more unique than any other power and as such could not justify their actions by stating it was necessary for the world.

In examining the results above, it is fairly clear that *messianic exceptionalism* is the dominating type of American exceptionalism expressed by the different presidents. In explaining these results, the context and time these presidents were in office could have effected what type of exceptionalism they chose to convey in their rhetoric. For the three presidents that conveyed *messianic exceptionalism* America at that time was either reaching new heights or had already established itself as a global power. Also the three presidents either engaged or were building up for a war. During Kennedy's presidency, the U.S. was essentially committed to the Cold War and also in containing the spread of communism into Vietnam. Reagan's time in office was spent reinvigorating the U.S. military back to its former glory (after the failure in Vietnam), in order to deter the communists from further conflicts. Finally under Bush the U.S. was engaged in two wars and the 'War on Terror' arguably defined Bush's presidency. The significance this has is that as the presidents were faced with these conflicts they may have articulated religious rhetoric as a way to justify their actions. Claiming that their cause was just and that they were fulfilling a destiny from God, as well as underlining stark moral contrasts between them and their enemies, could to some extent validate the actions they took. Even though Obama began his presidency with the U.S. still engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan, he came into power

looking to end the two wars his predecessor has started as well as bolster the international image of the nation, which was once again somewhat tarnished during the Bush administration. As such, considering a lot of mistrust and animosity was garnered towards the U.S. as a result of their War on Terror, the rhetoric Obama chose to articulate focussed on improving cooperation between America and the world, while admitting U.S. fallibility. Obama came into office looking to correct the foreign policy abuses committed under Bush and as such employed rhetoric consistent with *global, internationalist and rejectionist exceptionalism* to express that the U.S. could not just do what it wanted because of its exceptional status but also to improve its image by expressing the commitment the U.S. had in the spread of liberty and freedom around the world (Obama being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize is an indication of this).

To summaries then, my first research question asked what different types of American exceptionalism could be conveyed in presidential rhetoric. Through my analysis and the use of my typology I determined that there are different forms of the concept that can be articulated in rhetoric; one that mainly focuses on America's messianic destiny, another that emphasizes America's exceptional global leadership, a third that embraces the unique qualities of the U.S. while at the same time recognising the nations shortcomings and finally one that dismisses that the U.S. is exceptional or superior to other countries but still acknowledges the nations power and influence. My second research question asked how these types differ between the chosen presidents. Kennedy, Reagan and Bush all conveyed rhetoric that encompassed *messianic exceptionalism*, with Reagan and Bush also articulating *global exceptionalism*. The biggest difference however was with Obama whose rhetoric reflected *global, internationalist and rejectionist exceptionalism*.

Finally I asked how Obama chose to utilize the concept. To begin with I can conclude that there is not much substance to the claim that Obama does not believe in American exceptionalism. As my analysis shows, Obama has articulated rhetoric that is associated with concept, albeit in a different manor than his predecessors. Obama clearly believes that the U.S. has a unique set of characteristics that set them apart from other nations and also believes that the U.S. must make the most of its global leadership to help others. What sets Obama apart from the other three presidents is that he acknowledges America's flawed history, encourages international cooperation and ultimately believes that America should not be able to do what it wants just because of its power and influence. Obama's attitude to American exceptionalism may differ from the

other presidents and his rhetoric may reflect different aspects of it, but considering his diverse background, the attention garnered towards his religious faith and the strong international ties he has, it is not surprising that he chooses to convey his attitude towards the concept in a way different to his predecessors. This does not however mean that Obama rejects the whole concept of American exceptionalism but it might reflect that he believes the U.S. is not better than any other nation but rather different or unique in its own way.

Though I chose to look at how American exceptionalism was articulated in the rhetoric of four different presidents, I was somewhat disappointed with my results as I had hoped to find rhetoric that reflected more of the groups in my typology. Therefore further possible research on this topic can look at several more presidents over a much larger time span in order to determine how their attitudes towards American exceptionalism differ between them. Furthermore, one can also study whether a president's attitude and rhetoric towards exceptionalism differ from their campaign trail to their time office. In the same vein a study can be done on how presidential rhetoric differs over time, for example if a president's attitude towards exceptionalism differs in their first and second terms. Finally further research on the topic can focus on whether heads of state articulate American exceptionalism differently in speeches made domestically compared to those made to an international audience.

The debate of whether the U.S. is actually an exceptional nation is one this paper moves beyond. Instead this paper looks at how presidents either believe or what to believe that American exceptionalism is real. As American exceptionalism is such a fundamental part of America's culture, history and national identity, it is difficult for a president to fully deny the concept without then denying these other aspects. Even though it can be dangerous for a nation to see itself as exceptional and above the law, there is no denying the global leadership America processes and the good it can do in guaranteeing freedom and liberty around the world. But regardless there is a fine line that can be crossed where actions are justified under the pretext that it is necessary for the world.

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